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Abstract

This research explores the role of athlete on-field and off-field brand image on consumer commitment toward the athlete and associated team, preference by athlete’s sponsor, and the mediating effect of consumers’ self-brand connection on these relationships. Data were collected from fans of soccer players through a cross-sectional survey promoted on social media platforms. A partial least squares structural equation model examined the direct effects of both athlete brand dimensions on athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference, and the indirect effects mediated via self-brand connection. The results indicate that athlete on-field image is significantly related to athlete sponsor preference, while the off-field image influences athlete commitment and team commitment. Self-brand connection is influenced by athlete off-field image, and mediates the relationship between off-field image and athlete commitment. This study contributes to a better understanding of how to manage athlete brands and linkages between fans, athletes and associated entities.

Keywords: Athlete Brand; Brand Associations; Fan Commitment; Sponsorship; Spill-over Effects; Self-brand Connection.
Introduction

Athletes enjoy increasing levels of social influence extending well beyond the sports in which they compete (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Parmentier, 2011). Today’s athletes often inspire their supporters (Kerr & Gladden, 2008) and many serve as multiplatform promotional entities that draw attention from media and corporate sponsors (Arai et al., 2013; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). As illustrated by Forbes’ (2017) inclusion of athletes in their yearly “Most Valuable Sports Brands” list, athletes themselves have become brands (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). This trend has been exacerbated by the global expansion of social media platforms, which has shifted away from team-following toward athlete-following (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). For example, in May 2019, Cristiano Ronaldo (165 million) had more than double the number of Instagram followers than his former club Real Madrid (71 million) and eight times the amount of his current club Juventus (26 million); and has signed a one-billion dollar lifetime endorsement deal with Nike in 2016 because of his image and reach (Badenhausen, 2016). Similarly, Ben Simmons (4.2 million) had more than double the number of followers on Instagram than his team, the Philadelphia 76ers (1.8 million). These athletes often act as entrepreneurs of their own brands (Ratten, 2015), and require strategic growth management guidance to build their audience (Agyemang, Williams, & Kim, 2015).

Athlete branding has become a topic of academic inquiry, not just a trend in marketing. Recent studies have focused on the conceptualization of athletes’ brand image (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Arai et al. (2014) proposed a model based on athletic performance (e.g., skills, performance), attractive appearance (e.g., physical attractiveness, personal style), and marketable life style (e.g., off-field life story, role model). Parmentier and Fisher (2012) suggested that athlete brand image depends on professional image (e.g., playing opportunities) and his/her media persona (e.g., end-consumer awareness), and Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) categorized Instagram
posts into two types: front stage (e.g., on-field performance) and backstage (e.g., personal life). Although there is no consensus on the most relevant athlete brand associations, there seems to be agreement among researchers that on-field image and off-field image are the two key dimensions to properly understand athlete brands (e.g., Eagleman-Geurin & Burch, 2016). Following this reasoning, Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, and Agyemang (2018) have proposed a framework based on on-field and off-field image, although the model has not been empirically tested.

Previous studies have suggested that brand image influences attitudinal and behavioral outcomes linked with the athlete and related entities, such as the athlete’s team and sponsors (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Yu, 2005; Williams, Kim, Agyemang, Martin, 2015). Research on sport brand architecture indicates that brands are evaluated in context, rather than in isolation, and that image spill-over happens between brands in a portfolio (e.g., Cobbs, Groza, & Rich, 2015). Despite the common understanding of athletes as brands, studies utilizing branding theories to expound the phenomena still require further development to better understand fan reactions to athletes and related entities (Arai et al., 2013; Hasaan et al., 2018). Star players are regularly cited as brand associations of teams (e.g., Daniels, Kunkel, & Karg, 2019) and superstar athletes have the potential to impact the gate revenue of their team (e.g., Shapiro, DeShriver, & Rasher, 2017). Similarly, high profile athletes are regularly used as brand endorsers (Chanavat, Desbordes, & Dickson, 2016; Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012) and some have become entrepreneurs through leveraging the value of their personal brand and social reach (Ratten, 2015). However, the unique influence of athletes’ on-field and off-field brand image on fan’s attitude toward the athletes, their teams and sponsors requires empirical testing (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

The recognition of athletes’ positive on-field and off-field image may not always translate into favorable attitudes toward the athlete and related entities. For example, statistics
indicate that Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have similar outstanding achievements differentiating them from other soccer athletes, yet people have strong opinions (positive & negative) toward them (The Guardian, 2017). This difference may be related with the on-field and off-field brand image of the athlete, as well as fans’ self-brand connection, given that extant branding research shows that consumers support brands that are congruent with their self-brand image (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) and a strong self-brand connection often leads consumers to develop and maintain a committed relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998).

In a celebrity endorsement context, self-brand connection has been suggested to partly mediate the relationship between the perceived credibility of an endorser and the subsequent endorsed brand equity (Dwivedi, Johnson, & McDonald, 2015). Consequently, self-brand connection may play a role on the relationship between athlete brand image and consumers’ commitment toward the athlete; (2) the athlete’s team; and (3) the athlete’s sponsor.

The purpose of this research was threefold. First, we examined the relationship between athlete’s on-field and off-field brand image and consumers’ commitment to the athlete. Second, we tested the impact of athlete brand image on consumer outcomes toward related entities, such as his/her commitment to the team and sponsor preference. Third, we examined whether these relationships were mediated by consumers’ self-brand connection to the athletes. Data were collected from social media users who supported professional soccer athletes. This research contributes to both sport marketing research and practice by examining the specific brand associations that form the on-field and off-field brand image of athletes, their impact on consumers’ reactions toward the athlete and related entities, and the mediating role of self-brand connection to the athlete. The research findings provide insights for agents and athletes building their own brands as entrepreneurs, as well as teams and sponsors investing in athletes to build their brand.
Literature Review

**Athlete Branding**

A brand represents a “repository of meanings fueled by a combination of marketers’ intentions, consumers’ interpretations, and numerous sociocultural networks’ associations” (Parmentier, 2011, p. 219). This means that the value of a brand lies in all descriptive and evaluative information held in consumers’ memory. Information processing theories form the basis for branding research (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). For example, Keller’s (1993) seminal work of customer-based brand equity model was based on the associative network memory model (Anderson, 1983), premising consumers’ various decision making largely depends on their knowledge of the brand and the thoughts they link with the brand. When applied to athletes, this brand knowledge consists of awareness of the athlete and his/her brand image (e.g., Arai et al., 2014). As such, an athlete’s brand image refers to the set of associations that people identify with a particular athlete (e.g., Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013), and its development requires fans’ awareness of the athlete and an understanding of how the athlete is different from other athletes (Montoya, 2002; Hasaan et al., 2018). While athlete brand awareness is often generated through team/sport prominence and socializing agents such as media and peer group influence (Hasaan et al., 2018), brand image generation is more controllable by the athlete (Arai et al., 2014).

Athlete brand image is multi-faceted. While Keller’s original customer-based brand equity model (1993) categorized brand associations into attributes (consumer associations of the product’s descriptive characteristics), benefits (personal value consumer attach to the product) and attitudes (overall consumer evaluation of the brand), brand attributes have been suggested to represent controllable aspects of the athlete brand and important predictors of consumers’ subsequent reactions to the athletes and associated brands (Arai et al., 2014). Consequently, Arai et al. (2013; 2014) proposed and empirically tested a model of athlete brand image (MABI) consisting of 10 associations across three key dimensions: athletic
performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. These studies were instrumental in understanding athletes as brands and highlighted how on-field performance (e.g., athletic performance) does not capture every facet of an athlete’s brand, and that there are other associations not related to on-field performance (e.g., marketable lifestyle or social attractiveness) that contribute to creating an athlete brand in fans’ minds. Yu (2005) further argued that a fan’s connection to a certain athlete is influenced by his/her successful career and personal life’s appeal, and Arai et al. (2013) highlighted that athletes achieve their status as brands through their outstanding performance on the field but also via their distinctive lifestyle. For example, athletes such as David Beckham or Cristiano Ronaldo are strong brands in the marketplace that have heavily relied on both on-field and off-field brand building activities (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

It follows then that both on-field and off-field image should be considered when examining an athlete’s brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Following Braunstein and Zhang (2005) and Arai et al. (2013; 2014), Hasaan et al. (2018) conducted a literature review and proposed a conceptual framework of athlete brand based on-field and off-field image. Given that athletes primarily develop their brand status based on continued excellence and success in their sport, on-field image attributes represent a crucial component of athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2013). The on-field image attributes refer to performance-related characteristics of an athlete (Arai et al., 2014) and in the current research include the dimensions of Fair Play, Effort, Achievements, Style of Play, Impact, and Skills (Arai et al., 2013; Chadwick & Burton, 2008; Hasaan et al., 2018). Additionally, the public persona of an athlete is important to brand status (Walsh & Williams, 2017), given how off-field activities tend to contribute to an athlete’s broad public perception (Arai et al., 2014; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

Parmentier and Fischer (2012) further posited that, unlike products and services that are produced purely to serve markets, person brands have purposes beyond bringing profit to themselves or the organization they work in. Similarly, Thomson (2006) refers that
connections with human brands imply a bona fide human being (e.g., David Beckham) and not an inanimate object (e.g., book). To this end, the off-field image of an athlete is related to his/her life beyond the sport activity, and are conceptualized in the current research through the dimensions of Physical Attraction, Body Conditioning, Lifestyle, Personality, Cultural Background, Social Responsibility, and Role Model (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). The definitions of the on-field and off-field image used in this study, theoretical support, and examples for each association are provided in Table 1.

Hypotheses development

Researchers have proposed that both the on-field and off-field image of athletes are important parts of establishing and sustaining a connection with fans (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the impact of athlete associations on fans’ loyalty toward the athlete. Examining sport brand elements that drive fans’ reactions is paramount to increase brand health (Biscaia et al., 2016), which suggests the importance of understanding how consumer perceptions of an athlete’s on-field and off-field image influence their commitment to support that athlete. Building on the fact consumer commitment is a vital component of loyalty toward brands (Arai et al., 2014; Oliver, 1999; Tsiotsou, 2013; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000), the current study measures consumers’ psychological commitment to an athlete (i.e. athlete commitment) and examines how it is impacted by both the on-field and off-field image of that athlete.

Thomson (2006) posits human brands (e.g., athletes) are often perceived as sources of attractiveness (familiarity, likeability, and/or similarity) and credibility (expertise and trustworthiness), and evidence from daily life indicates that attractiveness and lifestyle are often the subject of great fan interest (The Guardian, 2016). Source credibility and attractiveness models (McGuire, 1985) can be used to explain the impact of athlete image on consumer perceptions of the athlete. That is, athletes who are well known and liked by
individuals are likely to be the object of strong interest and followership (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018). Thomson (2006)’s study indicates consumers can develop committed relationship with human brands (e.g., athletes) that are similar to real interpersonal relationship. By repeatedly being exposed to the image of a human brand, consumers feel emotional security and fulfilment of fundamental needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) provided by the human brand, and subsequently develop satisfied, trusting, and committed relationships. This process provides initial evidence how athlete image can affect consumers’ commitment toward that athlete.

Additionally, findings from brand research demonstrate that team brand associations affect consumer reactions (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2016; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel, Doyle, Funk, Du, & McDonald, 2016; Moore & Homer, 2008; Watkins, 2014), and the Fan Attitude Network (FAN) model (Funk & James, 2004) posits that consumers develop a positive attitude toward a sport brand when they perceive that the brand has attractive attributes (e.g., Funk, Beaton & Alexandris, 2012). For instance, Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat (2015) found that personality dimensions (i.e., sophistication, sincerity, competence, excitement, and appeal) have a positive impact on a celebrity’s appeal. Moreover, consumer commitment with athletes and teams throughout time is an important pillar for the sport industry to succeed (e.g., Wang, Zhang, & Tsuji, 2011; Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012; Gladden & Funk, 2001) and, regardless of the focal entity, brand associations are often suggested to be paramount to understand the level of commitment toward a brand (Arai et al., 2014; Kunkel et al., 2016; Yoo et al., 2000). As such, Summers and Johnson Morgan (2008) indicate consumers expect exemplary behavior both on- and off-field from athletes. However, sports fans can generally separate the on- and off-field behaviors of athletes (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Summer & Johnson Morgan, 2008) and are willing to manage their expectations accordingly. Consequently, the following hypotheses were developed to examine how an athlete’s on-field and off-field image affects consumers’ commitment to that athlete:
Hypothesis 1a: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s on-field image are positively related with athlete commitment.

Hypothesis 1b: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s off-field image are positively related with athlete commitment.

Research in sport brand architecture—the organizing structure of a brand portfolio—indicates that entities at all levels in the sport industry are connected (Cobbs et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2015). For example, in the context of professional spectator sport, a league often represents the master brand that provides the framework for teams to compete, while teams represent sub-brands that provide the core product within the portfolio of the league (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). Similarly, it has been proposed that athletes are integrated into the brand portfolio of their teams (Williams et al., 2015). Leagues and teams both influence consumer involvement (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2010), because they are in a mixed-branding brand architecture where they are visibly connected, and consumer perceptions of the team influence consumer perceptions of the league (Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017). Studies have demonstrated that sub-brands can affect the evaluation of the master brand by either diluting or enhancing its corporate brand image (Balachander & Ghose, 2003). Consequently, it is important to investigate the impact of athletes on their related entities in the framework of sport brand architecture.

Researchers have highlighted the impact of athletes on their teams (e.g., Brandes, Franck, & Nüesch, 2008), leagues (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2017), and sponsors (e.g., Fink et al., 2012). Drawing on the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), which posits that meaning is transferred in the mind of consumers between related brands, we extend Kunkel et al.’s (2014) conceptualization of sport brand architecture to athletes. That is, athletes can be considered as sub-brands that are visibly connected to their respective teams, which represent the master brand from a structural perspective (i.e., the team governs the athlete). For example, the transfer of David Beckham to Major League Soccer (MLS) contributed to the
brand image and revenue of the MLS as a whole and his new team, LA Galaxy (Shapiro et al., 2017). Following this rationale, understanding how perceptions of an athlete’s on- and off-field brand image affects consumers’ psychological commitment to the associated team (i.e., team commitment) represents an important step when managing the brands within the sport ecosystem. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 2a: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s on-field image are positively related with team commitment.

Hypothesis 2b: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s off-field image are positively related with team commitment.

In a similar way, research has also indicated that athletes influence consumers’ reactions of their sponsors. Like with athletes, teams and leagues, consumers transfer the meanings associated with an endorser to a brand when an associative link is established between them (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Fink et al., 2012). This relationship has also been demonstrated for leagues and their sponsors (e.g., Farrelly & Quester, 2005), teams and their sponsors (e.g., Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Marôco, 2013), and athletes and their sponsors (e.g., Yu, 2005). Given the mixed-branding architecture of sport brands, athlete brand image has been proposed to transfer to their sponsors (e.g., Chanavat et al., 2016, Chanavat, Martinet, & Ferrand, 2009). The social attractiveness and professional trustworthiness of the athletes often make them marketable for sponsorship deals (Ratten, 2015; Summer & Johnson Morgan, 2008), and the ultimate goal of sponsors is to orient consumer preferences toward their products (Barros & Silvestre, 2006), as sponsors expect return on the investments on the athletes (Yu, 2005). Thus, examining how athlete’s on-field and off-field image influences athlete sponsor preference (i.e., consumers’ positive evaluations of athlete sponsors and willingness to purchase associated products) is critical to optimize athlete-sponsor relationships. Based on the mixed-branding architecture of sport brands, the following hypotheses were developed:
Hypothesis 3a: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s on-field image are positively related with athlete sponsor preference.

Hypothesis 3b: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s off-field image are positively related with athlete sponsor preference.

Fans create connections with brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). For example, action sports athletes (e.g., snowboarders) frame their athletic life under an extreme environment allowing them to actively communicate a symbolic meaning that fosters a sense of identification and attract loyal audiences. Consistent with this view, self-brand connections are formed when consumers engage in a matching process to identify brands that are congruent with their self-images (Chaplin & John, 2005). The current study theorizes that the meaning linked to athlete brands is vital for consumers to develop a self-brand connection with certain athletes.

Self-brand connection is defined as the degree to which a brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self, including past (nostalgic), current and future (possible or desired) selves (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) argued that self-brand connection and commitment are two related but different aspects contributing to strengthen the ties between consumers and brands. While self-brand connection refers to fans’ perception of how closely the athlete represents themselves (e.g., Escalas, 2004), fans’ commitment toward the athlete is a subsequent response indicating their promise to the relationship with the athlete, as described for teams in the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004). The self-brand connection framework contends that people use brands to create and represent their (desired) self-concept and to present their self-concept internally and externally (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004). Escalas and Bettman (2015) further argued that the set of brand associations is more meaningful for consumers when it is closely linked to their self-concept because it can be used to construct their self-image. Furthermore, according to the self-expansion theory (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), people possess an
inherent motivation to incorporate others (i.e. brands) into their self-concept, and consumers for whom self-brand connection is high are likely to commit to a relationship with a brand leading to greater loyalty (Parks, MacInnis, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). For example, a fan who feels strongly self-connected to Stephen Curry is likely to become loyal to him. Thus, consumers matching their self-image with the athlete is a key aspect preceding a consumer to commit to a relationship with the athlete brand.

Moreover, previous studies considered sports celebrities as product endorsers and examined how consumers form self-brand connections through the symbolic brand meaning derived from the celebrity endorser (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Escalas & Bettman, 2015, 2017). Based on the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), symbolic properties are first associated with the brands the celebrity endorses and the symbolic meanings are transferred from the celebrity to consumers (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). When the symbolic meaning associated with the celebrities is used to communicate the self-concept to others, the meaning is internalized to consumers and a self-brand connection is formed. By applying the rationale to the athlete brand context, the current study argues that on-field and off-field image of an athlete may convey a symbolic meaning to consumers, who will likely form a self-brand connection with that athlete if they identify with those symbolic properties. Dwivedi et al. (2015) further investigated the impact of celebrity endorsers’ image on endorsed brand outcomes and found that self-brand connection partly mediates the relationship between the endorser and associated products. In addition, self-brand connection has been suggested to increase brand relationship durability regardless of the circumstances (Fournier, 1998; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007). These studies provide support to the idea that celebrities are a direct source of symbolic meaning for consumers and that self-brand connections influence reactions toward the athlete brand and endorsed brands. Thus, the following hypotheses were developed, and all hypotheses are visually presented in Figure 1.

**Hypothesis 4a:** Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s on-field image are positively
Hypothesis 4b: Consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s off-field image are positively related with self-brand connection.

Hypothesis 5: Self-brand connection has a positive relationship with a) athlete commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

Hypothesis 6: Self-brand connection partially mediates the relationship between on-field image and a) athlete commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

Hypothesis 7: Self-brand connection partially mediates the relationship between off-field image and a) athlete commitment; b) team commitment; c) athlete sponsor preference.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design was used to examine the relationships between athlete brand image (conceptualized based on both on-field and off-field associations), self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. We choose one sport to eliminate sport-specific differences, focusing on soccer because of its global prominence. Because consumers’ perceptions of athlete brands are socially constructed and dependent on various aspects, such as culture and context (e.g., Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001), we focused on measuring those brand associations that are applicable to the most athletes.

Procedures and Participants

Quantitative data were collected to test the proposed hypotheses. Participants were recruited via Twitter and Facebook through a video created by the authors titled “Who is your favorite soccer player?” The video description included hashtags relevant to the topic, such as #football, #soccer, #FIFA, #MLS and #EPL, and contained a link to a survey hosted by Qualtrics. The video was promoted to individuals who ‘liked’ soccer-specific Facebook pages, were in soccer-specific groups, or followed high-profile soccer athletes. Respondents
had a chance to win prizes, such as $100 vouchers for Amazon. A total of $200 was spent on promoted posts on Facebook and $150 on promoted posts on Twitter.

A total of 455 respondents started the questionnaire during a period of two weeks. After data cleaning, 279 responses were eliminated because they either completed the questionnaire in an unrealistically short time, marked the same answer for every question, provided inconsistent combinations, failed the attention check (i.e., “Click strongly disagree to demonstrate that you are paying attention to the questions.”), had duplicate IP addresses, or did not answer the sponsorship question correctly. Subsequently, a total of 177 respondents, representing a useable response rate of 38.9%, were included in the data analysis. Despite the response rate and the use of a convenience sample, in a review of survey research best practices, Hulland, Baumgartner and Smith (2018) highlighted that low response rate do not necessarily represent a problem for theory testing, and that the use of convenience samples suffice when the aim is to test the veracity of proposed relationships. It is also important to note that although the sample size is slightly below the targeted 200 participants (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2005), there is no absolute standard regarding adequate sample size (Muthen & Muthen, 2002) and this rule of thumb has been suggested by some to be simplistic (Wolf, Harrington, Clark, & Miller, 2013). Following Hinkin’s (1995) recommendations for an item-to-response ratio ranging from 1:4 to 1:10, an acceptable sample size in the current study would be between 88 and 200 subjects. Also, through a power analysis program with an anticipated effect size of .20 at a probability level of .05 and at a statistical power level of .80 (Westland, 2010), the researchers concluded that 123 respondents would suffice for the current study. Additionally, the PLS algorithm that was used to analyze data in the current research is not sensitive to small sample sizes (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Thus, the current sample was deemed suitable to test the research hypotheses of this research.
Respondents were between 18 and 67 years old ($M = 27.11; SD = 9.27$). The majority of the sample was male (59.4%) and had a university degree (70%). Most respondents were from the United States (42.4%), Mexico (24.3%), and the United Kingdom (8.5%). A total of 86 different soccer players were mentioned as participants’ favorite players, of which 90.7% played in one of the top five European leagues (i.e. England, Germany, Spain, Italy and France) and only 2.8% were female. The five most mentioned players were Lionel Messi (12.9%), Cristiano Ronaldo (6.7%), Javier “Chicharito” Hernandez (6.2%), Mesut Ozil (5.6%), and Thomas Mueller (3.4%). The wide range of mentioned athletes made it possible to have a better understanding of athlete brands because it was not focused on one specific athlete brand.

**Materials**

The questionnaire contained items measuring athlete brand image, consumer self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. These measures were adapted from existing literature (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Biscaia et al., 2013; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2013) and a process of content and face validity. To capture athlete on-field and off-field associations, a list of items influencing athlete brand image was developed based on Arai et al. (2013, 2014), Hasaan et al. (2018) and Ross et al. (2008). The content and face validity of the items was assessed by a panel of experts. Eight sport management academics were provided with detailed information about the purpose of this study, a list of constructs containing the associated definition and items. These academics were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = does not reflect construct at all; 5 = reflects construct very well) in terms of each criteria; relevance, representativeness and clarity. They were also asked to provide qualitative feedback to improve the face validity of each item. Items with an average rating below four (80% threshold; Polit & Beck, 2006) were removed. The item most accurately measuring the core of each brand association was selected to be included in the questionnaire.
The use of single-item measures followed previous brand association research (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014; 2017), and was deemed appropriate because they captured the core of each brand association (for a review see Rossiter, 2002) as determined in the expert feedback. Additionally, single-item measures have been deemed preferable to multi-item measures for online data collection as respondent fatigue was reduced and respondent frustration for addressing similar questions about the same construct, such as asking three times whether an athlete is attractive, could be avoided (cf., Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Thus, athlete on-field image was measured with six items and athlete off-field image was measured with seven items.

Consumer self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference were measured with multi-item constructs as they represented complex psychographic constructs (cf., Rossiter, 2002). Consumer self-brand connection was measured with three items adapted from Escalas and Bettman (2003) and Dwivedi et al. (2015). Athlete commitment was measured with two items adapted from Tsiotsou (2013) and Sumino and Harada (2004), while two items were also used to capture team commitment that were derived from Wu et al. (2012) and Sumino and Harada (2004). In turn, athlete sponsor preference was measured with two items derived from Biscaia et al. (2013). The questionnaire was optimized for mobile devices and 5-point Likert scale items anchored from \([1] =\) strongly disagree to \([5] =\) strongly agree were used. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were asked who their favorite player was. Then, before being exposed to the sponsor-related questions, they were asked “Which of the following brands sponsor the athlete” with leading sport equipment manufacturers being listed (i.e., Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Umbro, Under Armour). The sponsorship questions were then linked to the sponsor that the respondent indicated and only respondents who correctly indicated the actual sponsor of the athlete were included in the data analysis.
Given the study is cross-sectional with both independent and dependent variables being collected from the same source at one moment in time, procedural remedies to alleviate concerns about common method variance (CMV) bias were adopted (Hulland et al., 2018; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, the draft questionnaire was subjected to a content and face validity procedure by an expert panel (Polit & Beck, 2006). Then, the final items were randomized with a separation of dependent (athlete commitment, team commitment, sponsor preference) and independent variables (on-field attributes, off-field attributes, and self-brand connection) into different sections of the questionnaire (Hulland et al., 2018). A complete list of the items is presented in Table 2.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed via SPSS version 24 and SmartPLS version 3. Skewness and Kurtosis were examined to evaluate data distribution. The proposed hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Data analysis was guided by considerations of the direction of causality between a construct and its measures to avoid inaccurate conclusions about the structural relationships between constructs (Jarvis, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, 2003). Consequently, we followed recommendations to treat athlete brand image associations as formative measures (i.e. direction of causality is from items to construct) where the meaning of the brand was derived from the cumulative effect of the unique brand associations (for a detailed review, see Kunkel et al., 2017). Following a formative approach, the items form the latent constructs with arrows pointing from the item to the construct. Thus, unique brand associations did not have to be conceptually interchangeable, did not have to covary, and could have different antecedents (cf., Finn & Wang, 2014; Jarvis et al., 2003). This approach is consistent with previous literature on sport consumers (e.g. Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012) and followed Kunkel et al.’s (2017) recommendation that formative measures are preferred to reflective measures when analyzing sport brand associations. For example, Kunkel and colleagues treated consumers’ evaluation of the logo of a sport league and whether the league
has star players as factors forming the brand image of the sport league. Similarly, an athlete could have an interesting life story but not be physically attractive, yet, these associations are both related to off-field image. Psychographic constructs such as consumer self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference were treated as reflective measures. To evaluate psychometric properties of these measures, internal consistency, average variance extracted (AVE) and squared-correlation tests of discriminant validity were conducted (Hair et al., 2011).

Partial Least Squares (PLS) SEM regression analysis with bootstrapping was employed to analyze the hypothesized model. PLS-SEM analysis was selected over covariance-based SEM, as it allowed for the inclusion of formative and reflective measures and can handle small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2011). Guidelines recommended by Hair et al. (2011) were followed to assess the model. To evaluate formative constructs, tests for multicollinearity examined whether each indicator’s variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than the recommended threshold of five [5], and tests for validity examined whether the parameter estimates for each indicator was statistically significant (at the 5% level) after a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 resamples (Hair et al., 2011). These tests replace standard tests of covariance-based SEM, such as the average variance extracted of the latent formative construct or factor loading thresholds of over .60 (for a detailed review, see Hair et al., 2011). This process represents the preferred method for examining models with mediating variables (Cheung & Lau, 2008) and followed previous sport management research (cf., Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012). Mediation effects examined whether the confidence intervals for bootstrapping procedures were significantly different from zero. These bootstrapping tests provided a robustness check on the standard error and corresponding statistical significance of the proposed mediation effects. The direct, indirect, and total effects of the proposed model were tested via PLS-SEM regression analysis.
Results

Assessment of the measures

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Data were positively skewed with mean scores significantly above three (3), which represents the mid-point of the 5-point Likert scale items, for all athlete brand image associations. However, skewness (values smaller than -1.779) and kurtosis (values smaller than 3.364) indicated that data distribution, and consequently multi-collinearity, was not an issue (Hair et al., 2011). The validity assessment of on-field and off-field image associations showed that Fair Play, Impact, and Skill had no statistically significant relationship with on-field brand image associations; yet, following Jarvis et al.’s (2003) recommendations for formative models, these items were retained to avoid omitting unique parts of the composite variable and prevent restricting the theoretical domain of the construct. The mean score for on-field image (\(M = 4.54, SD = .779\)) was higher than for off-field image (\(M = 3.96, SD = .959\)), while athlete commitment was the outcome variable with the highest mean score (\(M = 4.23, SD = .923\)). In addition, Cronbach \(\alpha\) scores and composite reliability (CR) scores of the reflective constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), providing support for the internal consistency of these constructs.

The correlation matrix for the constructs and average variance extracted (AVE) tests of discriminant validity are presented in Table 3. The AVE scores varied from .655 (self-brand connection) to .899 (athlete sponsor preference), exceeding the recommended threshold of .50, and provided evidence of convergent validity. In addition, evidence of discriminant validity was accepted given that the correlation coefficients were lower than the suggested criterion of .85 (Kline, 2005) and none of the squared correlations exceeded the AVE values for each associated construct (Hair et al., 2011). Both formative constructs (on-field and off-field brand image) and reflective constructs (self-brand connection, athlete commitment, team
commitment and athlete sponsor preference) showed good psychometric properties. Consequently, the structural model was examined.

Hypotheses testing

The results of the structural model are pictorially presented in Figure 2 and bootstrapping results are presented in Table 4. The model explained 39.2% of self-brand connection, 46.2% athlete commitment, 11.9% team commitment, and 11.3% athlete sponsor preference. The path coefficients from on-field image to athlete commitment and team commitment were not significant \((p > .05)\). As such, \(H1a\) and \(H2a\) were not supported; yet, there was a significant positive effect of on-field image on athlete sponsor preference \((\beta = .251, p < .05)\) supporting \(H3a\). In turn, off-field image was positively related to athlete commitment \((\beta = .313, p < .05)\) and team commitment \((\beta = .326, p < .05)\), but not to athlete sponsor preference \((p > .05)\). Therefore, \(H1b\) and \(H2b\) were supported while \(H3b\) was not supported. The relationship between athlete image and self-brand connection was only significant for on-field image \((\beta = .602)\), thus supporting \(H4a\), but not \(H4b\). In turn, self-brand connection showed a significant positive effect on athlete commitment \((\beta = .490)\), but not on neither team commitment nor athlete sponsor preference \((p > .05)\). Therefore, \(H5a\) was supported while \(H5b\) and \(H5c\) were not supported. Self-brand connection did not show a significant mediating effect on the relationship between on-field image with athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference \((p > .05)\) not supporting \(H6a\), \(H6b\) and \(H6c\). Finally, self-brand connection partially mediated the relationship between off-field image and athlete commitment \((\beta = .295)\), supporting \(H7a\), but the effect was not significant for team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. Therefore, \(H7b\) and \(H7c\) were not supported.
The purpose of this study was to explore the role of athlete brand image dimensions (on-field and off-field) on athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsorship preference, as well as the mediating effects of self-brand connection on these relationships. The current study extends previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image, as well as by examining the role of these associations on fan outcomes to different brands in the sport ecosystem. More specifically, it extends the body of knowledge related to athlete branding by (1) empirically testing the associations that contribute to athletes’ on-field and off-field brand image, (2) exploring the impact of athlete brand image on consumer commitment toward the athlete and associated team and preference of athlete-related sponsors, and (3) examining the mediating role of self-brand connection on the relationship between athlete brand image and other outcomes (i.e., athlete commitment, team commitment, and athlete sponsor preference. We extend previous studies focusing on athlete brand outcomes that have either not incorporated fans’ view (e.g. Hasaan et al., 2018; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) or simply examined fan reactions to athletes (Arai et al., 2013) by examining reactions to teams and sponsors. Also, the current study extends previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image, as well as by examining the effect of these associations on the athlete’s team and sponsors. This is of vital importance because brands do not act in isolation and the sport ecosystem is composed by a variety of brands with potential to influence each other (Chanavat et al., 2016).

**Athlete brand image**

The results show that respondents evaluated on-field brand associations positively with all mean scores above the mid-point. The positive evaluation is related to the fact that the mentioned favorite athletes competed at the highest level, with many having global star
The brand associations of *Effort*, *Achievement*, and *Style of Play* had a significant positive relationship with athletes’ on-field brand image, whereas the brand associations *Fair Play*, *Impact*, and *Skill* did not show a significant positive relationship with athletes’ on-field brand image. These findings indicate that while consumers acknowledged the *Skill* and *Impact* of a player on the field, supporting propositions by previous athlete brand research (e.g., Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005), these associations did not distinguish the athlete brand from other athletes who also have a high level of skill and are impactful on the field. This may have been related to the fact the athletes in our sample have all a high-profile. Nevertheless, there may be instances where athletes have built their brand on unique associations that are not significant for the majority of athletes. Brand associations such as *Skill* may represent the foundation to generate brand awareness which together with brand image form brand equity. Conversely, the athlete’s individual *Style of Play* and *Effort* on the field, as well as personal *Achievements*, seem to build the on-field brand more effectively, providing initial empirical support for recent athlete brand research (e.g., Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018).

The examined off-field brand associations were also evaluated positively with all mean scores above the mid-point, and all examined associations showed a significant positive relationship with athletes’ on-field brand image. The findings related to the associations *Body Fitness* and *Physical Appearance* support Arai et al.’s (2013, 2014) propositions that physical attractiveness contributes to athletes’ brand image. Similarly, results generalize Geurin-Eagleman and Burch’s (2016) findings that posting sexually suggestive photos generates higher engagement than other content on athletes’ social media profiles does. It is also in line with sponsorship effectiveness research suggesting that physical appeal moderates the effectiveness of the endorser (e.g., Till & Busler, 2000; Yu, 2005). Similarly, the significant effects of *Lifestyle*, *Personality*, *Social Responsibility*, and *Role Model* support Arai et al.’s
(2013, 2014) propositions that a marketable lifestyle adds to an athlete’s brand image; while findings for Personality and Culture are consistent with Hassan et al.’s (2018) propositions. Overall, the formative approach to measuring brand image revealed the brand associations that significantly influenced athlete brand image, and indicates that there are several aspects that contribute to an athlete’s brand image. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo has on-field achievements with his current (i.e., Juventus) and former clubs (e.g., Manchester United and Real Madrid), and the Portuguese National team, while his off-field brand can be linked to being a father, sex-symbol, a model, and entrepreneur (The Guardian, 2016). As such, a valuable athlete image might consist both of sport-related performance and personal life (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Parmentier et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). This is evident in the current study through the significant and positive correlation between on-field image and off-field image (.468; Table 3). In this sense, one can argue that athletes have the potential to become recognizable personalities outside of the sports environment, and the combination of their athletic performances and public personas is vital for the development of a strong brand (Walsh & Williams, 2017). The current study extends previous research by conceptualizing and measuring on-field and off-field associations that contribute to athlete brand image and its subsequent effects on associated brands.

The influence of brand image on outcome variables

The two athlete brand image dimensions influenced outcome variables differently. The current study broaden research findings on team brand associations (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2016) and the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004) to athletes, indicating that consumers’ perceptions of the on- and off-field athlete brand impact their connection to the athlete (Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Hassan et al., 2018) and brands that are related to the athlete brand (Yu, 2005). Consequently, the findings provide empirical support to the theoretical propositions by Williams et al. (2015) that athletes hold various roles in a sport organization's brand
architecture. The spill-over effect observed from teams to their league (Kunkel et al., 2017) also applies for athletes and their teams extending knowledge from the associative network memory model (Anderson, 1983) and meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) to the athlete branding domain.

Spill-over effects from athlete brand image to related entities differ by entity, which contributes to deepen the understanding of how to manage an athlete’s brand image. Athlete sponsor preference was influenced by athletes’ on-field image. As Carlson and Donovan (2013, p. 193) stated, “numerous firms tie their brands to successful athletes with the expectation that doing so will transfer the athlete’s positive attributes onto the brand”.

Likewise, the findings of this research indicate that on-field associations are more important for sponsors than off-field associations. This suggests that sponsorship success follows on-field success (Biscaia, Trail, Ross, & Yoshida, 2017). To this respect, footwear and apparel maker Under Armour signing NBA star Stephen Curry has led to a strong growth of the company’s basketball footwear (Business Insider, 2017). Conversely, athlete commitment and team commitment were influenced by the athlete’s off-field image, highlighting the importance for teams to hire athletes with strong off-field brand images. These findings suggest that athletes are hybrid brands (Cortsen, 2013) and that the way their image is managed outside the field of play is vital to increase followership for them and their teams (Agyemang et al., 2015; Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). For example, David Beckham has been commonly acknowledged as an example of how an athlete’s off-field image may play a significant role to increase commitment toward their favorite team (Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

Consequently, these findings extend previous research on athlete brand by empirically supporting the notion that both on-field and off-field brand image is important (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) to invoke positive fan reactions. While previous studies have suggested the existence of spill-over effects among brands within the sport
ecosystem (e.g. Biscaia et al., 2017; Kunkel et al., 2017), athlete’s on-field and off-field brand image were not equally effective at predicting athlete commitment, team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. Based on the current findings, performance-related characteristics are more effective at promoting positive reactions toward athletes’ associated sponsors, while life beyond the sport activity represents a more valuable component to promote commitment toward the athlete and his/her team. Still, the athletes examined in this study were among the top soccer players worldwide (e.g. Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo) and the lack of variability in participants’ responses regarding on-field image may have limited a deeper understanding of its role on fans’ reactions. However, the findings indicate that for athletes at the top level, off-field associations rather than on-field associations influence fans’ connection with the athlete.

The role of self-brand connection

The current study illuminates the role of self-brand connection on the relationship fans establish with their favorite athletes and associated teams and sponsors. As the findings indicate, self-brand connection played a role in the relationship between athlete brand image and consumer’s commitment with the athlete. Notably, self-brand connection was not significantly related to team commitment and athlete sponsor preference. These findings suggest that fans’ personal feelings toward an athlete do not necessarily translate into positive outcomes for related entities. Indeed, a strong athlete brand image is more important than athletes who are relatable. However, findings show that self-brand connection directly affected athlete commitment and mediated the relationship between off-field image and athlete commitment. These findings support the assumption that people use brands to represent self-images, and that this representation of the self is an important element in the development of consumer loyalty toward athlete brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). For
example, Steph Curry has been described as “the rare superstar where an 8-year-old kid can go, ‘He looks just like me. Maybe I can do it.’” (Pandian, 2017).

On-field brand image was not significantly related with self-brand connection suggesting that participants did not perceive their self-concept to be reflected by the athlete professional expertise. As noted by Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann (2015), brands play an important role in consumers’ identity, given that they tend to rely on brands to express themselves. In the context of professional athletes, the non-significant relationship between on-field image and self-brand connection may indicate difficulties for fans to associate themselves with top performers. Escalas and Bettman (2003) stated that consumers often select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self, while Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) noted that fans mainly consume sport brands loaded with meaning to which they can relate. These ideas are particularly relevant in this case given that the professional soccer players in this study are some of the top performers in the world and their on-field image was ranked very high. Consequently, this high level of on-field performance may be perceived by fans as personally unachievable, which may limit the development of a self-brand connection. In this instance, the aspirational self (Fournier, 1998), not the perceived self, may play a bigger role. While fans may have perceived some athletes to have unattainable on-field image, the significant role of off-field image indicates that the brand associations related to the athlete’s personal life (e.g., personality, role model, lifestyle, culture) may also be used to create and define a consumer’s self-concept (Chaplin & John, 2005; Escalas, 2004). Further research that considers a more diverse range of athletes would be helpful to understand better the relationships between fans, athletes and their related teams and sponsors.
Managerial Implications

The findings have several managerial implications germane to athlete brand management. Considering the importance of the Effort association for on-field image, athletes and managers should consider being more intentional in demonstrating their commitment to the field of play in every competition. Such exertion often ingratiates the athlete to the fan and can lead to an overall positive perception of the athlete brand. For instance, consider a basketball player who dives for a loose ball or an attacking player in soccer who sacrifices for his/her team and “tracks back” to deter the opposing team from scoring. Such instances are often applauded and can help the player win over fans, and brand managers should encourage this activity. Similarly, the associations of Style of Play and Achievement suggest that athletes’ self-presentation to fans (e.g., social media) should take the athletic action (Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) into consideration by highlighting important career achievements and their distinctive style. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo’s posts about match performances are often shared by thousands of followers contributing to his on-field image as a dominant athlete.

In addition, our findings support the idea that the effectiveness of endorsement is moderated by their athletic performance (Yu, 2005). Therefore, athletes must create, maintain and protect an image of success on the field. To this end, the use of social media seems to offer strong potential for athletes and their associated sponsors (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012), as the importance of celebrity endorsement has been suggested to strengthen over time (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Athletes should also pursue opportunities that would allow individual and collective achievements. The example of Kevin Durant (NBA player) moving from the Oklahoma City Thunder to the Golden State Warriors created various opportunities for sponsoring brands, resulting in Durant having the third highest endorsement earnings of all NBA players (Forbes, 2018). Indeed, his move was not solely based on basketball but to capitalize on the technology investment opportunities in the Bay Area (Rovell, 2018). With
this in mind, brand managers should consider destinations and opportunities beyond merely

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

strong reach and social capital (Ratten, 2015).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

role of Personality enforces the idea that brand personality regularly optimizes a consumer’s

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

their unique personality, which can be done via social media by giving consumers first-hand
.accounts of them engaging in activities aimed at highlighting their personality and provide

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and that it would be advisable for athletes to seek opportunities to engage in athlete
citizenship (Agyemang, 2014), whereby they influence society in a positive way and utilize it strategically to build their personal brand (e.g., Kunkel, Scott, & Beaton, 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research, there are limitations in this study that may have influenced the results and provide opportunities for future research. First, data were collected only via two social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter), and although the survey link was widely distributed using various related hashtags, the study only targeted soccer fans. Also, the results were derived from a convenience sample of individuals who may have taken the survey because of their interest in soccer, followership of specific online groups and high profile-athletes, or even the potential incentives that were provided. The collection of a larger, representative sample including fans and athletes from different sports and using different methods (e.g., online surveys and paper-and-pencil) would help future studies to further investigate the accuracy of the relationships tested in the current research and increase the generalizability of the results. As the current study focused on top athletes, which may have been the reason why Skill was not a statistical differentiator to drive their brand image, we recommend future research to include brand awareness and use a more diverse pool of athletes, including second tier athletes and more female athletes, to further understand the impact of athlete image dimensions on fans reactions toward those athletes and related entities.

Second, athletes with different brand images were combined into the same model. Although the free choice of athlete maximized the opportunity to capture participants with various levels of self-brand connection, this method sacrificed certain control over the target athletes. For example, the study could not exclude confounding variables such as likability. Considering that fans tend to react to brands in the sport environment in different ways (Biscaia et al., 2017), additional research could compare the current model across specific athletes to better understand the relationships between athlete image dimensions, self-brand
connection and fan reactions to the athlete and related entities. Given that sport athletes tend to be subjected to extensive scrutiny and high fan expectations (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008), of particular interest should be cases in which on-field and off-field image are incongruent. For example, when excellent soccer players are involved in major incidents, such as Lionel Messi’s tax fraud, or off-court abuse, such as Cristiano Ronaldo’s rape allegations. The impact of athlete transgression on different entities linked to the athlete would be both theoretically and practically relevant. This would likely allow to extend Lee and Kwak’s (2016) research, which demonstrates consumers can decouple more from the transgression related to the job performance (i.e., doping) than transgressions not related to the job performance (i.e., fraud). By comparing different athletes, control variables such as gender or sexual orientation should be included as covariates.

A third limitation and research opportunity involves the inclusion of self-brand connection measures allowing a distinction between perceived self and desired self. Previous studies have suggested that the usage of products and brands by individuals is often linked to desired self-images (Escalas, 2004; Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Thus, measuring both consumer actual self-image and desired self-image may contribute to our understanding of the importance of on-field and off-field brand image dimensions and their role in fan connection and subsequent reactions.

Fourth, the role of different types of media platforms (e.g., athletes mainly promoted through traditional media, reality shows, social media; Escalas & Bettman, 2017) on the formation of self-brand connection represents a research opportunity to explore why consumers develop different connections with brands within the sport environment, and further outcomes could be included in the current model. For example, self-brand connection with an athlete brand may lead consumers to appropriate social needs (Escalas and Bettman, 2015), and recent studies have highlighted the importance of sports to increase individuals’ well-being (e.g., Inoue, Sato, Du, & Funk, 2017). Therefore, examining how self-brand
connections with athletes relates to sport fans’ well-being may help expand our knowledge about fan relationships with sport brands.

Fifth, we only focused on sponsors in the traditional sense of companies sponsoring athletes to endorse their brand. However, an increasing number of athletes are becoming entrepreneurs (Ratten, 2015) by launching their own brands, such as Cristiano Ronaldo selling jeans and boxer shorts with his CR7 brand, or Zlatan Ibrahimovic selling hoodies and caps with his A-Z brand. Thus, future research should investigate the role of athlete brand associations and self-brand connection on fans’ purchase behavior toward the athlete branded merchandise vs. traditional sponsored merchandise. This would likely contribute to a better understanding of athlete entrepreneurship beyond the influencer status. In addition, the examination of spill-over effects between athlete sponsors and team sponsors may also prove to be beneficial to extend previous research on sport brand architecture (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2017).

**Conclusion**

In summary, the current study represents an initial effort to understand how consumers’ perception of athlete brand image influence their commitment toward the athlete, his/her team and associated sponsors, as well as how these relationships are mediated by their self-brand connection. It provides a deeper understanding of the aspects that contribute to the development of fan relationships with not just their favorite athlete but also other brands in the sport ecosystem such as teams and sponsors. In particular, the findings indicate that on-field and off-field image impact outcome variables differently. On-field athlete image is important to increase athlete sponsor preference, while off-field image leads to an improved athlete commitment and team commitment. In addition, self-brand connection mediates the relationship between off-field image and athlete commitment. Taken together, the findings from the current research suggest a new perspective on athlete branding and shed light on the
importance of athlete brand image dimensions on fan outcomes to brands involved in the sport ecosystem.
References


ATHLETE BRANDS AND SELF-BRAND CONNECTION


**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model.

**Figure 2.** Summary results of the structural model. n.s. = not significant; * = significant at the .05 level.
### Table 1. Athlete Brand image.

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

* = Original definition adopted.
Table 2. Items, Descriptive Statistics, Factor Loadings and Internal Consistency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Names and Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>CR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-field image</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair Play: Athlete X shows fair play on the field.</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.791</td>
<td>.347</td>
<td>1.468</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort: Athlete X gives 100% every game.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>.704</td>
<td>3.575*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement: Athlete X has won important titles.</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.111</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>2.731*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of Play: Athlete X’s style is distinctive from that of other players.</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.732</td>
<td>.472</td>
<td>2.309*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact: Athlete X is an impactful player on the field.</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>.478</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill: Athlete X has superior skills.</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td>-.294</td>
<td>1.647</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Off-field image</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Conditioning: Athlete X’s body is well conditioned.</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.908</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>5.690*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Attraction: Athlete X is good-looking.</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>1.131</td>
<td>.600</td>
<td>8.235*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle: Athlete X has an interesting personal life.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.035</td>
<td>.522</td>
<td>6.162*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality: Athlete X has a unique personality.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>.670</td>
<td>8.178*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture: Athlete X represents the culture of his/her background well.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>.524</td>
<td>5.184*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsible: Athlete X is socially responsible.</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>.961</td>
<td>.655</td>
<td>7.951*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Model: Athlete X serves as a good role model.</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>.828</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>8.931*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-brand connection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I identify with Athlete X.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.967</td>
<td>.878</td>
<td>39.017*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete X is a mirror image of the person I would like to be.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.207</td>
<td>.833</td>
<td>33.531*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think following Athlete X helps me construct my self-identity.</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.216</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td>28.490*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athlete commitment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a committed fan of Athlete X.</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.967</td>
<td>.878</td>
<td>39.017*</td>
<td>.779</td>
<td>.899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a loyal supporter of Athlete X.</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>.929</td>
<td>45.320*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team commitment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a loyal supporter of Athlete X’s team.</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>1.387</td>
<td>.885</td>
<td>24.668*</td>
<td>.803</td>
<td>.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me to be a fan of Athlete X’s team.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>.939</td>
<td>50.462*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athlete sponsor preference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor X is a good brand / organization.</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.885</td>
<td>.952</td>
<td>65.067*</td>
<td>.888</td>
<td>.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would buy products from Sponsor X.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.960</td>
<td>.944</td>
<td>56.384*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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

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

Notes. Values below the diagonal are correlation estimates. Values above the diagonal are squared correlation estimates.
Table 4. Path Coefficients, Indicator Weights, and Explained Variance of Mediated Structural Model.

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

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