Consumer-Athlete Brand Relationship: A Qualitative Exploration of Sport Fans' Experiences

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Abstract

Athlete marketing can have profound effects on sport fans. While the affinity for superstar athletes is clear, the internalization of brand image associated with high-profile athletes has received little scholarly attention. The central aim of this exploratory study was to understand sport consumers' perceptions of the athlete brand and its influence on their self-concept. Seventeen purposefully selected members of an athlete-centered fan club took part in semi-structured interviews. The interview data revealed the following prevalent themes: athlete brand adoption, athlete brand devotion, city identity, and community engagement. Based on the findings, meaningful interactions with consumers and altruistic actions fostered the relationship between the athlete and his followers. The present study contributed to the research concerning the emotional bond sport consumers have with athletes and evolving literature on athlete brand management.

Keywords: athlete brand, identity, brand image

1. Introduction

The influence professional athletes have on their fans produces significant and far-reaching effects on the sports marketing and economic landscape. Captivated by athletes' talents, performances, and publicized personal lives, fans create unique and indelible associations with these sports heroes (i.e., athletes) (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyeman, 2016). These deep attachments create a brand image, an impression sport consumers form about their admired athletes (Arai et al., 2014). Arai and colleagues (2014) defined an athlete brand as a "public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market" (p. 98). Further, their social status establishes athletes as cultural icons and valuable commodities (Feezell, 2005; Gilchrist, 2005; Hasaan et al., 2016). To illustrate, the "Be like Mike" mononym created a unique object of imitation, which transcended the sport and extended to the everyday life realm (Feezell, 2005). Sport marketers employ the knowledge concerning athlete brand management to decipher how fans view their admired athletes' lives on and off the field.

Celebrity athletes (e.g., LeBron James, Roger Federer) have an enormous impact on the sales and image of the businesses which they endorse. Athlete managers leverage fan behavior insights by utilizing the following athlete brand attributes: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014). Another way athlete brands are developed is through off-the-court campaigns (e.g., appearances, community service, commercials) (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). These athlete-fan interactions present sport marketers with unique opportunities for promotional initiatives that capitalize on the emotional bond athletes have with their fans and positive associations with their endorsers (Thomson, 2006). In fact, Silvera and Austad (2004) asserted that meaningful interactions make consumers feel engaged, understood, and appreciated, despite brands' commercial goals. This human side characteristic of athletes is particularly critical not only for their own marketability, but also for their fans' self-identification, satisfaction, and loyalty.

Sport management scholars have examined how various factors (e.g., level of team identification) influence fan behavior in the college sport setting (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005), psychological connection to sport teams (Funk & James, 2001), influence of role identification on behavioral intentions among sport fans (Shapiro, Ridinger, & Trail, 2013), motivational factors impacting team identification (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002), and continuation of

identification with teams (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). Additionally, the existing scholarly work has reported on how various institutions influence self-perception and employee organizational identification (Ashworth & Mael, 1989; Oja, Bass, & Gordon, 2015). While research concerning team and organizational identification has been given adequate attention, the available research on human brand (e.g., athlete brand) identification is rather sparse, which leaves academicians and industry practitioners at a significant disadvantage. Specifically, previous literature lacks an in-depth understanding of consumer feelings, perceptions, and identification with athletes and their brands.

It has been argued that individuals accept positions of others and form their personal identities and perceptions based on others' self-concept (Hewitt, 1997). These individuals' perceptions are impacted by the identities of the ones they choose to associate with (e.g., superstar athletes) to reinforce their strengths and cover any existing weaknesses (see Michener, DeLamater, & Myers, 2004). To understand how sport fans internalize athletes' characteristics (e.g., name, perceived personality, image), this study sought to decipher favorable and relatable brand associations that foster the positive image of an athlete and influence fans' personal identities. Specifically, this research endeavor examined how different facets of an athlete's persona (e.g., athletic ability, life story) influenced the self-concept and intentions of sport consumers. Furthermore, considering athletes' abilities to impact fans' socio-cultural ideologies and behaviors (Biskup & Pfister, 1999), a holistic understanding of the images that elicit such influential responses and affinity for their personas is equally important for the athlete branding research and related industry practices. Therefore, the central aim of this exploratory study was to investigate how sport consumers internalize the nuanced athlete brand image and subsequently form their self-concept. To this end, the present study uncovered multifaceted associations held toward an athlete that reflect sport consumers' own identity. The following research questions were developed to carry out this study:

RQ_1: How do sport consumers recognize an intrinsic connection with an athlete brand?

RQ_2: How does an athlete reinforce emotional engagement with loyal consumers?

RQ_3: What off-field features contribute to enhanced athlete brand consumption?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Identity Theory

Considering the current study is grounded in deciphering an intrinsic connection to personal and professional aspects of superstar athletes' images, it is critical to discern consumers' personal affiliations and identities. Identity was termed as "a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation defining what it means to be who one is" (Burke, 1991, p. 837). Social settings can influence individuals' motivations by matching their own identities (Carter, 2013). The connection between an individual's perceptions and actual behavior can be explained from the perspective of a person's pursuit of certain goals and imitation of model behavior (Burke & Stets, 2009; Kemper, 1968). Further, people discern among extensions of the self-identification in relation to a person's immediate circles (Buss, 2001). While the 'self' manifests itself as essential qualities of individuals' consciousness and personal identities, a variety of settings and acceptance of different roles ultimately influence a person's self-control and adaptation (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009).

Importantly, the salience of identities has a significant impact on this hierarchy and one's sense of identity, as multiple identities may coexist and subsequently impact a person (Stryker, 1968). The activation of an individual's identity results in behavioral motivations and intentions to give a person a sense of structured meaning and purpose (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Felps, & Lim, 2009; Burke & Stets, 2009). With respect to individuals' ability to find self-identity, this partly depends on their environment, including persons (e.g., athletes) they choose to associate with (Burke & Stets, 2009). Restated, an individual may choose to perceive themselves with reference to others' personal characteristics (e.g., athletes), which is particularly important given the context of the present study.

2.2 Athlete Branding

Much of the existing research suggests that superstar athletes should be perceived as stand-alone brands (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). With respect to the meaning embedded in an athlete brand, previous scholars have recognized two different ways athletes resonate with their fans. Specifically, sport consumers relate to athletes and their images based on on-court performances and style of play (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). In addition to memorable athletic triumphs, sport marketers can leverage their clients' lives off the playing field (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016). While signature athletic moves characteristic of an athlete influence consumers' initial impression, the off-the-field dimension of an athlete brand further solidifies a spectrum of associations placed in fans' minds.

Athlete brands are retained in recognizable names, personalities, and life stories (Arai et al., 2014). An athlete's name reinforces a memorable image, which makes for a unique marketing tool used to expand the pool of sponsors and sell branded merchandise. To illustrate, David Beckham is considered someone who exemplifies a branded product, because he possesses essential components of a brand such as name, logo, and personality (Keller, 2008; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Sports fans are enamored of celebrity athletes' on-field accomplishments and develop a deeper sense of connection with athletes by following their off-field endeavors (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Further, there is empirical evidence to suggest that athlete social media marketing can influence consumer engagement, thereby solidifying an athlete's brand (Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2020). Evidently, sport fans experience an abundance of connotations associated with a star athlete's personality (Mullin et al., 2014). Sport consumers tend to be inclined to connect with an athlete's personality because they see in an athlete a reflection of their own internal characteristics (Mowen & Minor, 1998).

To demonstrate what constitutes an image of a superstar athlete, Arai and colleagues (2014) developed a conceptual model of athlete brand image. The scholars have suggested that the critical associations for an athlete brand can be classified into three higher-level categories (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance, marketable lifestyle) that further organize into ten sub-dimensions, resulting in a complete athlete's brand image (Arai et al., 2014). Michael Jordan, for example, resonates with clutch player, prolific scorer, and champion (Mullin et al., 2014). Equally as important is Jordan's off-field marketability which further reinforces his brand. It is evident that an athlete brand is capable of creating a plethora of associations in consumers' minds. This knowledge about an athlete is employed by sport marketers to influence fans' intentions and behavior.

3. Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews with members of an athlete-centered (i.e., LeBron James) fan club located in a large city in the Midwestern United States. Since the club's inception in 2003, the membership has grown to its present level of roughly 200 members. Originally founded to closely follow the career of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) LeBron James, the club has developed into a social, community-based organization which contributes to local causes and youth mentoring initiatives. LeBron James nevertheless remains the focal point of the fan club's identity. The fan club prides itself on systematic functions such as watch parties, field trips, holiday gatherings, and local volunteer outings. These social functions are aimed at binding the collective and supporting emotional well-being among its members. The fan club holds monthly meetings for committee discussions and social purposes. More importantly, the members prioritize community endeavors, much like the focal athlete brand (i.e., LeBron James).

LeBron James was deemed an athlete brand given the purpose of the current study for his athletic expertise, corporate endorsements, and symbolic meaning that in turn, foster formation of strong, unique, and favorable brand associations and influence consumers' self-concept and identities. A comprehensive understanding of the process of athlete brand identification guided the integration of participants and the data collection procedure. This approach would facilitate selection of participants with extensive experience concerning the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Further, deep identification with an athlete and specific personality traits dictated the utilization of the present data collection. On the whole, in order to discern which associations constitute the phenomenon under study, it was critical to select participants who showed extensive familiarity with the studied construct (i.e., athlete brand) (Patton, 2002).

3.1 Sample

Upon identifying the sample for the present study, 17 female members of the aforementioned fan club were solicited individually for participation in face-to-face and phone interviews. We held preliminary discussions with the present participants to confirm their suitability for this study. This initial screening process identified each participant's level of involvement in fan club activities and ability to reflect on these experiences in an articulate manner (Patton, 2002). With regard to age distribution, the current participants ranged in age from 61 to 94. Most of the participants identified themselves as African American (82%) followed by White/Caucasian (18%). Our initial discussions with each of the prospective participants aided in determining their level of engagement with the fan club (e.g., member responsibilities, tenure). Given the dearth of empirical evidence concerning the studied case, we intended to recruit participants who took on diverse roles within the club at various stages of development.

Further, learning about the participants' self-concept and consequent behavior in relation to the athlete's personality and fan club's mission guided our reasons for sampling. We utilized purposeful sampling, where only certain participants met the selection criteria based on their ability to provide information-rich data (Silverman, 2000). Considering the understudied construct (i.e., athlete brand image) and exploratory nature of the inquiry, this

sampling approach was deemed advantageous. This sampling technique would allow us to delve deeper into the understanding of athlete brand image and consumer self-concept.

3.2 Interview

Eight participants were interviewed at their place of residence, six interviews took place at a mutually convenient time in a public location, and the remaining three interviews were conducted via telephone. While the face-to-face method provides several practical advantages, in this case, it was not feasible for extensive travel to conduct all in-person interviews. Further, Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor, and King (2007) argued that phone interviews: 1) use economic and human resources efficiently (e.g., reduce the need for travel) 2) minimize disadvantages with in-person interviewing (e.g., researcher can take notes discreetly, without making the participants feel uncomfortable) 3) facilitate development of appropriate relationships between researchers and participants and 4) improve quality of data collection procedures. As a result, both approaches (i.e., in-person and telephone) were utilized for this data collection.

A semi-structured interview approach was employed, where the sequence of questions could be altered by the authors to delve deeper into the knowledge, feelings, and responses of study participants (Patton, 2002). We drew interview questions from the literature on identification and athlete branding introduced in the theoretical framework of this study. Interview questions were designed to elicit deeper responses to questions concerning LeBron James. Sample questions guiding each interview included the following: a) What is your perception of LeBron James? b) Why do LeBron James's personal qualities resonate with you on a deep level? We built rapport with each of the participants before an interview took place by asking "warm-up" questions, the tactic commonly used in qualitative research (Shenton & Hayter, 2004). The final sample size was deemed sufficient due to the evidence of data saturation. Specifically, the point of data saturation occurs when further interviews do not result in any new findings or no additional themes emerge from the collected data (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

3.3 Data Analysis

The initial stage in data analysis was guided by open coding, where "the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). Further, we applied deductive (using current theory) and inductive (data-guided) approaches to analyze the interview data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Specifically, we drew a set of priory themes from the existing framework concerning the studied construct and analyzed the themes derived from our interviews (Patton, 2002). The inductive thematic analysis was conducted by taking direction from the interviews, thereby ensuring consistency of the emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Credibility was established through member checking (during interviews) and further discussions about the accuracy of the data with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure validity and reliability, we implemented the following verification strategies: methodological coherence, appropriate sample, collecting and analyzing concurrently, thinking theoretically, and theory development (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). We summarized and presented the participants' verbatim responses through the key themes in the following section.

4. Results

We presented the findings in four main sections drawn from the analysis of the interviews as follows: athlete brand adoption, athlete brand devotion, city identity, and community engagement. Each primary theme breaks down into sub-categories (i.e., athlete brand humanization, athlete brand moral alignment, value collaboration) to complement the perceptions of the participants and clarify the overall pattern of the findings. We incorporated representative quotes from the transcripts into the study to illustrate each of the main themes and sub-themes in this section.

4.1 Athlete Brand Adoption

The participants evaluated the athlete through the lens of their own beliefs. This behavior linked the athlete's name to the participants' self-image. The participants experienced an emotional connection to the athlete and his personality founded in their own maternal identity. Most participants discussed an emotional connection with unique attributes of the athlete reinforced by a matronly identity and aspirations for a family bond. Furthermore, the consumer associations triggered sentimental memories and the affinity for the athlete.

It was evident from the interviews that the participants took on the responsibility as athlete brand owners and evaluated the athlete's aura in terms of their personal beliefs and values. Throughout the interviews, the participants alluded to a distinct involvement with the athlete with Participant 8 stating, "He [LeBron James] is a good young man. He reminds me a lot of my son…that is what really motivates me to be in that club that I am in." It was evident that the participants equated the bond with the athlete's personality with strong, trustworthy, and caring family ties. For example, Participant 3 framed this affective relationship with the athlete as: "[We perceive him as] our adopted grandson."

Participant 2 illustrated this personal connection to the athlete by stating the following: "He [LeBron James] is like our child…He is our own, he is our LeBron James…it would be like kids and their families." Participant 9 had a similar reaction:

He was from a single parent and I am a single mother. So, you kind of feel it, and when your child can go to school and still go on to do things, you are just proud. You still help them and you do whatever you can.

It was clear that the personal qualities of the athlete created an indelible association with the current participants' own identity, linking them to the morals exhibited by the athlete. As reported by many participants, the desire to rely on personal characteristics heightened favorable attitudes towards the athlete and nurtured the emotional connection with fellow members.

4.1.1 Athlete Brand Humanization

All participants indicated they had meaningful interactions with the athlete that gave his persona a human character. According to Participant 6, "He [LeBron James] writes letters to the kids. He sends out gifts to the kids. He will send them tickets…the children have so much to look forward to." These interactive experiences resulted in the participants' affective and positive attitudes about the athlete. All participants perceived the athlete as personal and conversational. Moreover, the participants discussed the empathetic traits characteristic of the athlete. It was evident that he became a source of inspiration for some participants, guiding them through difficult times with Participant 7 saying:

When I was going through cancer, it was the chemo [and] you just felt like death. You just did not know if you could continue because it is just like a wipeout. I would watch the TV and I was so happy, just because he [LeBron James] made the whole room light up. It was a dark time for me…I had surgery, I have an implant, all those things then you go through chemo and that chemical takes you down so far that you just do not know what you are doing, you are in a fog…That is an incentive in itself and someday I might get to meet him again in person and I might get to tell him [that] he [LeBron James] inspired me in that way.

Participant 4 had the following perspective on the athlete's interaction with the followers:

It is a Mother's Day card. I lost my husband and I got a big green plant, I nursed it for many years. That is his [LeBron James's] signature. I was on the list, they sent to many mothers within the area, they sent flowers, there was like a green plant and a card for Mother's Day…Just out of the kindness he had I guess a committee to give so many mothers in the area a nice Mother's Day gift.

Participant 7 illustrated the importance of personal interactions with the athlete by saying:

That is how I got a picture with him [LeBron James]. I met him a couple of times at the Barnes and Noble book signing. I stood in line for a long, long time…and when I talked to him, I said "I am the one that had the breast cancer and the…journal wrote about it" and he said "I know, my mom made me read that" and I said "yeah that is me…I need a new one [picture] with you," so he [LeBron James] said "okay."

Personal interactions with the athlete lend a human character to his personal brand's aura. The human element characteristic of the athlete was a crucial source of consumer desires and loyalty, adding value to the athlete's image. Consumer motives and reflections on self-image were expressed through a meaningful connection and inspirational story attached to the athlete's name and personality as evidenced by the current participants' opinions.

4.1.2 Athlete Brand Moral Alignment

The participants indicated the relationship between the athlete and his followers depended on similarities in moral standards. This perception of sameness of ethical standards and actions resulted in a distinct bond with the admirers of the athlete. To illustrate, Participant 8 had the following opinion:

What can I say? He [LeBron James] reminds me of my son. That is the deep level I resonate on, he is just a good young man. You cannot take those qualities away from within you. Those qualities are there. I would say you are raised with those qualities.

Participant 12 echoed this perspective by reporting, "A lot of these women are very caring, very nurturing, and wanted to carry on what he [LeBron James] aspires." Participant 7 identified the athlete as a source of motivation and discussed sameness about appreciation of hard work:

He has so much talent and he is so dedicated, that somewhat inspires me because as you age you have to work harder at staying alive than you did years before. I work every day, I work very, very hard just to stay alive. If you live long

enough, you have to have the mantra or that motto…He [LeBron James] is pumping iron or doing his exercises. I figure if LeBron can do it, I can do it.

These responses demonstrated that sharing core values with the athlete enhanced the participants' self-image and in turn, increased engagement within the fan base.

4.2 Athlete Brand Devotion

The participants' views demonstrated that the athlete brand trumps the jersey. Participant 15 indicated "We love LeBron [and] remember we went to Miami, we did not desert him." Participant 7 echoed this comment: "Every time the Heat [game] was on, I sat in the chair and watched it." All participants demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the athlete, despite a departure to a competing team brand. For example, Participant 16 stated, "The club continued to go on when he [LeBron James] went to play for the other team…We would support him wherever. He will always have ties to this community." Participant 2 emphasized, "Whatever he [LeBron James] does, we are behind him." To these participants, the athlete transcends the platform provided by his sport, because where he plays does not diminish his positive influence on his fan base. To illustrate, Participant 9 expressed the following view: "When he [LeBron James] left to Miami we kept believing. He is still ours, he is not theirs…We just all shared our love for him." In a similar manner, Participant 1 stated:

We all stuck by him regardless of wherever he goes whatever he does we are going to be here for him. I mean he is not going to play basketball forever and so, but whatever path he chooses, the fan club will still be there watching him keeping an eye on him and rooting for him and his endeavors.

Participant 12 provided a similar opinion:

We just supported him in whatever decision he made. Like we said, the decision, it was strictly business, he wanted a ring, as do most professional athletes. He was not going to get it [with the team], because [team owner] did not give him, I always said did not give him his Pippen. Michael Jordan did not do anything until he got Scottie Pippen. Plus, I do not think he thought LeBron was serious about leaving…[We] supported him. In fact, we said if he goes to L.A. we will support him.

In the same vein, Participant 10 shared the following thought:

He [LeBron James] needed to get away so he can advance somewhere else. I was not hurt at all, but I kept praying that one day he would come back to our city and give us a championship. And we kept praying and just believing that one day he would come back and then when the word came that LeBron was coming back, oh my gosh it was just excitement.

This unique tendency of the participants to remain loyal to the athlete, despite his team affiliation, complements the personal identification with the athlete among the members of the fan club.

4.3 City Identity

All participants described a specific place as part of the athlete's image structure. The athlete and his loyalty to the city and local communities were recognized as a source of pride among the current participants. For example, Participant 11 said, "He [LeBron James] will go down in history like Martin Luther King for what he does in the [city]…His impact on the [city] is a great impact." For Participant 5, LeBron James "does the [city] proud." Furthermore, distinct athletic achievements and winning excellence made the current participants internalize the value of the athlete to the local community with Participant 16 stating, "I will always be thankful because he was instrumental in bringing in a championship not just to Cleveland, but to the [city]."

Pervasive throughout the participant responses, the athlete not only symbolized, but established the values of the local community. The athlete raised the profile of the city he embraced, cementing his brand image as a pillar of the local community. Illustrative of this, Participant 9 stated:

I am proud that we have a human person that is from the [city], from humble beginnings, and has still maintained the [city] as home. He could probably live in any place in the world he wanted to, but he still chose the [city] as home. "This is home, it is going to be home, and I will raise my children here." It makes you so proud and then you begin to tell other young people if he [LeBron James] can do it, then you can do it if you really try, you may be a doctor, lawyer, school teacher, college professor, minister, choir director, any of those things, just be yourself.

These responses suggested that the athlete's loyalty to the local community resonated with his followers on a deeper level, solidifying the associations related to the athlete's character and his followers' sense of pride and identity.

4.4 Community Engagement

The participants' responses suggested that the athlete created a memorable image through his commitment to community engagement initiatives. Multiple participants discussed how socially responsible activities and charitable initiatives supported by the athlete made him more likeable and relatable. For example, the athlete is using his platform to mentor local grade students and create a pro-education movement in the local community. Participant 15 expressed admiration for the athlete's actions by saying, "He refurbished the floor at the [school], he put money in there. I admire his generosity." Participant 2 had the following reaction:

He is opening a school now for kids whose academic levels might be a little lower…LeBron is a rarity…I have never known anybody else in the sports arena that has done as much as he has done…If a child walked up to him and said I am hungry I need some money, he would probably say "boom here you go."

In another response, Participant 14 had a similar opinion:

He [LeBron James] is truly a hometown and he looks out for all the children, specifically now for the third grade that he is opening the school for the youth [in the city]. I think he is a good person with the heart for family and children.

Participant 5 described in detail the athlete's support of the local community and its youth:

His [LeBron James's] focus is on education and excellence with the kids. I think it is just phenomenal that he is so concerned about his city and the children and having a proper education in K-12…Then he thought so much about the importance of that…so he has moved it on up to the college level with the guarantee for college tuition for them as long as they keep their promise of keeping up their grades.

In a conversation with Participant 10, they offered the following comment about the athlete's support of local community:

I think that for him [LeBron James], as a young man, he had done a lot of things for his community…he put a lot into our city…recreational centers that needed improvement. There is a lot of recreational centers and I went into a couple that I could not believe it was the same center because a lot of them were totally changed and fixed up and remodeled. And I said "who did all of this?" And they said, "LeBron did." And you should see the excitement on these children's faces…it would just bring tears to your eyes…It just brought joy…to see the things he did for this community and for this city.

4.4.1 Value Collaboration

The participants related to and adopted the values espoused by the athlete, which created followers and collaborators that grow the club's membership and the athlete's positive influence. Partnering with the athlete's initiatives strengthened the bond among his followers and to the brand itself. This in turn enhanced the engagement with the athlete because the participants felt closer to his vision by emulating socially responsible behaviors. To illustrate, Participant 5 stated, "He is working with kids, trying to help kids, doing community outreach, community service and we want to do likewise as [his fans]." Participant 2 had the following opinion:

Just think of a young man that thinks about the children, and giving them the opportunities that somebody gave him…that is wonderful because if a lot of us would do that, it would be a better world. If more children get exposed to good things, they cut down on a lot of bad things that could happen. So, he is awesome, what can I say? He is a rarity. It is hard to find a young man like LeBron that thinks about others.

Evidently, the current participants related to the athlete's intentions in terms of bettering the local community and conditions for its youth. Further, this value uniformity resulted in a strong intrinsic connection between the athlete and his followers, as evidenced by many participants in this study.

5. Discussion

As evidenced by the existing literature, high-profile athletes epitomize a desired athletic ability, personal experience, and glamorous lifestyle, elements that often influence the economic decisions of their fans and society at large (Arai et al., 2014; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Feezell, 2005; Gilchrist, 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009; Hasaan et al., 2016). Unique athletic talent and memorable sporting performances produce consumer sentiments and a lasting impression on their audiences (Arai et al., 2014). The existing literature contends that consumers of athlete brands discern among a variety of meanings and associations attached to an athlete's name and that ultimately link consumers to their admired athletes (Arai et al., 2014). While the previous literature provides a conceptualization for the athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014) and outlines the antecedents of the athlete brand construct (Hasaan et al., 2016), there is no

available literature that explains in detail the intrinsic identification fans develop with athlete brands, the knowledge that aids in strategic athlete brand management.

The meaningful interactions with human brands (e.g., athletes) shape fans' self-characteristics and identities. The current findings point to a variety of roles and accompanying values, beliefs, and behaviors exhibited by the focal athlete brand. These personal traits, in turn, aid in formation of a multifaceted emotional bond that exists between the like-minded consumers and the athlete. To illustrate, all participants reported that not only did they view the athlete through the lens of their personal identification, but they also saw the athlete as a source of motivation. This finding is rather encouraging, considering the athlete brand relationship and its outcomes have escaped our empirical attention. As indicated by the current findings, these fans connected deeply with the athlete, which reinforced an indelible impression on their self-image.

The current findings point to the perception of the athlete brand as a representation of consumers' own personal values. It was evident from the findings that the participants viewed the athlete's personality through the lens of internal identity and a family-like bond, components neglected by previous research. Moreover, the participants discussed the athlete's values and how they, in turn, constituted the participants' self-concept. This finding echoes Erikson's (1968) supposition regarding identification as an individual's "wholeness" that employs goals, values, and beliefs to maintain self-concept. Furthermore, our findings broaden the understanding of athletes as role models (Gilchrist, 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009). The participants made it evident that an athlete can act as catalyst for sentimentality feelings of family such as idolization. The participants also indicated that they had certain expectations for the athlete as consumers and suggested that consumer preferences are formed based on similar values and an emotional connection with the athlete's initiatives. The conclusions drawn from these findings serve to deepen our inquiry into the consumer identification with the aura of an athlete. These findings are particularly intriguing considering the influence of personal characteristics (e.g., athletic performance, appearance, lifestyle) of an athlete on establishing trust, satisfaction, and engagement among fans.

All participants reported on the role of interactive experiences in meaningful relationship with the athlete. Face-to-face interactions such as public appearances were perceived with a sense of connection to the same group of peers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These reflections corroborate the interpersonal relationship frame (Thomson, 2006) and confirm the notion of human brands' role as a friendly companion (Cole & Leets, 1999; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). While the existing literature concerning athlete branding discusses the importance of relationship marketing efforts in strategic athlete brand management (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016), the knowledge concerning consumer attachment to an athlete brand is limited. The present findings further the concept of consumer athlete-brand attachment. Specifically, the participants described in detail the appreciation for likeable qualities of the athlete. The human aspect displayed by the athlete (e.g., empathy, compassion, vulnerability) and his relatable persona further solidified the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from following his endeavors. As evidenced by the participants' comments, the athlete showed the ability to relate to attitudes and desires of his admirers which resulted in unwavering loyalty among the followers.

The findings also demonstrated the complexity of the images associated with the athlete brand phenomenon and contributed to the overall understanding of the connection sport consumers have with athletes and their brand image. Prior literature discusses the importance of consumer-brand interactions (Thomson, 2006) and athletes' exemplary behavior (Feezell, 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009). However, these studies overlook the depth of consumer associations in the context of athlete brands. Given sport consumers relate to different facets of athletes' personas, the current evidence provides different angles to grasp the nuanced identity-associated hierarchy highlighted by Stryker (1968). It is evident that the present study refines the existing conceptualization regarding the athlete brand and consumer self-concept and adds to the overall understanding of this unique identification and the numerous associations linked to an athlete.

The responses reported in this study indicated that consumer identification with the athlete brand equated to a lasting bond between the athlete and his followers. Previous research has discussed brand image's role in strong attitudinal attachment to brands, which leads to a meaningful engagement with the focal brand (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2008). However, prior literature concerning athlete branding (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016) made no mention of the emotional involvement with an athlete's persona that influences the minds of fans. The current study contributes to this construct by demonstrating the participants' willingness to remain loyal to the athlete irrespective of team affiliation. This finding adds another facet to the athlete brand-consumer relationship and strategic athlete brand value communication.

Throughout the findings, the reference was made to a specific city as part of the athlete's image and identification. The athlete matched the values inherent to a particular community. This finding relates directly to how individuals

perceive themselves when compared to in-group versus out-group realms, the comparisons discussed in the literature on group identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). More importantly, the present findings explain how geographic identification influences consumers' self-conceptualization and connection to the athlete. Heere and James (2007) highlighted geographic identity as one of the factors that has an impact on team identity. With respect to athlete branding, the current participants' views provide further insight into how external identities (e.g., city) can strengthen the bond between the athlete and his followers.

Past literature argued that sport celebrities and teams can embody the local community and elevate the status of its population (see Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005; Rojek, 2006). The participants recognized the athlete and his loyalties with the city as a source of pride that served as elements capable of influencing self-assuredness, creativity, and altruistic values (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Verbeke, Belshcak, & Bagozzi, 2004). This finding also confirms the arguments that celebrity athletes are "cosmopolitan flexible accumulators who exchange bond of city, region, and even nation" (Rojek, 2006, p. 684). Drawing conclusions about the current findings, it is clear that the athlete elevated the city's reputation and solidified his association as a pillar of the community.

The participants' opinions regarding the athlete's community engagement initiatives are especially important in the light of the impact of athletes' and organizations' social responsibility actions (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Walker & Kent, 2009). Babiak and Wolfe (2009) have argued that "athletes promoting, for example, healthful living, may generate a larger, more attentive audience than would employees in other fields" (p. 722). Previous research confirms that various social initiatives implemented by sport organizations can enhance the overall image, add value to their brand, and influence donor commitment (Walker & Kent, 2009). In response to the questions regarding the athlete brand relationship, the participants said that the athlete made social consciousness and community engagement his top priority. While this finding echoes the contentions regarding athletes' and teams' social responsibilities made by previous scholars (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2009), the present analysis presents an in-depth finding into the impact these initiatives have on the connection to the athlete's personal brand and what it represents. It is now evident that the athlete's loyalty to his community and contributions to supporting youth in need resonated at a deep level with the participants. Furthermore, the data at hand further refine Rojek's (2006) assertion regarding athletes' ability to adopt the identities of cities and regions they represent. From the consumers' perspective, responsible citizenship and community responsibility establish a unique model of behavior and further reinforce the images and attitudes associated with the athlete and his persona.

The current findings indicated that the athlete created a desire for imitation within the group of like-minded fans. Participants' comments made it clear that collaboration with the athlete's community initiatives became their first priority and strengthened the connection within the collective. This shared consciousness and admiration for the values exhibited by the athlete provides further guidance to research on athlete fan collectives and their rituals. Further, the motivation to join the athlete's community enhanced the following of the athlete due to a deeper familiarity with his socially responsible actions. We now know that athlete brand followers can be inclined to emulate athletes' intentions and initiatives to influence and improve local communities.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study provided greater insight into the influence of athlete brands on sport consumers and related beliefs and associations, this research endeavor was not without limitations. The current participants' responses should be interpreted with caution considering the findings were obtained from a fan club surrounding a single athlete. It is still unknown how the current data can be applied to a more diverse pool of athletes, fans, and sport realms. While the present evidence is encouraging, the extent to which these results may be generalized remains unclear. Future studies examining consumer self-concept and connections to athletes and their personal brands may elicit different results. Specifically, future research should investigate the consumer perceptions in the context of a broader pool of athletes to enhance the knowledge concerning the athlete brand phenomenon and consumer identification. Furthermore, additional inquiries are needed to analyze how sport fans, who represent various demographics, relate to an athlete brand.

Additional evidence concerning communal consumption of an athlete brand is required to produce better understanding of how like-minded consumers with reference to perceived fan membership respond to athlete-led initiatives and their brands' favorable associations. Future studies should also concentrate on the role in-group consumer dynamics play in development of strong attitudes toward athletes. It should be advantageous for future researchers to examine the intricacies of group athlete brand consumption and the benefits sought by fans of athletes. Furthermore, future research should focus on deciphering how specific facets of an athlete brand (e.g., athletic achievements, off-the-field persona) influence identification, associations, and desires of sport consumers.

6. Conclusion

The current findings suggest that an athlete's interactions with fans can influence their engagement and motivations. Our results underline sport fans' dependence on an athlete's initiatives and role model behavior. It was evident that these reciprocal interactions had a profound impact on the participants' satisfaction and their devotion to an athlete. As expressed by the participants in the present sample, an athlete's personal values (e.g., caring, dedicated) can solidify his or her image among like-minded consumers. More importantly, an athlete's volunteerism and altruistic intentions were evidenced to resonate with the present participants and in turn, impacted their community-related engagement and overall satisfaction.

This research offers several important implications based on the participants' responses. Specifically, these findings can aid athlete brand managers in building and fostering relationships with fans. To illustrate, sport marketers can facilitate athlete event and community appearances, thereby increasing fan engagement and interaction opportunities. Further, athlete managers can rely on the current findings for further guidance with respect to specific charitable actions and community initiatives. Most importantly, considering the nuanced methods used to promote an athlete's brand, our findings can assist with athletes' understanding of role model behavior and its impact on younger generations.

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