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Athlete brand construction: A perspective based on fans' perceptions

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to develop a framework for understanding the antecedents and components of athlete brand. Based on a set of 21 interviews conducted in three different countries, a detailed framework is proposed including five antecedents and two components of athlete brand. The antecedents are media (social media, mass media, video games and major sport events), oral communications (word of mouth, and rumors and narratives), impression management, social agents (parents, family members, friends and community), and teams and sport (sport interest, team interest and team geographical location). In turn, the components of athlete brand are related with on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). Complementarily, these components of athlete brand are proposed to have an impact on fans' loyalty towards the athlete. Implications of these findings for building and managing athlete brand are discussed, and directions for future studies are provided.

Keywords: athlete brand; athlete loyalty; fans; teams

Introduction

Different kinds of sports have extensively influenced modern society[1,2]. Technological advancements have increased the popularity of sports as a cultural spectacle, and sports stars are considered one of the most visible aspects of modern day sports[3,4] .Currently, numerous high profile professional athletes have emerged (especially those in highly commercialized fields of sport) whose popularity often surpasses that of the team to which they belong[5]. Perhaps the most relevant example is Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James, considering his economic impact on the city of Cleveland[6]. In line with this view, extant studies have suggested that the current era belongs to the domination of professional athletes as standalone entities who are no longer merely associated with their team[7]. Athletes such as Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Roger Federer have successfully converted their athletic abilities into multimillion dollar endorsements[8]. Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, and Daza-LeTouze[9] asserted that this process is largely related to the mediatization of individuals who essentially become human brands. This means that athletes can be considered as brand entities by themselves[10,11] and have such effective fan power that fans now follow the athletes instead of just the teams that they play for[12].

Meanwhile, to create value for a brand, consumers (i.e., fans) must develop positive and unique brand associations toward that brand; however, they first need to become familiar with it[13,14]. Previous studies have suggested the roles of different sources, such as the media[15], oral communication[16], impression management[17], social agents[18], and team and/or sport[19], on brand and athletes, which help familiarize fans with them. Consistent with this perspective, Montoya[20] explained that developing an athlete brand requires fans' awareness about the athlete and an understanding of how he/she is different from other athletes. Subsequently, establishing a brand requires the development of a positive image about their personal lives among the public in general[21], including aspects related to the on- and off-field attributes of the athletes[22]. In light of the previous literature, the current study focused on understanding the components of athlete brand including both on- and off-field attributes, as well as the factors that enhance fans' perceptions of those attributes (i.e., antecedents). While the extant literature suggests media, oral communication, impression management, social agents and/or team, or sport as important sources that can help increase fans' awareness of the athletes and develop positive associations with those athletes[17,22] there is a dearth of qualitative research to better understand the specific roles and sub-dimensions of the aforementioned factors as possible antecedents of athlete brand awareness among local and foreign fans. The same is important in terms of the components of athlete brand, particularly on how to measure aspects related with the on- and off-field attributes of an athlete. Thus, based on the previous literature, the purpose of this study was to develop a detailed model for understanding the antecedents of athlete brand creation and its components. Through an in-depth qualitative examination of a set of interviews with

fans from different countries, the study endeavored to develop a deeper understanding of athlete brand creation and its role in the sport marketplace. In doing so, this study attempts to provide a framework for helping athletes and brand managers in their attempt to establish a recognized athlete brand.

Athlete brand development

As noted by Carter[23], a human brand consists of peoples' opinions about an individual. In this sense, one can say that athlete brand is related with the personality and image of a particular athlete that is perceived by the public[22,24]. Carlson and Donavan[11] explained that athlete brand basically depends on public perception of an athlete. For example, Tiger Woods and LeBron James earned a brand status from their public persona as a golfer and as a basketball player, respectively. Evidence also explained that athlete brand is related with the personality of the athlete for the public. In this regard, athletes themselves have a strong role in building their personal brands[22,25].

Keller[13] explained brand knowledge as an essential component of the creation of brand awareness and the development of brand associations. Macdonald and Sharp[26] mentioned that consumers must know about the brand first, whereas Gladden and Funk[27] noted that consumers should be aware of the brand, and that such awareness could be positively influenced through a variety of sources. Different factors have been suggested in the literature as possible triggers to develop awareness among potential fans. For example, media channels tend to be beneficial for many sports and/or athletes, aiding them to increase popularity[28]. Similarly, oral communication conducted by peers and/or other persons often represent a vital source for sharing knowledge about athletes in different cultures and countries[16], whereas impression management is one of the major contributors in the creation of modern-day celebrities[29]. That is, an athlete's efforts to create, maintain, or change his/her image is vital in enhancing fans' perceptions of them. In addition, social agents (i.e., entities that have some type of societal impact) often have a direct influence on fans' responses to sports properties[30]. In relation to this, Keegana, Harwood, Spray, and Lavallee[31] stated that peers and parents play important roles in influencing motivation in the sport environment. Furthermore, the popularity of a team and/or sport commonly acts as a trigger to increase awareness and athlete associations[32,33]. For instance, many supporters applaud athletes while they are playing just because they are members of their favorite team[34]. All of these factors tend to lead to the creation of the athlete brand. Hence, media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team and/or sport often contribute to increase athlete awareness, which in turn, can lead to the creation of mental associations about that athlete.

Athlete brand components

Grant, Heere, and Dickson[35] stated that athletes tend to become famous due to their field achievements and public interest in off-field activities. For example, Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo are famous for both their athletic characteristics and features of their private lives. The fans' perceived image about their favorite athlete is based on athletic performance during competition and his/her character in real life[36]. Therefore, athlete brand is dependent upon two different dimensions of athletes' lives: their on- and off-field attributes. The on-field attributes are related to an athlete's athletic performance, and the excellent performance of an athlete is extremely valuable for establishing an athlete's brand[37]. In turn, off-field attributes are related with the athlete's personal life behind his/her on-field activities, including such aspects as athletes' personality, athletes' partners and family members, or athletes' hobbies and their looks[5]. The development of an athlete brand is an important aspect for both local and foreign fans, and in several occasions, athletes emerge as important assets at both personal and collective level[38]. For example, Wayne Gretzky is considered a pride of Canada, and when he announced his engagement to American actress Janet Jones and his transference from the Canadian club Edmonton Oilers to the American club Los Angeles Kings, it created political crisis in Canada and people actually began to go against the proposed free trade between US and Canada[39].

With the growing importance of an athlete for marketing purposes, a great stream of studies focusing on athlete brand began to emerge. For example, Williams and Agyemang[40] focused on the antecedents of athlete brand through three different broad categories: organization-, market-, and athlete-related antecedents. Consistent with this view, other researchers have also provided contributions regarding the antecedents of athlete brand, such as O'Keeffe and Zawadzka[15], who explained that the media has increased the popularity of star athletes, teams, and sports. Künzler and Poli[16] declared that oral communication is a vital platform for sharing knowledge about athletes, whereas Wagg[17] explained that impression management is essential to promote an athlete. Similarly, Ullrich-French and Smith[41] highlighted social agents as factors affecting the behaviors of youth about sports. Furthermore, Best[42] mentioned that a fan's interest in a certain team tends to increase his/her interest in the associated athletes, whereas Kunkel, Hill, and Funk[43] identified involvement with a sport as a reason to follow a team or athlete. Complementarily, researchers have also studied the components of athlete brand. For example, previous studies developed the model of athlete brand image (MABI) and suggested that an athlete brand depends upon athletes' athletic performances, their attractive appearances and marketable lifestyles (i.e., on- and off-field attributes of an athlete)[24,25]. While all these studies have contributed to the continued understanding of athletes as brands, to date, no study has been developed to include the proposed antecedents and components in a single model. There is also a need to collect fans' opinions about the proposed dimensions suggested in the literature, in order to obtain in-depth knowledge on the aspects that contribute to the development of athlete brand and the components that must be managed by athletes and managers. Thus, the current study adopted a conceptual framework on the basis of the literature review as

a starting point to examine athlete brand construction (Figure 1). The research questions guiding this study are the following:

RQ1: How do media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team/or sport contribute to increase fans' awareness and positive associations about athletes?

RQ2: What are the specific on- and off-field components of athlete brand?

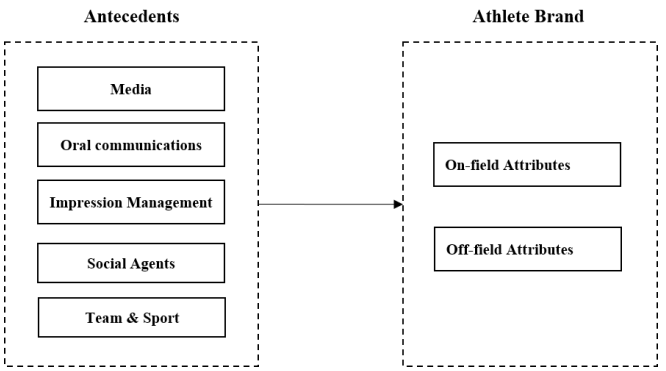

Figure 1. Adopted framework of athlete brand construction based on the literature review.

Method

Given the nature of the research questions, this study employed an inductive qualitative design. The authors surmised that this method is the most appropriate in eliciting meaning and gaining in-depth knowledge that is currently absent from the athlete brand literature. Owing to the shortage of in-depth examinations in this area, this approach is intended to be a starting point and a prelude to future investigations that can build upon the existing study.

Sampling of participants

The preliminary stage of sampling involved negotiating access[44], and this process was eased due to the lead researcher's established relationship with various sports stakeholder groups (i.e., clubs, athletes, sport researchers). Encompassing these relationships, a purposeful convenience sample was employed to select study participants according to a set of predetermined criteria[45]. Participants have to meet all the following conditions: 1) must consider themselves a sports fan, 2) have at least one favorite athlete, 3) has watched at least one game (live or on television) of their favorite athlete during the current season, and 4) has followed this particular athlete for at least one year. The purpose of using these criteria was to select a legitimate "athlete fan" for this study as defined by Crawford[46]: someone who considers himself/ herself obsessed with sports (i.e., team, athlete, celebrity). In line with that view, the first two conditions helped filter fans based on their own perceptions of being a fan, and the third and fourth conditions helped ensure that the sample included more enthusiastic and passionate sport fans. Moreover, the sampling strategy was deemed convenient given that the participants were easily accessible based on the origins and/or locations of the researchers. This type of sampling strategy is advantageous in situations wherein researchers want to collect data that can be used as a springboard for future studies[47].

The lead researcher conducted all interviews in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g., the interviewees' office or a classroom designated by the school for this specific purpose). The final sample comprised 21 football fans from three different countries (Portugal, Estonia, and Pakistan). The purpose of selecting three countries of different cultures and sporting backgrounds was to study fans from various geographical areas of the world. Athletes, teams, and key sponsors are multinational brands aiming to have worldwide good reputation. Hence, the authors decided to conduct the study in three countries with distinctively different background: Portugal already has strong football culture, Estonia is a European country where the popularity of football and football culture is emerging[48], and Pakistan is mostly regarded as a non-football-playing South Asian country, in which cricket is the most popular sport [49]. The participants, composed of both male and females, came from a diverse range of professions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

	Gender	Country	Profession	Status
1	M	Portugal	Scholar and sport journalist	Expert
2	M	Portugal	Student	Amateur player and fan
3	M	Portugal	Student	Fan
4	M	Pakistan	Mechanical engineer	Fan
5	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
6	M	Pakistan	Lecturer	Fan
7	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
8	M	Pakistan	IT specialist	Amateur player and fan
9	M	Pakistan	Salesman	Amateur player and fan
10	M	Pakistan	IT specialist	Fan
11	M	Pakistan	Sports journalist	Expert
12	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
13	M	Pakistan	Marketing manager	Amateur player and fan
14	M	Pakistan	Student	Fan
15	M	Pakistan	IT specialist	Fan
16	M	Estonia	Football player	Former amateur player and fan
17	F	Estonia	Lecturer	Fan
18	M	Estonia	Commercial director of football club	Expert
19	M	Estonia	Entrepreneur	Fan
20	F	Estonia	Researcher	Fan
21	M	Estonia	Bank employee	Amateur player and fan

Data collection

Interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of fans' thoughts about their favorite athletes. A qualitative technique was employed to suggest possible associations of the fans towards their favorite athletes on the basis of Keller's[13] recommendations for measuring the characteristics of brand associations. All interviews were conducted for two months. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Prior to the interviews, all participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, which covered the key issues specified in the literature related to the antecedents of athlete brand and its components. Each interview consisted of two sections. The first section included questions focused on gaining a better understanding of the antecedents of athlete brand, and the section was designed to improve current knowledge about the components of athlete brand. For example, the questions aimed at understanding the following questions: (1) Is on-field performance important for player popularity? Why? (2) What are the on-field characteristics of your favorite player? (3) What off-field characteristics of your favorite player impresses you? The examples of questions about the antecedents were as follows: (1) Do you remember how you became aware of your favorite player? (2) Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why? (3) Do you know of any stories about your favorite player that impresses you? If yes, please tell me (in a positive or negative matter) (see Appendix 1 for the detailed interview initial guide).

As is the case with numerous qualitative methods, the researcher serves as the instrument to elicit the data. To do so, probing questions must be asked to extract more details[50] . For instance, real life examples were often used in follow-up questions to clarify participants' replies to questions. The interview guide remained the same in its structure and sequence of questions for every interview. Additionally, it is important to mention that an expert (i.e., a personal related with field of sport) from each country was interviewed separately from the fans in order to gain deeper insights about the questions mentioned. For these interviews, all questions were presented based on two different perspectives (i.e., their opinion as both fan and expert). First, the question was "directed to the fan" (e.g., Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?), and then it was "directed to the expert" (e.g., Do you think fans tend to follow their favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?). Interviews lasted between 15 to 40 minutes depending upon participant interest, information, and willingness to share his/her thoughts. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to further conceal their identities.

Back-translation: All participants from Estonia and Portugal had a solid understanding of the English Language. For instance, some participants were students of a university where most of the courses were taught in English. Meanwhile, the Urdu language was adopted in interviewing the participants from Pakistan because it was difficult to find sports fans who had a working knowledge of the English language. In translating the interview guide into Urdu, back-translation was used to minimize discrepancies between the original and the translated instruments. The interview guide was first translated into Urdu by one of the researchers and then this was back-translated into English by two different Pakistan professors who were proficient in both languages. The comparison of the two forms ensured that the instruments were conceptually equivalent.

Data analysis

The analysis commenced after conducting the first interview in the current study. This strategy allows the researchers to become more familiar with the participants' responses[51]. The lead researcher listened to the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Along with the field notes that were taken during the interview, the lead author noted the first impressions of the interview, and then proceeded to discuss these initial impressions with the other researchers. Through this process, the researchers were able to discuss ways by which to improve follow-up interviews so that the research team could gain a better understanding and response from the participants.

Two levels of coding were adopted for the current study: the open coding level and the axial level. Open coding was employed for the initial analysis. Corbin and Strauss[52] described open coding as "Breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data". To do so, interview responses were read until a good grasp of the data was obtained. The researchers then discussed preliminary themes emanating from the first reading of the data. Furthermore, the researchers referred to the study purpose and interview guide in the process of coming up with initial themes.

Coding within the selected passages was done in the second stage to determine emergent patterns. Once the initial themes were identified, the researchers classified them into more defined, concrete themes; in some cases, they combined similar themes and those that could not stand alone. This process is known as "axial coding," which is defined by Corbin and Strauss[52] as the process of crosscutting or relating the initial themes to one another. Results in this study were elaborated from the themes arising from the axial coding process.

Finally, trustworthiness was ensured through the guidelines proposed by Lincoln and Guba[53], namely, credibility and dependability/conformability. Research collaborators with competence in qualitative methodology ensured the credibility and dependability of the procedure. Furthermore, the study attempted to provide the participants with a great detail of information with regards the research process. Peer-debriefing sessions were utilized to gain outside perspectives on the themes that emerged from the data, and member checking was employed during the study to ensure that the participants' "voices" were being accurately portrayed. This included follow-up questions and repeating what the participants had stated. For the purpose of achieving conformability, during the interviews, the interviewers remained unbiased and did not comment about their own opinions about certain matters or about certain athletes.

Findings

The results of the interviews conducted with fans are presented below. The first part of the interviews covered the antecedents of athlete brand, whereas the second part focused on athlete brand components. Overall, the findings are in line with the proposed model in Figure 1, and give us a better understanding of the roles of media, oral communication, impression management, social agents, and team and/or sport in the creation of athlete brand among fans. Moreover, the findings contribute to a deeper knowledge on how to measure the on- and off-field components of athlete brand. This study's results section initially focuses on the antecedents of athlete brand followed by a presentation of its components.

Antecedents of athlete brand

Table 2 shows the participants' responses about the factors that serve as antecedents of athlete brand. The participants' responses, which were based on their favorite athlete, indicate the vital role of media. In fact, 20 participants acknowledged some form of media as the first source of connection with their favorite athlete (see Appendix 2). For instance, one of the participants described media as a whole, and media channels, in particular as follows:

> Media is all around the football clubs and football players [they are] on 24 hours of the day and 7 days a week. From the time a player arrives to the stadium until he goes home, media is covering everything. <…>. For example, nowadays, social media is important for everything, especially in football. Players are starting to understand this like Cristiano Ronaldo who have a lot of fans on Facebook. Fans often use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can track what football players are doing just by connecting with them on [their] Facebook page [Tiago].

The participants' responses concerning the role of the media further highlighted specific types of media channels, such as mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games (see Table 2), and their roles in increasing awareness levels about a certain athlete among both actual and prospective fans.

The role of oral communication as an antecedent of athlete brand also received positive responses from the participants. A total of 12 participants (see Appendix 2) acknowledged that oral communication plays a major role in the process of providing information and getting them closer to their favorite athlete. As mentioned by one of the participants:

> At the beginning, when the players are starting to become important, people just tell lies about them, they often get confused about the players and say incorrect things about them, but then some of these comments about the players will aid at building their career, for sure. I think the stories behind the players have a lot to do with loyalty, how much fans like the players, where they came from, and their social lives outside the field. I really don't believe in the relationship between Ronaldo and his Russian girlfriend, for example. I think it is all [done] to get social attention. I think they are showing themselves because it is good for both actually [Tiago].

After interviewing fans, two types of oral communication emerged. Specifically, participants' responses resulted in the identification of word-of-mouth (WOM) and rumors/narratives. Examples of these two types of oral communication are presented in Table 2.

Complementarily, five participants acknowledged the role of impression management performed by an athlete as a direct source of information for them; they recognized that such effort can be an antecedent of athlete brand. It is also important to note that media channels are often a good source through which fans can become aware of impression management actions taken by athletes. As noted by one of the participants:

> While I was living in Germany, FC Bayern Münich and German player Bastian Schweinsteiger was once asked during the press conference about some political issue and he said: "I am sorry, I am not [an] expert in this field; you should ask me about football. I cannot answer this." So, [I think a] player should maintain his natural image among fans [Triin].

Meanwhile, another participant who highlighted the role of impression management shared the following sentiment:

> Recently, a child wanted to get a Messi autograph, but Messi misbehaved with that child. Later, Messi apologized and took a few pictures with the kid. So, instead of [having] a bad feeling, I felt positive feelings for Messi because he had the courage to accept his mistake. He apologized for what he had done wrong and tried to compensate for his mistake [Bilal].

In addition, most participants agreed upon the fact that athletes should act while keeping in mind their goal of creating a good image, even in countries and regions where their kind of sport is not so popular. As one of the participants mentioned:

> Sponsors want to capture new markets, and Asia is a big market. So recently, we watched an advertisement of a Japanese company, in which Messi is showing his skills. I think that is the best example of a player advertising himself in new market. So, players can introduce themselves to a new market through charity work, advertisements, coaching clinics, interactions with fans of new markets, or playing in friendly exhibition matches [Najaf].

Social agents also seem to play a vital role as antecedents of athlete brands, which is something that has been mentioned by 19 participants. No matter the country, some social agent is playing an important role and even fans are recognizing that, although a certain social agent may not work in their cases, social agents usually work for the majority. The interviews resulted in the identification of four different types of social agents, such as parents, family members, friends, and community, as described in Table 2. As highlighted by one of the participants:

> The problem sometimes is with parents who failed at becoming football players and then put pressure on their kids to fulfill their own failed dreams. I saw six- or seven years-old kids arriving the stadium with their parents who then start training them as goalkeeper for two or three hours. This is ridiculous. On the other hand, there are some parents who do not put pressure on their kids and just support them, whatever the decisions are, whatever the results are, or whatever the kid's performances are. There are parents that manage to do that. The greatest influence of the family members on kids is when they are building the career, and sometimes even to help creating stability for an established career [Tiago].

The role of a team and/or sport also seems to have a positive influence on athlete brand. According to 13 participants, if a fan is familiar with certain types of sports and certain teams, it becomes easier to recognize and start liking an associated athlete. In turn, athletes from non-popular sports or teams have to work harder to gain the approval of fans and other people with interest in sports. Based on participants' responses, sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location were identified as the three important factors that can help in better understanding the roles of team and sport in the creation of athlete brand. As one of the participants said during the interview:

> Cricket is very popular in Pakistan. So, even an average cricket player is well-known in Pakistan. But when it comes to football or other sports that are not popular in Pakistan, only a handful players are well-known here. For example, if a very good player is playing in some small team he won't become as popular as the average player of a big team. Not only team performance, but also team location is a big thing in this regard. A player who is playing in a Karachi team becomes automatically popular among Karachi fans [Najaf].

Table 2. Participant's discussion about the antecedents.

Antecedent	Participants' responses
Media	
Mass Media	"I watched lots of their matches on TV, I read about them." [Shoaib]
Social Media	"Messi was kind a hot thing, I watched him on YouTube videos and I realized he is a magician player." [Waqas]
Major Sport Events	"During the 2006 World Cup, I came to know about Ronaldo." [Abid]
Video Games	"I came close to Ronaldo while playing Play Station as I always choose him for my team." [Farhan]
Oral Communication	
Word-of-Mouth	"I always mention Messi as a fabulous player in my chats with friends." [Waqas]
Rumors/Narratives	"I started to like him when I heard the story that he refused to exchange shirt with an Israeli player after the match." [Nouman]
Impression Management	"The one which impress me the most is the how hard working Ronaldo is and how he shows that to all of us." [Tiago/ Ricardo]
Social Agents	
Parents	"My father played football, my grandfather was a football player and a referee, so I decided to adopt football." [Shoaib]
Family Members	"My cousins discussed all the time about him so I knew him from their talks." [Sohail]
Friends	"My friend told me about Messi when we were watching a football game." [Muzamil]
Community	"I played Cricket like any other child as every new child born automatically attract towards cricket in Pakistan." [Shoaib]
Team and Sport	
Sport Interest	"As a football player myself, I chose my favorite player due to the similarities in the playing ground." [Zemenu]
Team Interest	"My favorite player plays in my favorite team and he is the captain and a very loyal player." [Pedro]
Team Geographical Location	"My favorite player played in sporting Lisbon, which is my favorite team because I live in Lisbon and played for Sporting when I was younger." [Ricardo]

Components of athlete brand

Table 3 presents extracts of participants' answers about the on- and off-field attributes of an athlete that they consider while selecting their favorite. As noted by one of the participants:

> On-field performance is a major criterion for an athlete to become popular, but there are some other elements as well that one has to achieve to become a star. There are many players who perform really well both individually and collectively, but they are not superstars because of marketing techniques [Saad].

All participants have mentioned that an athlete's on-field activity is paramount for them to like a certain athlete. Responses to the interviews also allowed the researchers to identify five

main categories related to on-field attributes: behavior, team, achievements, skills, and style of play. For example, two of the participants mentioned that:

> He was a fighter, an honest player. He never fell down. He never accepted defeat. He was the leader of the team that he represented. He won everything apart from the World Cup. His skills and style of play were unique and attractive. This is why I like him very much [Oleg].

> I started to like Ronaldo because of his speed and skills. I felt he was a game changer. At the time when he started to create an impact at the English Premier League, Arsenal was at top. But Ronaldo with his quality of play, helped Manchester United compete with Arsenal FC to get [the] top spot again [Saad].

Complementarily, 17 participants noted that the off-field attributes of their favorite athletes impressed them in a positive manner. In particular, the interviews allowed the researchers to identify five types of off-field attributes: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment. As an elaboration, one of the participants mentioned that:

> Not only a philanthropist, but he has [also] kept close contact with his family and friends. He protests against things that are wrong and stands up for what he firmly believes in. It's normal for football players to be hard-partying and arrogant individuals but he is not one of them. He keeps a very healthy lifestyle [Zemenu].

One interesting observation is that the participants seemed to relate a positive athlete brand to their increased loyalty towards that athlete. All participants pointed out that the on-field attributes of an athlete motivated them to follow the athlete and become loyal to him/her. For example, one participant shared the following:

> I followed Ronaldo on Facebook, Twitter, and on Instagram. My mobile phone is full of Ronaldo's pictures. As he posts his recent picture, I download and save it. I am a member of many pages and groups where they regularly post updates about Ronaldo. I try my best to watch every game of Ronaldo and if I failed to watch it live, I try to watch highlights of that match as early as possible. Whatever team he is playing for (Real Madrid or Portugal), I never missed any of his goal [Farhan].

Table 3. Participant's discussions about the on-field attributes and off-field attributes of athlete brand.

Components of athlete brand	Participants' responses
On-field attributes	
Behavior	"He is a fighter. He is a team player, very mature in the field." [Saad]
Team	"He is the captain of my favorite team." [Pedro]
Achievements	"He won golden boot with Manchester United" [Saad]
Style of play	"He has extreme good reactions as goalkeeper and the best thing is that he is kind of a half defender." [Triin]
Skills	"His shoots and free kicks are like a tomahawk missile." [Ricardo]
Off-field attributes	
Physical Attraction	"I find him very sexy." [Abid]
Lifestyle	"He is devoted to his family and he does charity work for people of Gaza." [Umair]
Personal Appeal	"His personality has groom much, and now he has a good personal appeal." [Waqas]
Ethnicity	"I like him because he is an Estonian playing in Germany." [Oleg]
Entertainment	"His life has enough entertainment factor to entertain us." [Waqas]

The same was observed in the case of off-field attributes. A total of 17 participants acknowledged that they were impressed with certain off-field attributes of their favorite athletes and started to like these athletes based on those characteristics. These responses suggest a link between athlete brand and athlete loyalty via on- and off-field attributes. Concerning the off-field attributes, one participant mentioned that:

> I knew Ronaldo before, but he became my favorite player when he refused to exchange his shirt with an Israeli player after Portugal vs. Israel match. I think that it showed how Ronaldo has strong character and cares with what is happening in the world. That really impressed me a lot and I started to follow him [Nouman].

Discussion

The current study focused on examining previously proposed antecedents and components of athlete brands through a set of interviews with fans from three different countries. The main goal was to capture fans' opinions so as to gain a deeper understanding of athlete brand creation and its measurement. This study contributes to the literature by (1) combining different ideas from past studies into a single model about athlete brand, and (2) providing a more comprehensive framework that can help scholars and practitioners target the dimensions they should focus on when promoting athletes. The findings from this study, as summarized in Figure 2, allows for a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the creation of athlete brand.

The dimension of media was further categorized into four main sub-dimensions. Specifically, for the participants in the three countries where the data were collected, mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games were identified as media sources that increase fans' awareness. These findings are consistent with those reported by Summers and Johnson[54], thereby suggesting the important role of mass media in the process of creating and spreading an athlete's good image. Sierra, Taute, and Heiser[55] mentioned that social media helps generate interest in and deepens fans' knowledge about athletes. A participant (Farhan) presented an example of social media influence by saying, "I became aware about Ronaldo via media and then social media provided further information about him." Meanwhile, Goodman, Duke, and Sutherland[56] stated that major sport events have the power to affect many segments of the population. In relation to this, it is important

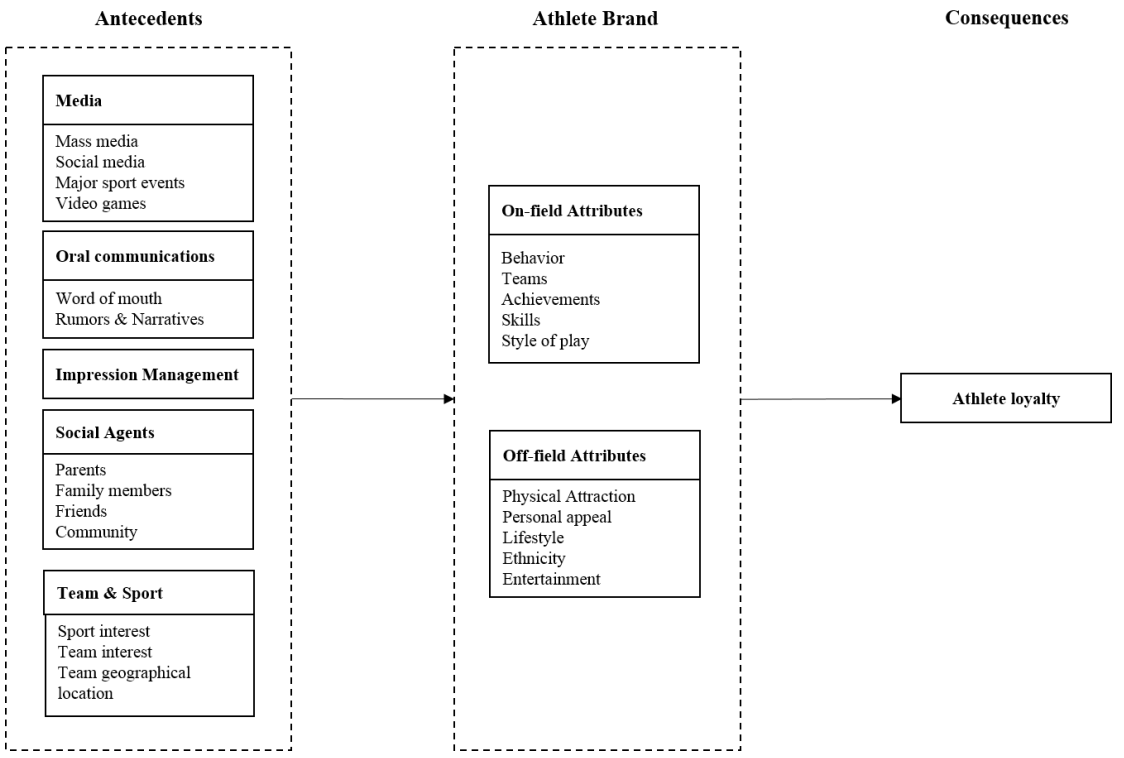

Figure 2. Final framework of athlete brand construction after participants' interviews.

to mention that most of the Pakistani participants in the current study mentioned that they only heard about football and some famous players during the 2014 FIFA World Cup hosted in Brazil. For example, one of the participants (Abid) stated that "During the World Cup, I came to know about Cristiano Ronaldo as there was hype created in the media because of his name and performance." Furthermore, the role of video games as part of digital media[57] was also highlighted by the participants of the study, who thought that video games helped sports fans develop an emotional bond with their favorite athletes[58]. One of the interviewees (Peeter) was very specific about this correlation, saying that "Every fan of sport video games knows Messi because of Messi's picture on FIFA games' box cover page."

Regarding oral communication, two further sub-dimensions were identified, including WOM and rumors/narratives. These findings provide support for previous findings, such as those of Kim and Trail[59], who acknowledged that WOM is the most effective source of product awareness in the sports domain in many cases. Lovelock and Wirtz[60] mentioned that WOM communication is important, as people tend to believe more in friends and other family members than in an organization's official communications. A very characteristic link between WOM and trust was highlighted by one participant (Shoaib), who stated that "Word-of-mouth from trusted ones is an important factor [increasing] athlete awareness."

In the same vein, Künzler and Poli[16] highlighted the role of rumors/narratives in enhancing awareness through examples in the African context, in which rumors and stories about certain athletes often contribute to enhance their image among fans and the general populations. For example, one of the participants (Umair) mentioned that "Ronaldo's story about charity for the Gaza people introduced me to him."

Complementarily, impression management was confirmed as an important antecedent of athlete brand when some participants acknowledged how the image presentation of their favorite athlete impressed them. This finding is consistent with previous studies stating it is fast becoming an essential practice among famous athletes[61]. Thornton, Audesse, Ryckman, and Burckle[62] mentioned that impression management has long been used to facilitate social interactions and affect positive outcomes. Similarly, Prapavessis, Grove, and Eklund[63] highlighted the

importance of impression management, which helps spread awareness about an athlete and build his/her image among fans. Nowadays, athletes can employ different strategies to help them create an image that is targeted towards fans. For example, Real Madrid and French football player Karim Benzema recently acknowledged that some of his contemporaries, including Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham, are being accused of caring too much about their image, so he declared that "I'm not an actor or show-off and my game is my image"[64]. The participants of this study also recognized the efforts exerted by athletes to manage their impressions. A participant (Tiago) perfectly captured this by sharing the following observation: "Top athletes are also focusing on efforts of creating awareness through impression management."

The dimension of social agents in this study was further developed into four sub-dimensions: parents, family members, friends, and community. These results provide support to the study of Dionísio, Leal, and Moutinho[65], who suggested that socializing is a learning process that starts in childhood and occurs primarily with the help of one's parents and family. Dionísio, Leal, Moutinho[65] reported that the majority of fans start to follow a club in their childhood under the influence of some person who are close to them. In the same view, Papaioannou, Ampatzoglou, Kalogiannis, and Sagovits[66] described parents as a basic source of influence who shape their children's interest in sport. A participant (Shoaib) shared the following recollection: "My father was a football player so even in the living of Cricket loving country I choose to play football instead." On a similar note, Hsieh[30] mentioned that family members and friends might have an influence on other family members and friends.

At the same time, a community (i.e., a group of people having common interests) is considered another important socializing agent in the context of sports[67-69]. For instance, Carmelo Anthony, an American professional basketball player who currently plays for the New York Knicks of the National Basketball Association (NBA), is an example of someone who has achieved popularity because he represents the specific community of Baltimore, which is suffering from poverty, drugs, and crimes[70].

The team and sport itself can also be the bases for informing people about certain athletes, and the results of this study allowed the researchers to identify three sub-dimensions related to this: sport interest, team interest, and team geographic location. As noted by Kunkel, Hill, Funk[43], the interest in a specific sport is often a reason to follow an athlete, and more than half of the participants of the current study highlighted the role of sports in the context of athlete brand. Complementary, Best[42] explained that the interest in a certain team leads to an interest in their athletes, which is consistent with the current research findings. For example, participants mentioned the role of the team in selecting their favorite athlete: Steven Gerrard because of Liverpool (Ricardo), Ryan Giggs because of Manchester United (Najaf), and Gary Lineker because of Everton (Oleg). The participants' responses are also in line with the result of Hay and Joel[71], who suggested that the geographical location of the team could have a positive impact on athlete brand and fans' loyalty towards the athlete. To this respect, one Portuguese and one Estonian fan acknowledged that one of the reasons for liking their favorite athlete is team location. For example, people who see Brazil as a major football-playing country often develop a good impression about Brazilian players and start following them. As in the game of Cricket, Pakistan is famous for producing fast bowlers, which make them popular all around the world and good enough to draw applause even from their rivals[72].

In relation to the components of athlete brand, the on-field attributes can be divided into five sub-dimensions according to the participants' responses: behavior, team, achievements, style of play, and skills. The importance of athlete behavior on the field is consistent with the study of Daley and Wolfson[73], who suggested that fans expect their favorite athletes to lead the team upfront. A participants (Bilal) agreed with this finding, mentioning that "Performance is an important thing as my favorite player constantly attack oppositions' goal and this creates panic in the opponent team."

Complementarily, Chadwick and Burton[5] noted the team(s) that the athlete represented in the past or is currently representing could change athlete ranks. This idea was expressed by one of the participants (Triin) who mentioned, "Cesc Fàbregas was my favorite player until he joined Chelsea Football Club." Certain achievements help in recognizing persons in any field of life and this is also the case in the field of sports. Grant, Heere, Dickson[35] explained that football athletes become famous because of their achievements. In line with this view, the participants mentioned their favorite athletes' achievements, such as the golden boot (Saad) and the fact they earned few disciplinary actions during the career (Najaf, Oleg) as important aspects for them.

The sub-dimension of style of play, which has been identified in the current study, suggests a link with prior studies as Morrissey[74] called Zidane a "magician" because of his style of play. For example, one of the participants (Triin) referred to German and FC Bayern Münich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer as a "half defender" because of his style of play. In addition, the identification of skills as a sub-dimension of on-field attributes is in line with the study of Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy, and Kirchner[75], who highlighted that some fans intend to watch athletes' skills more than to see the team winning.

Regarding the off-field attributes of athlete brand, five new sub-dimensions have been identified based on the interviews: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment. These dimensions are consistent with the finding of Cortsen[23], who highlighted that a personal brand is related with life stories, values, charisma, authenticity, and believability. Lee and Kwak[76] mentioned that the immoral activities of celebrities (e.g., athletes) could harm their popularity. Van Amsterdam, Knoppers, and Jongmans[77] stated that an athlete's physical attraction is important for fans, and the responses of the participants lend support to this idea. For example, two of the participants referred to physical attraction of their favorite athlete using the word "sexy" (Abid, Nouman). The lifestyle of an athlete is also important for 15 participants as they mentioned athlete lifestyle as a reason why they like their favorite athlete. In line with this idea, Woodhouse and Williams[78] noted that fans are really interested in athletes' lifestyles. In fact, two of

the participants quoted their favorite player as a "family man" (Ricardo; Umair). In addition, García[79] mentioned that the charisma or appeal of an athlete (i.e., his/her star quality) is capable of entertaining fans outside the arena, and 14 participants mentioned that personal appeal is important when choosing their favorite athlete. Complementarily, two of the participants (Ricardo and Oleg) noted that they kept the ethnicity of the athlete in their mind when choosing their favorite athlete. To this respect, Shakib and Veliz[80] mentioned that African–American and other big communities support their own ethnic members, whereas other reported that that British–Asians cheer for athletes and teams that represent their ethnical groups[81]. Furthermore, entertainment emerged as a sub-dimension of the off-field attributes of an athlete brand as this aspect is mentioned by 10 of the participants. This is consistent with Künzler and Poli's[12] suggestion that when athletes are popular, people want to know more about them. Overall, studying the off-field attributes of athletes suggested that fans who live abroad are less interested in the personal lives of athletes (i.e., four of 12 Pakistani fans denied any kind of off-field interest in their favorite athletes). To the best of our knowledge, no study has discussed and compared the interests of local and foreign fans. Thus, the current study could be a starting point for studying how the loyalty of home and away fans can be affected by cultures and regions.

Another aspect of the construction of the athlete brand is athlete brand re-construction. As mentioned above in the case of Cesc Fàbregas, the question is whether it would be possible to win loyalties again. One of the participants (Pedro) mentioned, "The 'famous slip' of Steven Gerard that cost Liverpool FC Premier League didn't affect my loyalty to Gerrard. I am still a fan of Gerard."

Just like in foreign fans, the literature about re-construction is also nonexistent. There are many examples all around the world of an athlete destroying his/her brand and having to re-construct it from scratch. Some examples are John "Bone" Jones, Lance Armstrong, and Luis Suárez. The latest example is Muhammad Amir, a Pakistani international cricketer. He was recognized as the most promising fast bowler at the young age of 17. However, he was charged in allegations of match-fixing and was eventually imposed with a five-year ban. On his recent return, he managed to win back the loyalty of many fans with his excellent performance in a short time period such that he is once again a celebrated athlete in his field[82].

In summary, the current study aimed at providing a basis through which we can gain a better understanding of athletes as brands. In doing so, this study conducted interviews with fans from three different countries, and with different favorite athletes. While all participants in this study had football players as their favorite athletes, one can argue that these findings are applicable to athletes from other popular team sports (e.g., the style of play or ethnicity are important aspects for athletes who play football and those who play baseball, basketball, or other popular team sports). The findings indicate that media (mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games), oral communication (WOM and rumors/narratives), impression management, social agents (parents, family members, friends, and community) and team or sport (sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location) act as antecedents of athlete brand. In turn, athlete brand components can be divided according to the on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play, and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment) of the athletes. Furthermore, a positive perception of the athletes seems to have a positive role in increasing fans' loyalty to an athlete.

Limitations and future research directions

As with any study, there are limitations that should be acknowledged and considered for future research. The first limitation is related with the sample composition. Previous studies suggested that consumers' opinions about brands tend to vary according to the cultural setting[14,83]. Thus, even though the current sample includes fans from three different countries, future studies could try to conduct interviews in more countries. In doing so, future studies must collect larger samples to verify whether differences exist in athlete brand creation and its components in different sports or cultural settings. Furthermore, considering fans' loyalty, future studies should also discuss different categories of followers, following, for example, Giulianotti's[84] categorization of fans into supporters, followers, fans, and flaneurs, or the distinction of fans and fanatics as proposed by Zucal[85]. This kind of study would provide further insights into the context of athlete branding and aid marketers who wish to establish and develop athlete brands for various kinds of customers and stakeholders. Second, the creation of a scale based on the model shown in Figure 2, followed by an empirical examination with a large sample of sport fans can help complement our understanding of athlete brand construction and its components. It would also be interesting to examine each antecedent individually so that one can better examine the importance of each antecedent in different cultures. As Luszczynska, Scholz, and Schwarzer[86] mentioned, the outcome of multi-country data could vary owing to different cultures, economic situations, religions, and social or political situations. This type of study can provide more strength to the study of athlete brand by nominating common factors among fans around the world (i.e., home and away) regarding the selection of favorite athlete.

Third, while this study focused upon the creation of athlete brand, it is also important to understand the array of consequences of athlete brand. Specifically, the suggested positive link between athlete brand and athlete loyalty[87] should be discussed in future research in order to create a more complete picture of athlete brand. It would also be interesting to examine other potential consequences. In some cases, athletes themselves establish a lifestyle brand using their names. For instance, Portuguese and Real Madrid footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has his own clothing and shoe brand called "CR7"[88]. Swedish female golfer Annika Sörenstam established the "Annika-brand" of golf-related products and activities after her retirement[22]. In light of these life examples, it would be interesting to understand the consequences of

athlete brand with a particular focus on fans' loyalty to the athletes and teams[89] as well as his/her endorsers.[10] Finally, there is need to test the model not only based on different cultures and countries, but to also for specific athletes as well. For example, are the mechanisms leading to the creation of Cristiano Ronaldo's brand the were same as those for the brands of LeBron James or Rafael Nadal? Chadwick and Burton[5] explained the common points of interest in developing two football athletes (i.e., Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham), whereas Braunstein-Minkove, Zhang, and Trail[90] established a framework that describes athlete effectiveness as an endorser of non-sporting goods apart from their team and sport. In this sense, additional research could focus on the examination of different branded athletes.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide to start the research

This research is part of a project intended to understand how fans became aware and what they think about their favorite players.

I will now ask you some questions about the factors that may trigger your awareness and mental associations to your favorite player(s)

- Do you remember how you became aware of your favorite player?
- What were the role of media, oral communication, social agents, impression management and the sport and team itself in providing you information about your favorite player(s) when you were not a fan yet?
- Do you follow your favorite player on mass media and social media? Why?
- Do you remember any story told by friends about your favorite player that impresses you? If yes, please tell me (in a positive or negative matter).
- Do you believe in the stories about your favorite player without confirming from authentic sources? Do you tell others those stories as well? Do you remember any story?
- If someone tells a bad story about your favorite player do you believe him/her? And what about a positive story?
- What are the social agents that you believe are more important to influence a fan to start following a specific player? (e.g., family members, friends, peers)
- Do you think players need to work on their own in order to create awareness among football fans? If yes do you have an idea how? Or should they wait for teams to get popular?
- Who is your favorite football player?
  - Can you tell me how you started to like that specific player?
  - Do you see anything common between you and your favorite player?

I will now ask you some questions about your favorite player(s):

- Do you like the team in which your favorite player is currently playing? Is your favorite team the same as the one from your favorite player? If yes, is that why you follow the team?
- Is the on-field performance important for player popularity? Why?
  - What are the on-field characteristics of your favorite player?
- Are the off-field activities of player important for player popularity? Why?
  - What are the off-field characteristics of your favorite player?
- Is it possible for a player to become popular without having such a high profile career? If so, what aspects make him/her so popular?
- Can players become brands by themselves or they just enjoy the status as a part of the team's brand?
- Do you remember any special performance of your favorite player? Please tell me.

Overall

- What is your favorite team and player inside the country and outside the country where you live? Why?
- Is there any other thing you would like to say in this interview?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Appendix 2

Appendix 2. Summary results of the interviews (Participants 1–11).

Participant		**Tiago**	**Ricardo**	**Pedro**	**Saad**	**Abid**	**Bilal**	**Sohail**	**Shoaib**	**Rehan**	**Waqas**	**Najaf**
Favorite Player		**CR**	**CR**	**SG**	**CR**	**CR**	**LM**	**LM**	**AI XH**	**LM**	**LM**	**RG**
Antecedents												
Media	Mass Media		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Social Media					X	X	X		X	X	
	Major Sport Events				X	X	X	X			X	
	Video Games											
Oral Communication	Word of Mouth		X	X		X	X	X				
	Rumors/ Narratives		X	X								X
Impression management	I.M.	X										X
Social Agents	Parents		X						X			
	Family Members		X				X	X	X			
	Friends		X	X		X	X	X				
	Community		x									
Team and Sport	Sport interest		X	X	X				X	X		X
	Team Interest		X	X	X					X		X
	Team geographical Location		X						X			
Athlete Brand												
On-field Attributes	Behavior	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Team			X	X				X	X	X	X
	Achievements	X			X			X	X	X		X
	Style of Play		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Skills		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Off-field Attributes	Physical Attraction					X						
	Lifestyle	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X
	Personal Appeal	X	X		X			X			X	X
	Ethnicity		X									
	Entertainment	X			X		X	X			X	

Note. CR = Cristiano Ronaldo; SG = Steven Gerrard; LM = Lionel Messi; AI = Andrés Iniesta; XH = Xavi Hernández; RG = Ryan Giggs; MN = Manuel Neuer; WH = Will Hughes; GL = Gary Lineker; RK = Ragnar Klavan.

Appendix 2. Summary results of the interviews (Partipants 12–21).

		Farhan	Nouman	Muzamil	Umair	Aat	Triin	Peeter	Oleg	Aili	Zemenu
		CR	CR	LM	CR	LM	MN	WH	GL RK	LM	CR
Antecedents											
Media	Mass Media	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Social Media	X		X				X			
	Major Sport Events		X	X							
	Video Games	X									
Oral Communication	Word of Mouth	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	
	Rumors/ Narratives	X	X						X		X
Impression management	I.M.		X						X		X
Social Agents	Parents										
	Family Members	X	X	X		X					X
	Friends	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
	Community										
Team and Sport	Sport interest				X	X				X	X
	Team Interest				X	X	X	X	X		X
	Team geographical Location										
Athlete Brand											
On-field Attributes	Behavior	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Team	X				X	X	X	X		X
	Achievements	X	X	X	X	X					
	Style of Play	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Off-field Attributes	Physical Attraction	X	X							X	
	Lifestyle	X	X		X	X	X		X		X
	Personal Appeal	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
	Ethnicity								X		
	Entertainment	X	X		X					X	X

Note. CR = Cristiano Ronaldo; SG = Steven Gerrard; LM = Lionel Messi; AI = Andrés Iniesta; XH = Xavi Hernández; RG = Ryan Giggs; MN = Manuel Neuer; WH = Will Hughes; GL = Gary Lineker; RK = Ragnar Klavan.