ESTABLISHING ATHLETE BRAND AMONG FEMALE PAKISTANI FANS

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ABSTRACT

Athlete branding is growing topic in academics. This article seeks to investigate athlete branding by focusing antecedents, attributes and its implication among developing south Asian country, Pakistani female fans to help the efforts of an athlete to become an international brand. The final data sample is comprised of 15 semi-structured interviews with female fans of certain athletes. Participant's responses indicated that five major antecedent media, oral communication, social agents, team & sports and impression management are basic source of brand awareness among fans. While selecting their favourite athlete two attributes associated to athletes emerged (on field athlete brand attributes and off field athlete brand attributes). Furthermore, Fan's indicated that athlete brand have positive impact on athlete itself, athlete's teams and on athlete's sponsors as well. These implications further discussed in the article. The result of the study can help to establish athlete brand among conservative societies (i.e. south Asian, Muslim) and second stream sports (i.e., Cricket).

Keywords: athlete brand; fan behaviour; loyalty; sport marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is a key element of any society and culture these days and the same applies to sporting celebrities. Sporting celebrities are recognized as top personalities in their home country both in the developed societies of the western world and developing regions of Asia and Africa (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). Along with politicians and show business stars, sportsmen and women are most notable personalities. They have become life heroes and are being followed not only in the countries they represent or originate from but often they have a worldwide cult-like following and are even worshipped (Yu, 2005). Athletes like David Beckham, Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Wayne Gretzky, Neymar and Imran Khan are a few examples of athlete celebrities who have not only established themselves as successful sports personas but have also become real life heroes for many people.

Celebrities are role models for adults (Stever, 2011), and like celebrities in other fields (i.e. politics, showbiz, etc.), sports celebrities have influenced not only people in their home countries but abroad as well (Künzler & Poli, 2012). Likewise, sports celebrities have been widely selected as endorsers of brands because they are perceived as role models with high potential to influence purchases and behavioural intentions of young adults (Dix, Phau, & Pougnet, 2010). For example, the cases of David Beckham and Muhammad Ali are noteworthy for their broad influence. David Beckham became a global superstar with his on field and off field status and a profile that resembles a 'rock star' more than an English footballer (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). He has had such a huge influence on his followers that his transfer from Manchester United to Real Madrid prompted five million Asian Manchester

United fans to switch their loyalty to Real Madrid (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). When Beckham moved to Los Angeles Galaxy from Real Madrid FC, within one year of his arrival in MLS (Los Angeles Galaxy), the club obtained 11,000 more season ticket holders, inked a shirt sponsorship deal worth an estimated USD $20 million with Herbalife, and increased merchandise sales by 700% (Vincent, Hill, & Lee, 2009). Muhammad Ali Clay, famous heavy weight boxer who retired decades ago, still represents an example of a superstar athlete to his fans worldwide (Cortsen, 2013). He not only won the hearts of boxing lovers but also became a role model for minorities in America and became a people's champion through raising his voice against what he thought wrong (i.e. Vietnam War, injustice to African Americans etc.), and he was the most famous athlete personality around the world for a long time (Gorn, 1995).

Pakistan is located in South Asia. A country that has traditionally been fond of cricket is transforming into a community passionate about a wide variety of sports thanks to the media and globalization. Still, there are very few studies focused on Pakistani fans to find out the motivation behind team and player loyalty to help sports related celebrities develop their brands. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies among female Pakistani fans regarding what attracts them to sports and sports celebrities. Pakistan is a sport crazy nation of more than 170 million people where sport is not only a physical activity but is also considered a tool for harmonizing society (Li et al., 2015). Celebrity endorsement is widely popular; for example, Pepsi captures the top position in the beverages industry in Pakistan and 90% of their ads feature sports celebrities (Ahmed, Farooq, & Iqbal, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test the athlete brand framework and conduct a study among female Pakistani fans. Unlike, Western cultures, the socio-economic status of women and their role in cultural paradigms of a

traditional society of Pakistan decided by families who sets the norms for males and females. Considering the widespread tendency to follow celebrities and the introverted nature of the society, this study aims to improve our understanding of the athlete brand framework and its applicability across various cultural contexts. Through this study it is possible to recognize the most effective source of athlete awareness among Pakistani women and the attributes of the athlete brands that are the most important to this target group. From the practical perspective this would allow athletes and their managers to focus on these aspects to increase the popularity of athletes among Pakistani women.

Therefore, our research question is:

RQ1: Is the athlete brand framework applicable for female Pakistani fans?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Athlete Brand

Branding is often discussed in the context of brand equity. Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as the value consumers associate with a brand. Keller (1993) coined customer based brand equity (CBBE) as brand equity is developed via brand awareness and brand association in customer's mind. Consistent with Keller's arguments, much marketing literature to date addresses the topics of brand awareness, brand associations among consumer (i.e., fans) and brand associations (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). The fan loyalty has been more focused on establishing brand equity of sport clubs and teams (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Funk & James, 2006). Researchers have kept their focus on team loyalty and fan interest in athlete (i.e., athlete loyalty and athlete branding) treated as a motive for team loyalty (Kerr & Emery, 2011; Neale & Funk, 2006; Richardson & O'Dwyer, 2003). Increasing number of athletes as a brand endorser and worldwide

popularity of various sports attracted researchers to study athletes as a brand.

Unlike sports team brand, athlete brand is also related with the concept of human brand. In this sense, branding people is a well-known strategy (Thomson, 2006) and sports celebrities regarded as human brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2008, 2013). Previously, it has mostly been the sports clubs and teams that have been considered brands, but athletes have surpassed the popularity of teams and become an entity in themselves (Chadwick & Burton, 2008; Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

Sport brand is defined as a name, design or symbol that a sports organization uses to differentiate its product (Bouchet, Hillairet, & Bodet, 2013). According to this definition, all individual athletes can be considered as brands because every athlete holds a unique name, distinctive appearance, and a personality (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). As personal brands differ from brands for products or services, athletes also discussed in the context of human brands (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2016). Unlike products or services, human beings act on multiple motives. That is why Cortsen (2013) called them a hybrid brand because the actions taken by individuals (i.e., athletes) make them more or less successful as person brands. In this sense Carter (2010) stated that a personal brand is a brand that consists of peoples' opinions about a particular individual. That is, an athlete brand could be explained as the personality of an individual athlete for the public (Hasaan et al., 2016).

As already mentioned, a brand is based on people's perception (Wood, 2000), so an athlete brand could be explained as a brand based on people's perceptions about a certain athlete. Therefore, an athlete brand is an example of a branded person or human brand like other celebrity brands. As with other celebrity brands, an athlete brand is related to the personality and image of a particular athlete as perceived by the public (Arai et al., 2014; Cortsen, 2013). Arai et al. (2014)

explain that an athlete brand is related to the personality of the athlete. In this regard, athletes themselves have a crucial role in contributing to building their personal brands (Cortsen, 2013).

The athletes seen as star players are preferred as commercial brand ambassadors, as their endorsements facilitate the brand's enduring and profitable relationship with its customers (Milligan, 2009). For example, the agreement between Cristiano Ronaldo and Nike helped the Nike sports brand to capture a major share of the Asian market that was previously dominated by Adidas (Roll, 2006). This is one of the reasons why companies often try to sponsor athletes because it can enhance brand awareness among potential consumers (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Maroco, 2013). Top athletes also prove beneficial for their clubs and teams; as a result, teams compete for the best athletes due to both their performance on the field and impact off the field. The large investments by clubs such as Real Madrid, Manchester City and PSG are proof of this. Kerr and Gladden (2008) have explained that star athletes have the ability to almost single-handedly develop brand equity for them and for their stakeholders (i.e. teams, sponsors).

Developing an Athlete Brand

The development of an athlete brand requires fan awareness of the athlete (Montoya, 2002). Yu argued that an athlete's image is built through his or her successful sports career and the positive image of their off-field lives among the public (Yu, 2005). In recent studies of athlete brands, Carlson and Donavan (2013) suggested that the personal appeal and success of athletes on the pitch plays a major role in fan identification with the athlete. Cortsen (2013) presented the idea of a hybrid athlete brand – when something positive or negative happens to an athlete, the same effect is extended to the athlete's brand. Arai, Ko and Kaplanidou (2013) and Arai et al. (2014) developed and tested the model of

athlete brand image (MABI) including the dimensions of athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Williams and Agyemang (2014) focused on college athletes and suggested the establishment of athlete brands through organization-related, market-related and athlete-related antecedents. Hasaan et al. (2015) presented a detailed framework of athlete brands including antecedents, athlete brand constructs and consequences that is the basis for the current study. The authors have followed the framework of Hasaan et al. (2015) to establish an athlete brand construct.

This study investigates the antecedents of athlete brand. These antecedents are media (mass media, social media, computer gaming and big events); oral communication (words of mouth and rumours & stories), social agents (parents, family members, friends, and community) and team & sport (sport interest, team interest, and team location). The study further investigated athlete brand attributes. The attributes of athlete brand are These components are on-field attributes (i.e., playing behavior, achievements, style of play, and skills) and off-field attributes (i.e. physical attraction, lifestyle, ethnicity, entertainment factor). Furthermore, the study also discusses the implications of the results for each stakeholder in the athlete brand (e.g. athlete, athlete's team and athlete's sponsors). This is a pilot study among female Pakistani sports fans to check the applicability of the framework for different audience and in a different culture.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

A purposeful sampling method was used to recruit the participants for the current study. Criterion sampling is a type of purposeful sampling where certain criteria are set for the participants of the study (Patton, 2002). For this study, participants were selected on the basis of the following: 1) they

are Pakistani females, 2) they consider themselves fans of a certain athlete, and 3) they have been following that particular athlete for at least one year. All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in settings preferred by the interviewees. The sample finally consisted of 15 Pakistani female fans from three different cities: Lahore, Karachi and Multan. The sample included participants of different ages and professions that offered a variety of opinions (see table 1).

Data Collection

Data were collected through 15 interviews. Interviews were conducted during a period of four months and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants of the study signed a participation agreement that described the purpose of the study and their acceptance to participate in the study. A semi structured interview guide was developed in accordance with the principles outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (2002). Through the interviews, the researchers tried to elicit information on the dimensions and sub-dimensions of athlete branding introduced by Hasaan et al. (2015). Each interview consisted of three different parts: 1) questions about the antecedents of the athlete brand, 2) questions about the construction of the athlete brand and 3) questions about the implications for the athlete brand (See Appendix 1 for the detailed interview guide).

INSTRUMENTATION:

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants, additional questions were asked to extract more details (Kvale, 1996). For instance, real-life examples were often presented during the interviews as follow up questions. The basic structure of the interview guide and sequence of the questions remained the same for all the interviews. The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes. The original identity of the participants was protected via assigning

a pseudonym to each of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated into English with the help of specialists who were proficient in both languages.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was initiated after conducting the first interview as this allows the researchers to become more familiar with the interviewee's responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The first interview was fully transcribed shortly after it was finished and the initial outcomes of the interview were analysed immediately. After each interview, the researchers discussed the outcome and impressions together. Through this process the researchers were able to improve the interview questions for subsequent interviews and get a better understanding of the responses of the interviews.

Two levels of coding (i.e. open and axial) were adopted in the current study. Open coding was used for the initial analysis to break the data apart and delineate concepts to stand as blocks of raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). The two researchers discussed the responses until they had a complete understanding of the responses of the interviewees. Initial themes in the data were identified and through this process it was possible to discover recurring patterns in the responses. Once initial themes were identified, axial coding was used to combine the themes of the initial patterns together (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The trustworthiness of the data was achieved through taking care of the credibility and dependability/conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For dependability, the authors have described the research process in detail so it would be possible to replicate the study and receive similar results. The conformability aspect was dealt with by having two researchers working on the project to ensure that personal influence is minimized and neutrality is achieved. Unbiasedness was maintained throughout all the interviews, the

researchers neither commented the interviewee responses nor offered their own opinions during the interviews.

Findings

The responses of the participants could be divided into three different categories: antecedents of athlete brand, construction of athlete brand and implications of athlete brand. The overall outcome of the study is explained in Figure 1. The findings also helped to describe fans' perceptions about certain on-field and off-field activities of the athletes.

Antecedents of the Athlete Brand

According to all the participants, there is more than one antecedent that triggers awareness about their favourite athlete. The media played a major role among our participants in spreading awareness about their favourite athlete.

If there was no media, I would have not known about my favourite player yet [Maha].

Furthermore, the participants pointed out different sources of media. However, the most interesting aspect was the factor of age. Women in the age group 35+ considered mass media as the source of information, while younger women emphasized the role of social media. Those participants who had a favourite athlete that was a non-cricketer mentioned the role of major sporting events to generate awareness about their favourite athlete. Computer games are considered to be mostly for boys in Pakistan and no women mentioned the role of video games as an antecedent in the process of becoming a fan of their favourite athlete.

Mass Media: In our times, we only had television, radio and newspaper. All of our family sat together to watch cricket matches and after his famous six in the Sharjah, United Arab Emirates against India, he become my favourite player [Rabia]

Social media: I noticed his name on Facebook and then discussed him with my friends and family. I watched his matches on YouTube and became a fan of Ronaldo [Sana]

Major Sporting Events: I heard about Federer when he won the Wimbledon championship in 2012. As televisions broadcasts big events so I saw his game and have been following him since then [Maha]

Oral communication played an important role in the case of several participants. Pakistan is a traditional conservative society, where people put greater weight to what they hear from others.

I heard that Shahid Afridi donated lots of money to various causes. After listening to this story I thought he is a good human being as well, not like our other players who have no character at all, so he became my favourite [Aiman]

All participants acknowledged oral communication as an antecedent for developing fanship, and among 15 participants, seven accepted rumours and narratives as a cause of awareness, ten described word-of-mouth as a cause of awareness, while three participants nominated both.

Word of mouth: My brother told me about Daniel Vettori. While watching the cricket match he mentioned Vettori being one of the youngest slow bowlers in the world of cricket yet most effective. He liked many cricket players from New Zealand and always tried to update me but I liked Vettori most [Sidra].

Rumours and Narratives: When Waqar Younis was in the school, his school team avoided using him because he was a very raw and very fast bowler that often proved to be costly for his own team because of inconsistency. His team mates called him "Wild" but he never lost his aim and established himself among the world's finest [Vania]

Social agents, in the case of female Pakistani fans, proved to be the most important factor. None of the women mentioned that she is the only sports fan in her family. All the

participants "inherited" this fandom from their family and friends.

I grew up in a sport loving family, my father is big fan of cricket, my brothers play cricket and watch all sports broadcasts on television, my friends follow different sports celebrities on Facebook, Instagram, etc. When I was younger, I myself played cricket with the boys and girls of our colony. In short, living in Pakistan and not liking cricket is the same as living in the sea without liking water [Mona].

All of our participants acknowledged parents, family members and the community as the source of awareness regarding their favourite athlete. However, only seven participants mentioned friends as an antecedent of developing awareness about athletes. In Pakistan, sport in traditionally regarded as something men do and have interest in, and women of older generations usually paid no attention to that. However, for the new generations, the trend is changing and the interviewees who emphasized the influence of friends were all under 24 years of age, indicating that it is rather peer influence and not traditions that drive the interests of the younger females.

Parents: My father, he never missed a single match. He never discouraged me from watching a match. His favourite bowler was Wasim Akram, so is mine [Fatima]

Family members: My brothers are big sports fans. They like cricket, football, tennis, hockey etc. They praised a lot about Federer and I become interested in his game as well [Maha]

Friends: Although he retired long ago but my friends are his supporters and after listening to many stories from them I watched his old matches and started to like him. He is a role model for the whole of society [Maleha]

Community: Cricket is in the blood of Pakistanis and I am Pakistani as well, so I become familiar with this game when I was born here and because Misbah-ul-Haq belongs to my father's home town, so I like him very much [Kiran]

The most popular sport in Pakistan is cricket and cricket is played between countries. This is very different from football or basketball, where clubs compete against each other; in the case of cricket you have to support your country's team almost automatically. The popularity of the sport itself is a big contributor to the well-known athlete brands and high popularity of the cricketers among female Pakistani fans. Thirteen participants acknowledged the sport itself as a cause of awareness and the favourite player for all these participants is a cricketer. In cricket, the geographical location of a team is also its home country, and 12 participants chose a home team player as their favourite. Only one participant chose a favourite player who does not represent the Pakistani cricket team.

Sport interest: If you are a cricketer in Pakistan, you are already famous [Amna]

Team Interest: I always support my country and my favourite player is the one who served the country most [Sara]

The research also found that the general impression of the athlete is important for the fans. Public statements and behaviour matters a lot for the fans, and the words of the athletes become part of their identity as mentioned by one participant:

I did not like Waseem Akram ever because of his frequent use of abuse during the match. When you are a big deal and representing your country you should behave and act as a good human being, on the other hand, his pace partner Waqar never said anything that disgraced him [Vania]

When Roger Federer apologized about wearing the Indian cricket team shirt on social media, it increased his popularity because to become a top athlete you should be a top human as well [Maha]

In the light of these responses, impression management of an athlete (i.e., the process by which people control their impressions for others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990)) was added as an antecedent to the model. It was identified that impression management is an important factor for any

athlete and it can both positively introduce him/her to certain communities and also cause the loss to his fandom.

Construction of Athlete Brand

There are two main aspects to this section – the on-field and off-field attributes of an athlete. To achieve the status of a brand and a celebrity, athletes have to be visible with their personal lives as well with their sports performance. All our participants agreed that to become a top athlete, one has to play well and perform better than others. They have mentioned that they chose their favourite athlete not only because he plays well but he is also the best among others regarding other qualities. Our participants pointed out five on-field characteristics of an athlete to become a top brand: behaviour, team membership, achievements, skills and style of play. Specific reasoning was as follows:

Behaviour: I like Imran Khan because of his die hard attitude on the field. He never accepted defeat. He led the team from the front. Although he has retired, I did not see any other player with this sort of on-field behaviour [Isha]

Team: I think if he represented some other country instead of Pakistan, he would not have been my favourite player [Mona]

Achievement: Roger Federer has achieved what others can only think [Maha]

Skills: Have you ever watched Ronaldo running towards the opponent's goal? I don't think anyone else can do the same [Sana]

Style of Play: Fast bowlers are always the darlings among cricket fans, Imran Khan, Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis, Shoiab Akhater and so on. So if you are a fast bowler you have an edge over other players [Sara]

In addition to that, 13 participants acknowledged the importance of the off-field attributes for any athlete to become a top brand. The two participants who downplayed the personal life of an athlete for achieving top athlete status were aged above 40. So the younger generation is keener to know more

details about their favourite athlete. Five aspects of off-field attributes for athlete brands (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment) were mentioned by our participants:

Physical attraction: The most important reason behind liking Daniel Vettori is of course his looks. He is so innocent that you cannot ignore him [Sidra].

Lifestyle: Ronaldo donated so much money to Palestinian children. He was engaged in so many charities that even though he lives a lavish life, at the same time he also cares for others [Sana].

Personal appeal: Afridi has some sort of charisma in his personality. On the field or off the field he seems different and prominent [Rabia].

Ethnicity: …, being a Swiss-German, his ethnicity is a plus point for him [Maha].

Entertainment: Ronaldo has all the entertainment factors in his life, thrill, action, romance, twists and turns [Sana].

Implications of the Athlete Brand

In this section, the participants expressed their opinions about three categories of athlete brand beneficiaries (i.e. athlete's team, athlete himself and athlete's sponsors). When analysing the fans' perception regarding athlete's team loyalty, three sub-aspects emerged (i.e., team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation). Most fans like cricketers as favorite athlete. Cricket is played between countries so it is obvious Pakistani fan will like Pakistani cricket team. So team substitution is nonexistent among cricket fans. However, Sana, a fan of Ronaldo, acknowledged that whatever team Ronaldo will represent, she will support that team. Apart from team substitution, our participants also brought up the idea of supporting multiple teams (i.e. supporting Ronaldo's Real Madrid and Portugal, supporting Pakistan and the English county or Indian Premier League team, which their favourite player represents). The third aspect, revenue generation has more

consensus – 12 of the participants want to watch their favourite player in a stadium or on television, and they are also ready to pay for that. So an athlete, even a cricketer, is able to generate gate money or television rights by representing his team.

Regarding the athlete himself, branding is useful as well. Our participants mentioned that a top athlete secures media following, positive narratives, positive word-of-mouth, personal comparisons and fan loyalty once he established himself as a top athlete. As our participants mentioned:

Media following: I follow him on conventional media and on social media. I have many pictures of him in my mobile and computer [Amna]

Positive narrative: I heard that Afridi does not refuse to give autographs no matter where he is and who is asking [Aiman]

Positive word-of-mouth: I always talk positively about Imran Khan and mentioned his examples in real life [Sara]

Personal comparison: I am passionate like him [Vania]

Resistance to change: I never change my favourite player. He has retired already, but still I am his fan, in sports and in politics [Mona].

The current study identified a third dimension of athlete brand implications among the fans. The athlete not only positively affects himself/herself as a brand or his/her teams but also affects the sponsors as well. That is why athletes are frequently endorsers of the products and services; they are the faces of the brands and are featured in various advertisements about brands that seek connections with sports. The participants of the study acknowledged the positive impact of the athlete to his or her sponsorship brand, and that the famous athlete could use his/her charm for spreading brand awareness, casting a positive image of the brand, increasing purchase intentions and producing difficulties for rival brands. As our participants mentioned:

Brand Awareness: First time I noticed Rolex watches was when I saw Roger Federer in their ad [Maha]

Positive image: If Afridi is advertising some shampoo I believe it is a good product [Sunbul]

Purchase intentions: I want to buy CR7 brand shoes although I do not play any sport [Sana]

Ignoring rival sponsors: I always suggested buying the Shahid Afridi collection kurta if someone asks for advice from me [Rabia].

DISCUSSION

The current study is a qualitative enquiry about athlete brands introduced by Hasaan et al. (2015). The main goal was to test the proposed model with a less familiar target group (Pakistani females) in academics. This study contributes to the literature by providing fan perceptions of the construction of athlete brand and diminutions so practitioners can focus on a large, promising market. As an athlete can be a global brand, it is necessary to focus on different parts of the world; therefore, this study provides two insights into athlete branding. First, it examines a country where cricket (that is normally considered a British colonial sport) is a popular sport and very few studies so far have focused on this game. The second aspect of this study is its focus on women. Therefore, this study is not only a practical discussion of the theory but also provides the link to markets dominated by cricket and conservative societies. This paper is unique as it investigates females of Pakistan (members of a third world country and a Muslim country, normally considered backward society) and offered a deeper understanding to define athlete as international brand phenomenon via exploring a new potential market. The findings from this study are summarized in Figure 1, allowing a better understanding of important factors that contribute to the creation of an athlete brand from the perspective of female Pakistani fans.

The first portion of the study was about antecedents, and five major antecedents were noted from the fans' responses (i.e. media, oral communication, social agents, team and sport and impression management). Media was further sub-categorized into mass media, social media and major sporting events). These finding are consistent with Jun and Lee (2012), suggesting that mass media plays an irreplaceable role in the globalization of sports athletes. Further, Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger (2012) indicated that social media successfully provides sports organizations an initial opportunity to contact their customers, while Goodman, Duke and Sutherland (2002) stated that major sporting events have the power to affect large portions of the population. According to the current study, this statement is more suitable for foreign and less-popular sport athletes. National athletes and popular sports athletes are already known by the fans, but athletes from the sports that are not popular in certain countries, large events (i.e. world cup, Olympics etc.) helped athletes to become popular in new locations.

Oral communication was sub categorized into word-of-mouth, rumours and narratives. The findings of this study are in line with previous studies such as Bush, Bush, Clark and Bush (2005), who mentioned that young girls spread positive word-of-mouth regarding their favourite athlete. The current study confirmed that the tendency to spread word-of-mouth holds true also for females in older age groups. Künzler and Poli (2012) stated that the role of rumours and narratives are vital in African society, and we also found the same in South Asian society, where rumours and narratives play an important role in terms of athlete awareness.

Four major social agents emerged from the study (i.e. parents, family members, friends and the community). Bandura and Walters (1963) explained that people are influenced by different social agents such as family, friends, school and the community. Gutiérrez et al. (2011) described parents as the basic source for their children to generate interest in sports.

In the same vein, Hsieh, Wang and Yoder (2011) described how family members and friends can attract their close ones to follow their favourite. In the current study, friends are the least effective source of influence because sports considered as a manly thing not only in Pakistan but also in the some parts of western world (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). However, the role of the community is distinct and solid. There are many studies that mention the role of the community in the popularity of an athlete and the sport in their own community. Community is considered as an important socializing agent in the context of sports (Dunne, 2012; Wang, 2004).

In the category of teams and sports, two elements (i.e. sport interest and team interest) were identified. The interviews revealed that sport interest and team interest can encourage fans to like an athlete from that sport. Our results are in line with the view of Stewart, Smith and Nicholson (2003) that the popularity of a certain sport in a society may potentially influence its members to like a particular athlete. Consequently, popularity for a certain team might lead to liking an athlete from that team (Best, 2013).

One aspect that was missing in the framework by Hasaan et al. (2015) is impression management. Impression management is essential to promoting any athlete as a celebrity (Wagg, 2007), and impression management occurs through the media (Rojek, 2001). So the comments, actions and statements of an athlete count towards impression management. Impression management is vital and the best example is Cristiano Ronaldo who has more than 17 million followers on Twitter (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). The whole world is looking at his status updates. In this context our study suggests that impression management is another antecedent for constructing an athlete brand.

The second part of the study looked at athlete brand construction, which includes two aspects of the athlete's life (i.e. on field attributes and off field attributes). The on field

attributes were measured through five features (i.e. behaviour, teams, achievements, skills, style of play). The research results are in line with previous findings that suggest that fans expect their favourite athletes to lead the team upfront and show a sense of responsibility (Daley & Wolfson, 2010), and the same notions emerged from the participants who expected their favourite athletes to show a mature and leading behaviour on the field. In cricket, teams are most important because of national competitions. Martin (2013) suggested that a positive perception about a certain team helps its athletes to develop attachment with the fans of the team. Grant, Heere and Dickson (2011) emphasized that athletes become famous because of their achievements. One of our participants (Maha) mentioned about the "flawless technique of Roger Federer". Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy and Kirchner (2009) highlighted that some fans are more interested in an athlete's skills than their game results. The style of play also creates a link with prior studies as according to Morrissey (2009), famous French footballer Zidane is called the 'magician' because of his style of play. For example, one of our participants (Vania) referred to the Pakistani fast bowler, Warqar Younis, as the 'king of block hole Yorkers' because of his style of pace bowling.

The off field attributes based on five features of an athlete's personal life: 1) physical attraction; 2) personal appeal; 3) lifestyle; 4) ethnicity and 5) entertainment. Marketers and advertisers believe that a physically attractive person is more effective (Till & Busler, 2000) and the same concept exists in the context of sports, and it is widely believed that females follow a certain athlete because of his physical attractiveness (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). Our participants also mentioned "Daniel Vettori as cute" (Maha) and "Cristiano Ronaldo as attractive" (Sana)". Our participants mentioned that personal appeal is an important factor in choosing their favourite athlete and this is in accordance with past literature, as Mullin and

Dunn (2002) for example argued that an important aspect of star quality is the charisma of the athlete. Fans are interested in the athlete's lifestyle (Woodhouse & Williams, 1999), and the lifestyle of the athlete is an important factor especially in the case of females, as our participants liked committed family men, humility and charitable behaviour. Ethnicity is another major factor that could lead an athlete to the highest position among others as mentioned by our participants. Hyman and Sierra (2010) also noted that demographics could be a reason for liking a certain team or athlete. Our participants showed great interest in the off field entertainment factors of the athlete, which is in accordance with Tanaka (2004) in that fans become entertained by their favourite athlete's every action even by their facial expressions and movements.

The third part of the study is about athlete brand implication. The responses from our participants described loyalty towards athletes in three directions (i.e. loyalty towards the team of the athlete, loyalty towards the athlete himself and loyalty towards the sponsors of the athlete).

Hasaan et al. (2015) were not able to identify the sub category of team loyalty, but based on perceptions of the Pakistani female fans three aspects of team loyalty emerged (i.e. team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation). As mentioned earlier, the common competitive format for cricket is competition between national teams so the question of team substitution does not exist in this context; however, one of our participants, who liked Cristiano Ronaldo and football, was confident that if Ronaldo transferred into another club in the future, she will start supporting that club. This statement is in line with Yu (2005), who found that athletes have the power to change the loyalty of fans towards certain teams. The concept of supporting multiple teams also exists in cricket, as fans tend to support their favourite national team as well as their domestic teams if their favourite athlete play for any. This result is consistent

with previous research that described fans as often supporting more than one team because of certain athletes (McDonald, Karg, & Lock, 2010). The third effect of an athlete on its team, according to our responses, is an increase in team revenue, as fans want to buy things related to their favourite player and want to watch him on television and live in the stadium (Saatchian, Hadavi, Elahi, Rasooli, & Alizadeh, 2010).

In the context of athlete loyalty, five aspects emerged: media following; positive narratives; positive word-of-mouth; creation of links and Resistance to change. Media following is an obvious thing as already mentioned the case of Cristiano Ronaldo who is called the 'social networking king' (Caioli, 2014). Responses of the participants in the current study suggested that once they became a fan of their favourite athlete they started to believe stories about them without confirming whatever they feel is positive. Dubois, Rucker and Tormala (2011) also mentioned that fans believe positive stories and neglect negative stories regarding their favourite brand. Furthermore, the fans started to tell these stories and spread positive anecdotes about their favourite athlete, as Bush et al. (2005) reported that female fans spread positive word-of-mouth regarding their favourite sports personality. Our participants also reported that when they started liking a certain athlete they started to look for common things between themselves and the athlete. Identifying the links between the athlete and follower makes the followers feel closer to their favourite athlete. This is in line with Fink, Parker, Brett and Higgins (2009), who explained that loyal fans see themselves as a reflection of their favourite team and athlete. The last sub-dimension of athlete loyalty is resistance to change the favourite athlete in any situation. This aspect highlights that loyal fans tend to resist the idea of changing their favourite athlete even when the athlete is not in good shape (Neale & Funk, 2006).

The third beneficiary of an athlete brand is the athlete's sponsors. However,

within the framework proposed by Hasaan et al. (2015) this aspect was not discussed. Our respondents mentioned four ways an athlete's sponsor benefits from the athlete's brand status (i.e. brand awareness, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors). The results of the current study indicate that fans take notice when they see their favourite athlete advertising for that brand. So the athlete is causing brand awareness among his or her fans, which is a replication of the same idea that celebrity endorsers generate awareness of brands (Charbonneau & Garland, 2005). The attachment of an athlete with a certain brand spreads a positive message about the brand among the athlete's fans according to the responses of our participants. The same connection was supported by the past literature: the perception of a brand becomes more positive when linked to a celebrity (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). Athlete attachment with any brand can increase purchases, and our participants also showed positive purchase intentions regarding athlete related brands. This idea is consistent with Dees, Bennett and Villegas (2008), who state that the loyal fans of an athlete have positive purchase intentions in favour of athlete related brands. According to our participants an important implication of the athlete brand for its sponsors is that fans start to ignore rival brands. Chapanga and Choto (2015) argued in their study that hiring a celebrity athlete could even damage the campaign of a rivalling brand.

In summary, the current study aimed to investigate the athlete brand framework and conduct a study among female Pakistani fans to check if the athlete brand framework is applicable for female Pakistani fans? If yes, what aspect of athlete brand framework are more important among female Pakistani fans in terms of loyalty to their favourite athlete? The authors conducted interviews with female fans in Pakistan with different favourite athletes, and the findings indicated that the media (mass media, social media and major sporting events), oral communication (word-of-mouth and rumours or narratives), social

agents (parents, family members, friends and community), team or sport (sport interest, team interest and team geographical location) and impression management act as antecedents of athlete brand. In turn, the components of an athlete brand can be described according to on-field attributes (behaviour, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). Furthermore, an athlete brand has a positive role in increasing athlete loyalty (media following, positive narratives, positive word-of-mouth, creation of links and resistance to change), increasing team loyalty (team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation) and increasing sponsor loyalty (brand awareness, positive image, purchase intentions and ignoring rival sponsors).

CONCLUSION

The current study is a qualitative enquiry about athlete brands introduced by Hasaan et al. (2015) that elaborate and expand the base study. The study suggests that athlete brand framework is applicable for female Pakistani fans. It indicates the possible antecedent of athlete brand among female Pakistani fans. It supports that an athlete brand could establish via athlete's on-field and off-field attributes. The study also highlights the positive role of an athlete on athlete brand in increasing athlete loyalty, athlete's team loyalty and athlete's sponsor loyalty. This study combined different ideas from past studies into a single study about the athlete brand. In this respect, this study is an addition to the academic literature and theories of human branding, sport branding, sport marketing and athlete branding by discussing a framework that explains athlete brand process starting from the awareness process to its benefits and outcomes. Thus the main contribution lies in the comprehensiveness of the model compared to the previous studies of the area. Furthermore, this study composed of

Pakistani female fans, thus the study demonstrates a unique range of potential applications among female fans that belong to South Asian sub-continent or conservative Muslim societies.

This study also offers guidance to athlete's marketing teams and managers to establish athlete as a brand in a different culture. As athlete is a global entity and international brand there is need to establish their brand in various countries and cultures. This study has addressed viewpoint of female fans living in Pakistan which can prove as a massive potential fan group.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The first limitation is sample composition. As mentioned in the study, Pakistan is a backward country where it is not easy to access females, while on other hand it is also a large country, and so for a better understanding of the attitudes of Pakistani female fans there is a need of diversity in a sample that represent all part of country. Furthermore, as athletes are global entities now, there is a need to conduct a more detailed study in different areas of the world to understand cultural differences as brands vary from culture to culture (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Second, it is still difficult to generalise on the basis of these results; however, with minimal modification, these results could be applicable for females living in cultures that are similar to Pakistan (i.e. developing countries, Muslim countries, and South Asian countries).

Thirdly, each dimension of the model needs to be treated separately. As we pointed out, one of the sub-antecedents of mass media, video games, proved to be unimportant in the case of Pakistani females. Therefore, a detailed study of all possible aspects could present a better and clearer picture of athlete brands. Fourthly, there is a need to conduct a study about cricketers based in multi countries in multi countries, as cricket is different in terms of playing styles and competition – it is necessary to understand cricket fans. Research

would also be beneficial in terms of short-term leagues (e.g. Indian Premier League, Australian Big Bash League, etc.) arranged in different countries. Moreover, the development of a scale and quantitative approach will also help in identifying how an athlete is established as a brand.

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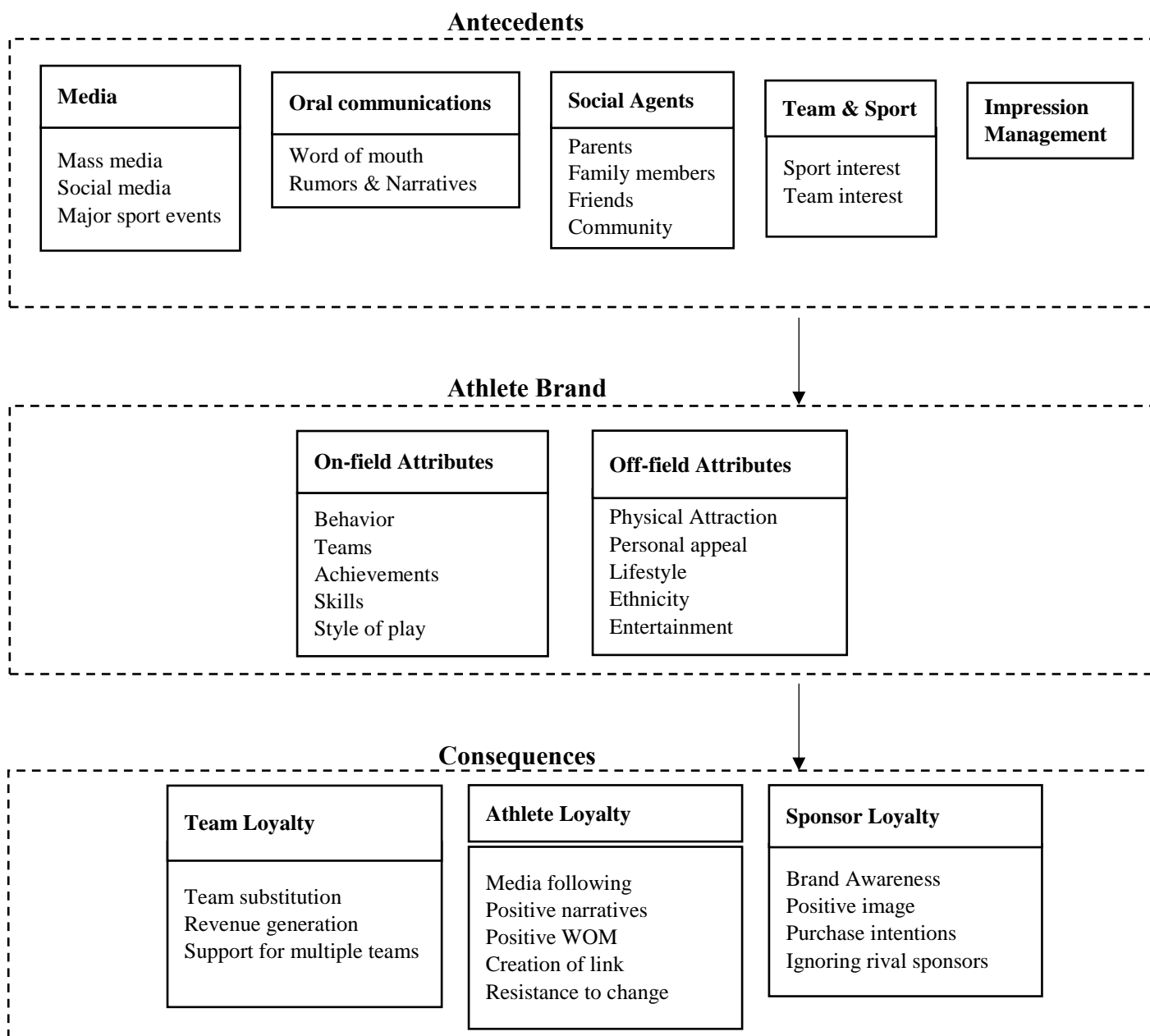
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Table 1

Sample characteristics

No.	**Pseudonyms**	Age	Profession	City	Favorite Player	Player's Sport/country
1	Kiran	22	Student	Lahore	Misbah-ul-Haq	Cricket/ Pakistan
2	Rabia	42	House-Wife	Multan	Javed Miandad	Cricket/ Pakistan
3	Maha	31	Lecturer	Multan	Roger Federer	Tennis/ Switzerland
4	Sidra	19	Student	Multan	Daniel Vettori	Cricket/ New Zealand
5	Aiman	21	Student	Karachi	Shahid Afridi	Cricket/ Pakistan
6	Maleha	20	Student	Lahore	Imran Khan	Cricket/ Pakistan
7	Rabia	20	Student	Lahore	Shahid Afridi	Cricket/ Pakistan
8	Sunbul	19	Student	Multan	Shahid Afridi	Cricket/ Pakistan
9	Isha	49	House-Wife	Karachi	Imran Khan	Cricket/ Pakistan
10	Sara	35	Manager	Karachi	Imran Khan	Cricket/ Pakistan
11	Amna	18	Student	Multan	Sarfraz Ahmed	Cricket/ Pakistan
12	Vania	36	Lecturer	Multan	Waqar Younis	Cricket/ Pakistan
13	Fatima	23	Student	Karachi	Wasim Akram	Cricket/ Pakistan
14	Sana	19	Student	Karachi	Cristiano Ronaldo	Football/ Portugal
15	Mona	29	Teacher	Karachi	Imran khan	Cricket/ Pakistan

Figure 1

Antecedents

Media	Oral communications	Social Agents	Team & Sport	Impression Management
Mass media Social media Major sport events	Word of mouth Rumors & Narratives	Parents Family members Friends Community	Sport interest Team interest	

Athlete Brand

On-field Attributes	Off-field Attributes
Behavior Teams Achievements Skills Style of play	Physical Attraction Personal appeal Lifestyle Ethnicity Entertainment

Consequences

Team Loyalty	Athlete Loyalty	Sponsor Loyalty
Team substitution Revenue generation Support for multiple teams	Media following Positive narratives Positive WOM Creation of link Resistance to change	Brand Awareness Positive image Purchase intentions Ignoring rival sponsors

Final framework of the athlete brand based on participant interviews