

King James holds court: A qualitative examination of the athlete brand community phenomenon

by

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ABSTRACT

While superstar athletes' relatable personalities, on-field achievements, and attractive brand image facilitate a direct connection with the target demographic, little is known about how this indelible bond manifests itself in athlete brand communities. The literature concerning identification among like-minded consumers through systematic functions in athlete brand communities and associated psychological benefits is virtually non-existent. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the practices of consumers within an athlete brand community, relationships with the focal athlete brand, and multifaceted emotional benefits derived from shared community experiences. The author conducted 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected members of a LeBron James fan club and analyzed related documents associated with the studied athlete brand community. Four prevalent themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews including athlete brand community adoption, culture, ideological uniformity, and sustainable development. This endeavor represented an initial attempt to explore how brand communities function in the context of athletes as focal brands.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iv |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | vii |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | ix |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | x |
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Proliferation of Athletes as Brands and Communal Consumption..... | 1 |
| Background, Objectives, and Research Questions..... | 5 |
| CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE..... | 9 |
| Brand Equity..... | 9 |
| Brand Knowledge..... | 23 |
| Brand Personality..... | 27 |
| Athlete Branding..... | 31 |
| Corporate Social Responsibility..... | 41 |
| Role Modelling..... | 45 |
| Social Identity Theory..... | 50 |
| Community..... | 55 |
| Brand Community..... | 59 |
| CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY..... | 69 |
| Epistemology and Ontology..... | 70 |
| The Qualitative Inquiry..... | 73 |
| Data Collection Procedures..... | 75 |
| Documents..... | 78 |
| Sample..... | 78 |
| Interview..... | 80 |
| Data analysis..... | 84 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS..... | 89 |
| Athlete Brand Community Adoption..... | 89 |
| External assimilation..... | 89 |
| Athlete brand idolization..... | 95 |
| Athlete Brand Community Culture..... | 102 |
| Responsible community engagement..... | 110 |
| Athlete brand centrality..... | 115 |
| Allegiance to the athlete brand..... | 122 |
| Ideological Uniformity..... | 127 |
| Engagement derived self-fulfillment..... | 131 |
| Sustainable Development..... | 144 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION..... | 150 |
| External Assimilation..... | 153 |
| Athlete Brand Idolization..... | 156 |
| Athlete Brand Community Culture..... | 159 |
| Athlete Brand Centrality..... | 165 |
| Role Modelling and Athlete Social Responsibility..... | 167 |
| Ideological Uniformity..... | 174 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Limitations and Future Research | 180 |
| APPENDICES | 183 |
| Appendix A | 183 |
| Appendix B | 184 |
| Appendix C | 185 |
| Appendix D | 186 |
| REFERENCES | 187 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH | 207 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | | |
|---------|--|--------|
| Table 1 | Subgroups of “support” dimension..... | 17 |
| Table 2 | Types of brand-building feelings..... | 29 |
| Table 3 | Characteristics of “good role model”..... | 48, 49 |
| Table 4 | Consequences of group membership | 52, 53 |
| Table 5 | Implications of integration and fulfillment of needs in a sense of community | 59 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Figure 1 | Conceptual framework of brand equity in college athletics..... | 14 |
| Figure 2 | Framework for spectator-based brand equity | 18 |
| Figure 3 | Dimensions of brand knowledge | 24 |
| Figure 4 | Conceptual model of athlete brand image | 36 |
| Figure 5 | Framework of athlete brand construction..... | 41 |
| Figure 6 | Four-stage circuit of athlete brand community construct..... | 152 |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Proliferation of Athletes as Brands and Communal Consumption

Superstar athletes influence sport consumers' social and financial decisions beyond the scope of study and the sports marketing industry. Professional athletes' (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo and LeBron James) superior athleticism, luxurious lifestyle, and fan interaction on and off the field elicit admiration, idolization, and sense of connection among fans. As a result, these attributes are packaged as athlete "brands" and marketed by teams, leagues, corporate sponsors, and athletes themselves. These brands permeate far beyond the sports marketplace and establish iconic allegiance throughout the world.

Today, these brands are furthered by athletes' engagement with target audiences in various forms of social media and advertising. The relationship between athletes and fans creates an indelible bond vital to sports consumers' perceptions of and investment in the athletes' brand image. This brand image is strategically connected to the businesses athletes endorse, thereby influencing sports consumers' decisions. In fact, companies and athlete brands utilize strategic communication to build an interactive platform between key markets and the offering that the athlete brand is wishing to endorse (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). The term "athlete brand" was introduced by Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014, p. 98) as a "public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and values using their name, face or other brand elements in the market." The power of the professional athlete brand has created the need for brand management, because "athletes are so much more than points per game or yards after the catch or slugging percentage. These are people that our society...worships" (Darlow, 2018, p. 17). Illustrative of this, the profound influence of the "Be like Mike" slogan transcended the sports arena to the realm of everyday lives (Feezell, 2005).

Athlete brand popularity has become religion amongst diehard fans in which legions of like-minded individuals embrace the unification in their collective idolization. The social status of celebrity athletes supersedes cultural barriers and social capital and equities (Gilchrist, 2005; Rojek, 2006). Biskup and Pfister (1999, p. 199) affirmed that idols (e.g., athletes) “symbolize and reinforce the ideals and norms prevailing in a society” and thus have a profound influence on the lives of their followers. Legions of fans, who worship celebrity athletes, identify with their personal brands, and in turn, socialize with fellow enthusiasts and benefit from their mutual admiration (Arai et al., 2014; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyeman, 2016). As previously reported in the sport management literature, some of the iconic brand communities (e.g., Chicago Cubs) add incremental value to a sport organization and key stakeholders (e.g., fans) (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Sport consumers in these brand communities recognize a sense of togetherness, which in turn “can contribute greatly to a sense of self, where self is psychologically intertwined with the fate of the team and other fans” (Underwood et al., 2001, p. 5). Similarly, sport consumers organize into brand communities (e.g., fan clubs) unified by the appreciation of athletes’ high-level performance, attractive appearance, and appealing life-style conveyed by athlete brands (Arai et al., 2014; Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011). These consumers are strongly attached to the focal athlete brand and internalize unique group experiences with fellow fans.

Marketers leverage the sport consumers’ knowledge regarding an athlete brand and related images and perceptions through the following content categories: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014). In addition, brands (e.g., athlete brands) can solidify their image through socially responsible actions off the playing field (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Walker & Kent, 2009). Individual fans’ attachment to specific athlete

brands encourages them to become a part of a larger brand collective with inherent connections related to members' external identities (e.g., location, age, gender, etc.). These connections solidify an intrinsic relationship among fellow brand devotees. Marketers appeal to these relationships by cultivating positive brand equity among fans which enhances reciprocal interactions and overall experience within the collective (Keller, 2008).

This mutual admiration validates fans' own identities and legitimizes their personal and financial investment in the athlete. Mullin et al. (2014, p. 20) strongly suggest that "enjoyment of sport, as a player or fan, is almost always a function of interaction with other people." This indicates that fans' common thread of living vicariously through the athlete enables congregations of sport consumers to identify with athletes' prowess and social positions to satisfy their own self-worth. Sport consumers feel strongly about their idolized athletes because these athlete brands are "expected to personify all that is good in us, our community, our society, and what is traditionally American" (Sailes, 2001, p. 57). This identification with brands (e.g., athlete brands) and consumption activities serve as a basis for social, communal solidarity linked with positive consumer outcomes (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

In the broad sense, some scholars have highlighted the shift from individual to communal consumption patterns. This transition from individualized consumption to the tribalized mode was described by Cova (1997, p. 307) who argued that consumers find value in the offerings (e.g., goods, services, and brands) "which, through their linking value, permit and support social interaction of the communal type" and claimed that "there could be a decrease in the consumption of products and services which isolate people" (p. 307). Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007) further emphasized that in contemporary commercial society, consumers reside in a special social setting, which places them in a culture replete with social identities. As

evidenced by McAlexander et al. (2002), marketing activities intended to enhance customer-centered relationships resulted in enhanced sense of community among consumers and positive perceptions of the brand. Other scholars have reported that higher levels of engagement in brand communities resulted in enhanced consumer satisfaction, emotional bonding, and commitment (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) termed the construct (i.e., brand community) as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." Keller (2008) explained the influence of brand communities on like-minded consumers this way:

Identification with a brand community may reflect an important social phenomenon in which customers feel kinship or affiliation with other people associated with the brand (e.g., athlete brand), whether fellow brand users or customers, or employees or representatives of the company. (p. 72)

These human associations (i.e., brand communities) unified by established communal patterns, provide substantial benefits to brand consumers and stakeholders alike (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) described in detail the implications of communal affiliation in the context of brand consumption:

Community is arguably the fundamental social relationship, having its roots in the familial relationship often used to define relationship marketing...it provides a good template to overlay the relationship between the company/brand (e.g., athlete brand) and those who consume...Deprived of their social connections, the value of these brands to consumers would certainly be diminished...[Therefore], brand communities carry out important functions on behalf of the brand (e.g., athlete brand), such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing

assistance...Communities exert pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand. (p. 427)

This effect of brand communities manifests itself by encouraging brand (e.g., athlete brand) consumers to form like-minded collectives. For example, Apple owners organize into brand communities to share brand experiences and special events with fellow users, and more importantly engage in community service (Keller, 2008). In a similar way, sport entities (e.g., teams) can increase permanence by promoting group experiences within brand communities (Underwood et al., 2001). In fact, this inclination to associate with far-reaching success of professional athletes (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) should be leveraged by sport organizations to foster shared fan experience and enhance commitment and affinity among brand consumers (Mullin et al., 2014).

This fanaticism among consumers of human brands (e.g., athletes and celebrities) due to their fascination with professional athletes' success attracts prospective members to brand communities wherein additional points of attachment such as geographic, ethnic, gender, and organizational identities affirm values that are of critical importance to these consumers (Heere & James, 2007). The members of the brand community relate to the athlete brand through a vertical structure emphasizing the members' desire to achieve the athlete's status. What starts as mere fandom, develops into shared identities and interpersonal relationships between members within the collective. An exploration of this dependence on communal consumption of athlete brands was the primary aim of the present dissertation.

Background, Objectives, and Research Questions

Scholars have built a solid conceptual foundation for the commonalities, dimensions, practices, and derived values observed in brand communities. For example, using face-to-face

and computer-mediated domains, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) observed three common markers of communities including consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and sense of moral responsibility. The authors offered evidence for not only the details of brand communities, but also rewards derived from brand consumption and affiliation to fellow members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) customer-customer-brand model was augmented by the consumer-centric construct of brand community proposed by McAlexander and colleagues (2002) who applied a customer-oriented approach to demonstrate that the value of brand community association resides in shared customer experience as opposed to the sole process of brand consumption. Structures of multiple brand community practices catalogued by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009), demonstrate marketers delivering value to consumers and enhancing consumer brand engagement to ultimately foster modes of consumption. The authors posited that using interacting brand-centered community practices increases consumer engagement and attachment to the focal brand (Schau et al., 2009).

Although marketing practitioners and academicians benefit from the abundance of studies concerning brand community, the brand community literature is rather fragmented in the sport management field. Heere and James (2007) have urged that sport fans should be perceived as community members rather than consumers. The scholars argued that extrinsic sources of identification (e.g., demographic and membership organizations) influence an individual's perception of their identification with a sport team (Heere & James, 2007). Recognizing the fact that a sport team embodies a community, replete with external identities, Heere and James (2007) contended that:

The success of college sports in the United States, the success of teams that are still regarded as teams of the city (e.g., Cubs, Red Sox), and the popularity of national soccer

team games illustrate the logic of the notion that a sports team is much more than just another entertainment service and that fans are more than just consumers...Identifying (the strength of) these external groups and integrating this concept into their strategic planning could provide sports teams with a fan base that is less likely to abandon them after three straight losses or the departure of a star player. (p. 332)

The sense of connection with fellow sport brand consumers reveals common interests and enthusiasm, which ultimately leads to increased brand equity for an organization (e.g., team) and unique group experiences among fans (Underwood et al., 2001). In fact, managers of sport teams unanimously agree on the importance of group experience, rituals, and traditions in effective brand promotion initiatives (Grant et al., 2011). Despite acknowledging the importance of the group experience, marketing practitioners continue to fixate on the direct connection to the brand (Grant et al., 2011). Developing a group experience approach to branding can potentially create a multifaceted emotional attachment to the brand which enhances the consumer experience and enriches the sponsors' targeting and permanence.

Considering professional athletes' profound influence on sport consumers and larger social ideologies coupled with the paramount importance of group experiences among like-minded consumers, a deep understanding of how these athlete brand collectives form and behave is equally important for sport marketing scholars and practitioners alike. Previous research concerning athletes as brands suggested that fans recognize athletes' athleticism, personal interactions, and philanthropic actions and in turn make connections with their personal brand image (Arai et al., 2014; Guest & Cox, 2009; Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2018). However, the influence of the athlete brand on the community of like-minded individuals from the perspective of the sport consumer remains unclear. Furthermore, given the ability of brand

communities to create multifaceted consumer benefits and enhance brand consumption through meaningful group experiences (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009; Underwood et al., 2001), the mechanisms that result in these positive outcomes in athlete brand communities require further study. As previously stated, several studies investigated these two constructs (i.e., athletes as brands and brand communities) independently. However, the athlete brand community phenomenon in its own right, has not received adequate scholarly attention. Specifically, there is no reliable scholarly evidence regarding development and structure of communities around an athlete brand. Furthermore, no research to date has analyzed specific processes and practices that activate shared emotional experiences among athlete brand consumers. Therefore, the present dissertation attempted to fill this evident gap in the literature. My objective was to offer a holistic understanding of how tight-knit communities of like-minded consumers function and prosper in the context of athletes as focal brands. To that end, the following research questions guided my dissertation:

RQ₁: How do prospective members assimilate into athlete-centered brand communities?

RQ₂: How do athlete brand communities develop shared cultures?

RQ₃: What are the emotional outcomes of shared consumption within athlete brand communities?

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following chapter contains an analysis of the literature concerning brand equity, brand knowledge, brand personality, athlete branding, corporate social responsibility, role modelling, social identity theory, community, and brand community.

Brand Equity

Branded products instill a sense of security in the mind of consumers. The origins of methods of brand identification can be traced back more than 70 years. Maynard and Beckman (1946) hypothesized that the brand name, the trademark or trade character, and trade name or firm style validated consumers' identification of certain articles. Furthermore, brands help consumers secure successive supplies of desirable products, and conversely they are of equal aid in avoiding the repurchase of those which are unsatisfactory (Aaker, 2012; Maynard & Beckman, 1946). Since the original introduction of the concept, the American Marketing Association expanded the definition of a brand to a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition." Restated, companies employ various combinations of brand elements to make their products and services stand out in a crowded market sphere.

Every time a marketer develops a new product name or a unique symbol for a new offering, they have designed a brand (Keller, 2002; Keller, 2008). Keller (1993) referred to these individual elements as brand identities. From a corporate perspective, one of the most significant advantages is brand name which carries distinct intangible assets, creates market permanence, and differentiates a business from its competitors (Aaker, 1991). Expanding on the criteria related to how consumers make brand choices and form preferences for specific design of brand

elements, Keller (1998) urged to consider the following components: memorability, meaningfulness, aesthetic appeal, transferability both within and across product categories as well as across geographical and cultural boundaries and market segments, adaptability and flexibility over time, and legal and competitive protectability and defensibility. These components (e.g., brand name, signs, and unique symbols) ultimately result in formation of brand equity, “a set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand’s name and symbol that adds (subtracts) to the value provided by a product or service to the firm and/or firm’s customers” (Aaker, 1991; 1996, p. 7-8).

Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000) termed brand equity as “the difference in consumer choice between focal branded product and an unbranded product given the same level of product features” (p. 196). Aaker (1991; 1996) discerned the following facets related to brand equity: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand assets. Perceived quality, which is viewed as consumers’ perception of product excellence and superiority, is especially important considering the subjective nature of consumer purchasing choices (Yoo et al., 2000; Zeithaml, 1988). Termed by Oliver (1997, p. 392) as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior,” loyalty leads to favorable consumer perceptions and prevents switching to a competing brand, which results in increased brand equity (Grover & Srinivasan, 1992). Keller (2002) argued that brand equity can create desired marketing outcomes due to a unique brand name and service identified by a brand. Restated, brand equity is the incremental value of various symbols added to a specific product (Farquhar, 1990).

Past literature explored the relationships between marketing mix components and brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000). The scholars proposed a conceptual framework for marketing efforts and their influence on the dimensions of brand equity (i.e., perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand associations, and awareness) (Yoo et al., 2000). The authors found that these elements were positively related to brand equity and the value derived from establishing a distinct brand name (Yoo et al., 2000). Berry (2000) proposed a service-brand equity model. The scholar believed that the customer experience with a company and quality of service significantly influenced the meaning of a brand and equity for products (Berry, 2000). Consumers of a brand tend to emotionally connect with brands; therefore, one of marketers' main responsibilities is to cultivate this relationship and enhance closeness, affection, and trust associated with a certain brand (Berry, 2000). The ultimate goal is to create a customer-brand relationship, in which the audience starts to internalize the brand and its aura. However, companies must make brand value a significant part of all employee communication. With regard to brand communication strategy within organizations, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) suggested that:

Internalizing the brand involves explaining and selling the brand to employees. It involves sharing with employees the research and strategy behind the presented brand. It involves creative communication of the brand to employees. It involves training employees in brand-strengthening behaviors. It involves rewarding and celebrating employees whose actions support the brand. Most of all, internalizing the brand involves involving employees in the care and nurturing of the brand...Employees will not feel part nor act out the brand unless they understand it and believe it. Marketers need to verbalize and visualize the brand for employees, so that employees will verbalize and visualize the

brand for customers. Brand internalization must be an ongoing process, just as brand building is an ongoing process with customers. (p. 129)

It is evident that the communication of brand meaning and value to companies' target audience increases brand equity, the component crucial in successful strategic brand management (Aaker, 1991; 1996; Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993; Keller, 2008).

Sport management literature confirms that sport organizations that are able to develop strong brand equity, can leverage this advantage to develop market permanence, expand on points of product and service differentiation, and create a memorable image (Mullin et al., 2014; Shank, 2001). Shank (2001) posited that sport consumers that perceive their brand as one with strong equity are more inclined to involve in repeat product purchasing patterns. Intricate customer relationship initiatives allow sport organizations to better serve their key target demographics which results in enhanced brand equity and incremental revenue (Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 2001). Gladden et al. (2001) suggested using integration strategies, strategic alliances, and mergers for sport organizations to maintain strategic asset acquisition and sustain market stability. For example, the National Basketball Association's partnership with SFX indicates the league's inclination to diversify its offerings and involve in innovative promotional initiatives (see Gladden et al., 2001). Gladden and colleagues (2001) asserted that:

The acquisition of assets, via integration, strategic alliances, and mergers, will be a primary tool utilized by sport managers to enhance the equity associated with their teams. While these efforts are not commonplace yet, they will be necessary if team owners hope to continue realizing appreciation in the values of their franchise...In acquiring additional assets, sport managers will need to overcome problems associated with the integration of inventories, personnel, and brand imagery. (p. 307)

Gladden, Milne, and Sutton (1998) developed a conceptual framework for brand equity in the context of sports. The scholars expanded on Aaker's (1991) conceptual framework, which outlined four main components related to brand equity (i.e., brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations (Gladden et al., 1998). The following dimensions of brand attributes were offered by Feldwick (1996) and Chernatony and McDonald (2003): awareness, image, perceived quality, perceived value, personality, and organizational associations. In terms of perceived quality, some sport management scholars argued that it depends on "how well a team achieves preconceived expectations for wins and progression into postseason play" (Gladden et al., 1998, p. 2). Perceived quality represents an extremely important element considering the risks of negative brand associations and consequent implications for a branded product (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Keller, 2002). It is likely for a sport organization (e.g., a team) to have poor perception of quality if a team experiences a mediocre season in terms of on-field performance (Gladden et al., 1998).

Brand awareness, which is referred to as consumers' ability to recognize a brand, is the second component of the proposed brand equity model (Gladden et al., 1998; Keller, 1993). The scholars explained that "In the sport setting, brand awareness refers to the familiarity of the sport consumer with a particular team" (Gladden et al., 1998, p. 2). Others contended that brand awareness should be the starting point for marketers attempting to build strong brand equity (e.g., Aaker, 1991). The next component (i.e., brand associations) represents the intangible advantage of brand equity (Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Shocker, Srivastava, & Ruekert, 1994; Bridges, 1992). Gladden et al. (1998) argued that in the sport setting, the brand associations element would be related to connection with a certain sport organization (e.g., a team) or emotions triggered by attending a game or event. The last facet that contributes to brand equity is

loyalty, which is termed as a brand's ability to maintain a consistent client base (Aaker, 1991). The experiential nature of sport presents a set of challenges in terms of delivering intangible benefits to ultimately enhance consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions (Gladden et al., 1998; Mullin et al., 2014). It is instrumental for marketers to develop reliable revenue streams in order to ensure profitability and secure loyal customer base (Boone, Kochunny, & Wilkins, 1995). Gladden et al.'s (1998) conceptual framework for brand equity in the college sport setting is presented below:

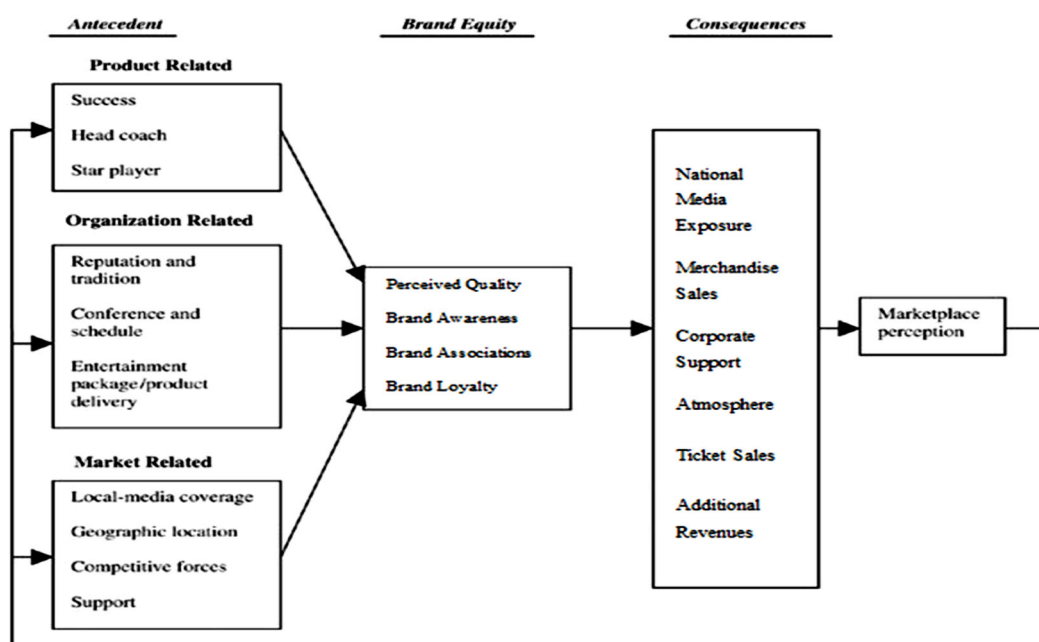


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of brand equity in college athletics (Gladden et al., 1998)

In terms of specific antecedents of brand equity, Gladden and colleagues (1998) provided the following elements: team-related antecedents (i.e., success, head coach, star player), university-related antecedents (i.e., reputation and tradition, conference and schedule, entertainment package/product delivery), and market-related antecedents (i.e., local/regional media arrangements, geographic location, competitive forces, and support).

Success in the sport setting revolves around the basking-in-reflected-glory (BIRG) theory according to which individuals tend to relate to people who are successful (Cialdini et al., 1976). People are inclined to think that they share success with those who they affiliate with; however, these individuals make no contributions to that party's accomplishments (Cialdini et al., 1976). A series of experiments conducted with students pointed to a noticeable tendency to connect with their school's football program only after they had achieved success (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Cialdini and colleagues (1976) elaborated on the findings as follows:

A striking aspect of the phenomenon is that subjects sought to proclaim their affiliation with a successful source even when they in no way caused the source's success. This component of the effect suggests a mediator consistent with balance theory. It is our contention that people make known their noninstrumental connections with positive sources because they understand that observers to these connections tend to evaluate connected objects similarly. It appears that the tendency to BIRG is an attempt to secure esteem from those who can perceive the connection. (p. 374)

When applied to the sport context, BIRG may manifest itself in increased ticket sales for a sport organization, donations, merchandise sales, and television ratings (Gladden et al., 1998).

Furthermore, BIRG was utilized as a way to explain the behavior of temporary consumers of sport and their motivations, to classify the typology of sport consumers (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999).

According to Gladden et al. (1998), a coach can have an immediate impact on a sport organization's (i.e., college team) brand equity. This effect is mainly caused by head coaches' visibility and media presence (Katz, 1994). The image of a head coach influences the image of the organization they are associated with; therefore, successful coaches play an important role in

building strong brand equity and increase visibility of sport teams (Gladden et al., 1998). A star player (i.e., athlete brand) can have a significant impact on performance and perception of sport organizations. Star players can drive ticket and merchandise sales which in turn has a significant contribution to long-term brand equity of college teams (Farrell, 1984; Gladden et al., 1998). In terms of university antecedents, Gladden et al. (1998) outlined the following reputation-related components: commitment from the university hierarchy, the perception of academic rigor, and a record of integrity in the management of the athletic program. The authors specifically emphasized the importance of integrity and the influence it may have on development of strong brand equity and organizational image (Gladden et al., 1998). The scholars believed an affiliation with a particular athletic conference could impact brand equity of a college program which could lead to increased ticket sales and positive atmosphere at games (Gladden et al., 1998).

Entertainment value is of critical importance to consumers' interest and attraction to sport (Sloan, 1979). Gladden et al. (1998, p. 7) contended that "Marching bands, stadium music, tailgating (i.e., entertainment outside of the stadium before the game), and other traditional activities may all serve to enhance the overall experience of attending." Local and regional media arrangements, geographic location, competitive forces, and support represent the market-related antecedents (Gladden et al., 1998). Media exposure can improve followers' experience after a sporting event (Smith, 1995). Local and regional media can also help marketers with reaching a wider pool of sport consumers (Gladden et al., 1998). Specific market locations may impact consumer preferences and thereby influence attendance and identification (Gladden et al., 1998; Kapferer, 1992). In a like manner, the level of competition in certain markets could significantly influence brand equity of sport organizations (e.g., university athletics); therefore, college teams that share athletic fields with more successful programs may struggle to generate

ticket sales and sponsorship support due to an inability of the athletic department to differentiate their brand based on unique game atmosphere (Gladden et al., 1998). Gladden et al. (1998) classified the support facet into five categories:

Table 1. Subgroups of “support” dimension (Gladden et al., 1998)

-
1. Student presence greatly enhances the atmosphere at any college athletic event. The extent of the support is moderated by the degree to which the students are commuters or residents and the allocation of tickets to students in the face of demand from boosters.
 2. Alumnae/i that return for home games generally comprise the core financial support for the college athletic team. Alumnae/i typically make booster club donations to receive priority seating.
 3. Faculty/staff may constitute a significant portion of the attending audience. However, it is unclear as to the extent to which this group contributes to brand equity.
 4. Other local supporters, mainly non-alumnae/i living in nearby communities, often adopt a university’s athletic team as if it were their own alma mater and provide financial support.
 5. Media supporters attend infrequently (mainly due to distance), but follow a particular team through the various forms of media. While this group does not purchase tickets, they may still contribute to equity by purchasing merchandise with the team’s logo, making booster club donations, or subscribing to publications. (p. 8-9)
-

The scholars believe that stronger brand equity will result in national media exposure, increased merchandise sales, better support from corporate partners, enhanced game atmosphere, and incremental ticket sales (Gladden et al., 1998).

From customers' perspective, the contrast of reactions to branded products in comparison to their unnamed counterparts is what Keller (1993) recognized as customer-based brand equity. The scholar labeled the concept as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 8). A framework for brand equity in the context of spectator sports was proposed by Ross (2006). This framework is demonstrated in Figure 2.

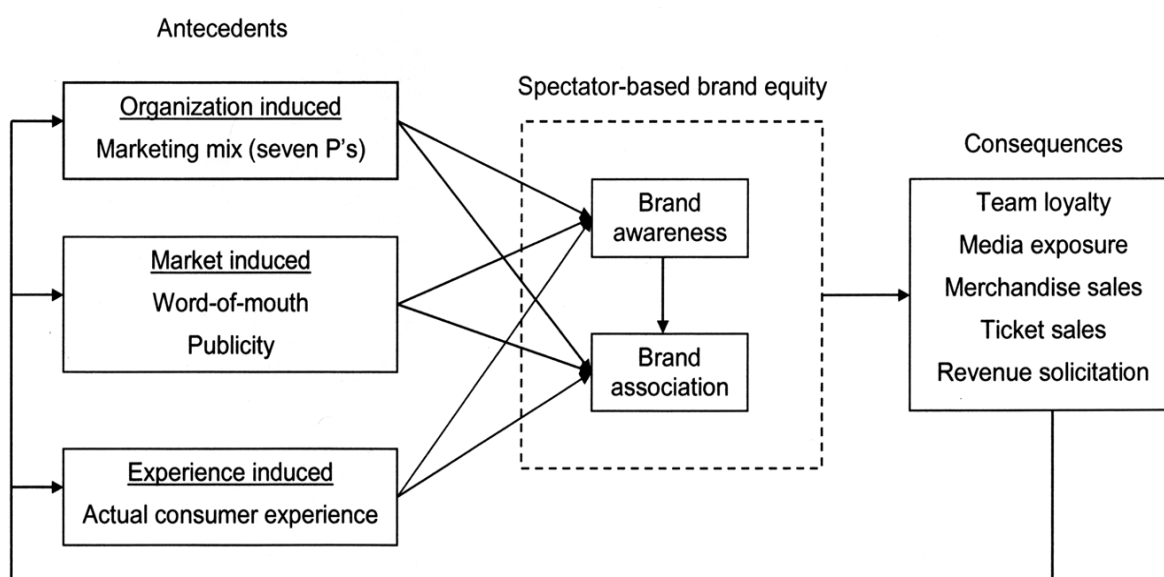


Figure 2. Framework for spectator-based brand equity (Ross, 2006)

According to Ross (2006), the proposed model accounts for the unique elements characteristic of spectator sport. The scholar highlighted three main antecedents for spectator-based brand equity including organization-induced, market-induced, and experience-induced antecedents (Ross, 2006). Ross (2006) termed organization-induced antecedents as "elements that are directly produced by the organization and therefore are those factors that can be controlled by the management" (p. 28). Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication often controls how consumers perceive and internalize information about sport organizations (Berry, 2000; Ross, 2006). Ross

(2006) claimed that publicity is equally important to development of brand awareness. Various outlets (e.g., television, magazines, newspapers, etc.) can be utilized to increase publicity and solidify brand associations (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). The last category is experience-induced antecedents, which Ross (2006) viewed as consumer experience based on quality of service. In fact, “Given that spectator sport is a service product and, therefore, the core product (i.e., the game or event) is an intangible, subjective and unpredictable occurrence, customer experience will strongly influence the brand associations held by that customer” (Ross, 2006, p. 29).

Furthermore, organizations that are able to provide quality service put themselves in a better position in terms of building loyal clientele (Aaker, 1996). On the other hand, if consumers hold negative associations about a service, they will be much less likely to invest in that service (Ross, 2006). These antecedents are associated with brand awareness and brand associations, the components critical in brand evaluation and choices among potential consumers (Ross, 2006). In terms of the benefits derived from strong spectator-based brand equity, Ross (2006) emphasized elements such as team loyalty, increased media exposure, merchandise sales, ticket sales, and revenue solicitation advantages.

Ross, James, and Vargas (2006) developed the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) to help sport management professionals with their efforts to develop and communicate favorable brand associations to target demographics. Through respondents’ associations, the analysis revealed 11 dimensions related to professional sport team associations including nonplayer personnel, team success, team history, stadium community, team play characteristics, brand mark, commitment, organizational attributes, concessions, social interaction, and rivalry (Ross et al., 2006). Expanding on the previous research, Ross, Bang, and Lee (2007) examined the applicability of the TBAS in the context of intercollegiate ice hockey. The results obtained from

an intercollegiate hockey sample validated the TBAS instrument (Ross et al., 2007) and demonstrated further the implications of the proposed conceptualization for various settings (e.g., intercollegiate sport).

To address issues related to market segmentation and strategic brand management, Ross (2007) utilized cluster analysis to categorize professional sport consumers (i.e., NBA fans) using the brand association criterion. Various perceptions of the sport brand allowed for a segmentation of participants into two distinct groups (Ross, 2007). The scholar contended that sport consumers classified into smaller market segments based on specific associations attached to a sport brand (Ross, 2007). With respect to value this research, Ross (2007, p. 19) asserted that “this analysis allows managers to discover ways in which the consumer thinks about the market” and added that “a general understanding of consumer perceptions is critical to the success of an organization.” Ross, Russell, and Bang (2008) tested the spectator-based brand equity model discussed earlier. The scholars utilized basketball consumers to support the proposed framework. Ross’s (2006) model was supported empirically, outlining a myriad of implications for the sport management field. Specifically, this study provided a clearer understanding of how sport marketers can enhance their existing brand equity management practices and build reliable strategies for brand awareness (Ross et al., 2008).

Moreover, marketing managers can now utilize this model to improve perceptions of their organizations within local communities and thereby engage more fans and enhance overall consumer experience (Ross et al., 2008). Strategic management of brand associations can lead marketing practitioners to better brand building decisions. For example, marketers can leverage success to enhance the team’s image. To that end, Ross et al. (2008, p. 334) emphasized that “Given that the performance of the team has an impact; managers should attempt to influence the

success rate of the team as much as possible.” This can be accomplished by recruiting talented players, hiring best coaches, and building modern training facilities and stadiums (Ross et al., 2008). The scholars also suggested that industry practitioners must concentrate their efforts on cultivation of the psychological connection sport consumers have with sport brands, considering this could in turn result in better brand recognition and value (Ross et al., 2008). Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, and Maroco (2013) assessed brand equity in the professional soccer setting. This research provided another layer of theory concerning brand equity. While the study confirmed an acceptable fit of the spectator-based model, the scholars contended that brand equity could be environmentally sensitive due to the differences related to international settings and consequent consumer perceptions (see Biscaia et al., 2013). Ultimately the contributions of this research lie in furthering strategic brand management practices and sport consumer experience (Biscaia et al., 2013; Mullin et al., 2014).

As mentioned by Keller (1993), greater competition forces marketers to develop effective marketing tactics to build strong customer-based equity. To that end, Blattberg and Deighton (1996) provided the following customer equity maximization guidelines:

1. Invest in highest-value customers first.
2. Transform product management into customer management.
3. Consider how add-on sales and cross-selling can increase customer equity.
4. Look for ways to reduce acquisition costs.
5. Track customer equity gains and losses against marketing programs.
6. Relate branding to customer equity.
7. Monitor the intrinsic retainability of your customers.

8. Consider writing separate marketing plans—or even building two marketing organizations—for acquisition and retention efforts. (p. 140-144)

It is apparent that brand equity revolves around consumers' beliefs and attitudes toward branded products and services. These brand attitudes are particularly intriguing, considering the unstable nature of consumer perceptions and preferences as they could influence customer lifetime value, the element instrumental in successful branding strategies and customer loyalty (Keller 1993; Leone, Rao, Keller, Luo, McAlister, & Srivastava, 2006). Kumar (2006) highlighted the following customer lifetime value management strategies (as cited in Leone et al., 2006, p. 129):

1. Knowing your customers well enough to deliver superior value while maximizing profitability for the firm.
2. Adopting a forward-looking metric such as the CLV for superior decision making and customer management strategies. These strategies are aimed at maximizing customer lifetime value.
3. Selecting the high- and medium-CLV customers for future targeting.
4. Allocating the optimal marketing budget across different customers/distributors based on their “future” revenue potential.
5. Selling the right product to the right customer at the right time.
6. Balancing acquisition resources and retention resources and focusing on the optimal spend.
7. Minimizing churn of your high-value customers/distributors.
8. Encouraging single channel customers to become multichannel customers.

Keller (1993) explained that in order for brand equity to occur, a customer must be familiar with a brand and hold favorable, strong, and unique associations in memory. Specifically, the author

hypothesized that the most valuable asset, from a firm's perspective and which could be acquired by implementing viable marketing tactics, is "the knowledge that has been created about the brand in consumers' minds" (Keller, 1993, p. 2). To put it another way, brand knowledge is the spectrum of associations that arise in the minds of consumers following the exposure to an element of the marketing mix (Keller, 1993). This brand-related knowledge is critical for marketers' understanding of how various consumer segments respond to marketing activity.

Brand Knowledge

Consumers' knowledge about a brand results in a difference of purchasing patterns (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2002). Therefore, brand knowledge can serve as an instrument which marketers utilize to manipulate consumer behavior through the mechanisms of awareness and distinct brand associations. Brand awareness, which consists of brand recognition and brand recall, revolves around the idea of consumers' ability to recognize a brand under certain conditions (Keller, 2008; Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Keller (1993) cogently explained that "brand recognition relates to consumers' ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when given the brand as a cue" (p. 3). Put differently, it is assumed that a consumer will discern a brand following prior exposure. Consumers' ability to identify a certain brand name when given a specific category is referred to as brand recall (Keller, 1993). Keller (2008) further explains that brand recall typically occurs at the point of purchase, indicating a consumer's ability to retrieve a brand name from memory. Keller's (1993) dimensions of brand knowledge are portrayed in Figure 3.

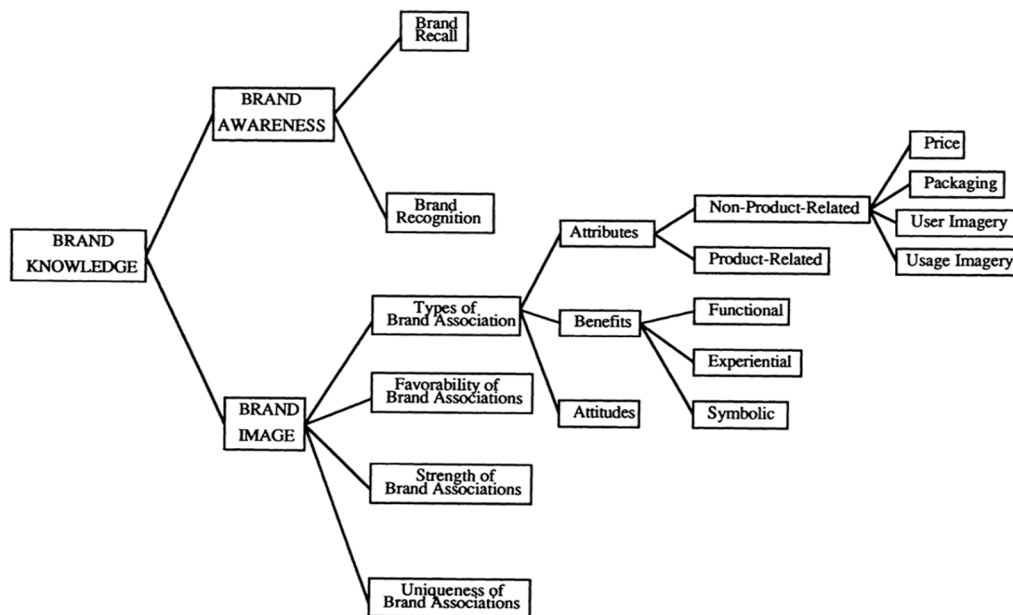


Figure 3. Dimensions of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993)

Brand image is recognized as an array of perceptions consumers hold toward a brand (Evans & Berman, 1992). The favorability, strength, and uniqueness of brand-related associations guide consumer decisions in a crowded market space (Keller, 1993). Describing the particularities of brand associations, Keller (1993) contended that these beliefs take three different forms. To be specific, attributes essentially detail characteristics of a product or service (Keller, 1993). The scholar further breaks down the category and compares non-product-related to product-related attributes (Keller, 1993).

Benefits, which are defined as “personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the product or service” break into functional, experiential, and symbolic, depending on the consumption advantage sought by consumers (Keller, 1993). The author termed functional benefits as intrinsic advantages of an offering (e.g., product or service) intended to satisfy the needs of consumers (Keller, 1993). Experiential benefits were referred to as various emotional experiences managed by marketers to “satisfy experiential needs such as sensory pleasure, variety, and cognitive stimulation” (Keller, 1993, p. 4). The scholar defined extrinsic advantages

of a product (e.g., social approval, personal expression, or outer-directed self-esteem) as symbolic benefits (Keller, 1993).

Through brand assessment, consumers are able to form powerful attitudes which in turn induce purchasing decisions among these consumers (Keller, 1993; Wilkie, 1986). The favorability of brand associations (i.e., attributes that ignite positive brand judgements) may differ depending on how consumers perceive a branded product (Keller, 1993). Consumers' assessment of the importance of a product is of critical value in this context, because "consumers are unlikely to view an attribute or benefit as very good or bad if they do not also consider it to be very important" (Keller, 1993, p. 5). Keller (1993) argued that strength of brand associations plays an important role in consumer identification with a particular brand. The strength of brand associations can be affected by how consumers receive and maintain the information about a brand (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) detailed the following with respect to the strength of brand associations:

Strength is a function of both the amount or quantity of processing the information receives at encoding (i.e., how much a person thinks about the information) and the nature or quality of the processing the information receives at encoding (i.e., the manner in which a person thinks about the information). (p. 5)

The strength of associations, in turn, could positively influence the likelihood that consumers will retrieve the information about the brand when given a distinct brand reference (Keller, 1993). It is also important to take into consideration the context, in which a specific brand is consumed. The differences, in terms of brand positioning that are controlled by marketers and ultimately impact the uniqueness of brand associations, will trigger the desired consumer response (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993, p. 6) noted specifically that "These differences may be

communicated explicitly by making direct comparisons with competitors or may be highlighted implicitly without stating a competitive point of reference.” Moreover, product-related attributes, functional benefits, and other associations could eventually influence the differences in terms of brand perception (Keller, 1993). The three-step mechanism for consumer preference for strong brands was described by Keller (2002) this way:

- (1) attention and learning, that is, the building of brand knowledge structures;
- (2) interpretation and evaluation of marketing information or brand alternatives, that is, the use of brand knowledge; and
- (3) mechanisms that are thought to affect the actual choice process, that is, the application of brand knowledge. (p. 479).

With the purpose of establishing categories of consumer associations in the context of sport, Gladden and Funk (2002) used Keller’s (1993) conceptual framework and identified 16 dimensions that underlie sport brand associations, ultimately developing the Team Association Model. The identified sport team brand associations constructs included attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Gladden & Funk, 2002). These facets break into the following dimensions: attributes (i.e., success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product delivery, and tradition), benefits (i.e., identification, nostalgia, pride in place, escape, and peer group acceptance), and attitudes (i.e., importance, knowledge, and affect). While other facets of team brand associations may exist, this research endeavor made a significant contribution in terms of outlining the categories of brand associations that may be present in the team sport setting (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In all, given the role the perceived value by consumers plays in overall brand equity, this endeavor made a significant contribution to our understanding of the types of associations that make consumers recognize a brand in the team sport setting.

Brand Personality

Brand personality is referred to as “the human characteristics or traits that can be attributed to a brand” (Keller, 2002, p. 159). These qualities allow consumers to express their personal identities (Belk, 1988). Aaker (1997) termed the construct as a combination of human traits that represent a brand. Consumers’ perceptions of a brand and how a brand is promoted may influence how these personality-related traits are received and in turn internalized by consumers (Keller, 2002). The relationship between brands and people is largely depended on brand personality characteristics, which in turn allows businesses to differentiate themselves from competitors by controlling consumer spending choices (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Punyatoya, 2011). For example, consumers may perceive the Nike brand as innovative, stylish, and athletic which consequently could trigger favorable associations, communicating the unique personality of Nike (see Keller, 2002).

Furthermore, people form meaningful relationships with their brands, the process that resembles interpersonal relationships (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier, 1998). More importantly, this brand identification was found to make consumers more immune to negative brand transgressions and strengthen brand relationships and consequent repurchase intentions (Lin & Sung, 2014). Keller (2002) noted that while the detailed usage of imagery could affect brand personality, it is important to consider the context in which consumers interact with a brand. Additionally, user imagery is often delivered by advertising; however, consumers may prioritize product performance attributes and overlook imagery-related characteristics (Keller, 2002). Specific characteristics related to brand personification and consumers’ expression through a brand have drawn much scholarly attention (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

Consumers relate to certain brands (e.g., celebrities) (Rook, 1985) and adopt various personality traits including anthropomorphization, personification, and imagery (see Aaker, 1997). Promotional initiatives and advertisement allow marketers to communicate distinct brand personality traits. To illustrate, Pendergrast (1993) explained that Coca-Cola resonates with consumers as an all-American and real brand, which creates a point of differentiation from competing brands in the same category (e.g., Pepsi) (Plummer, 1985). Furthermore, the existing literature contends that an increased congruity between human traits and certain characteristics of a brand has a positive effect on brand preference and consumers' purchasing behavior (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

Aaker (1997) analyzed various personality traits and proposed a brand personality framework. The scholar investigated 37 brands and 114 personality traits, identifying five distinct brand personality dimensions (Aaker, 1997). Specifically, these dimensions include sincerity (e.g., down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful), excitement (e.g., daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date), competence (e.g., reliable, intelligent, and successful), sophistication (e.g., upper class and charming), and ruggedness (e.g., outdoorsy and tough) (Aaker, 1997). The author admitted that these brand personality traits must be utilized with caution, considering the context in which a brand is consumed and intricacies related to consumer brand preferences (Aaker, 1997). The consumer response to a particular branding campaign triggers what Keller (2002) referred to as brand feelings. Highlighted in Keller (2002), below are the six types of brand-building feelings (Kahle, Poulos, & Sukhdial, 1988):

Table 2. Types of brand-building feelings (Kahle et al., 1988)

-
1. Warmth: soothing types of feelings; the brand makes consumers feel a sense of calm or peacefulness. Consumers may feel sentimental, warmhearted, or affectionate about the brand.
 2. Fun: upbeat types of feelings; the brand makes consumers feel amused, lighthearted, joyous, playful, cheerful, and so on.
 3. Excitement: a different form of upbeat feeling; the brand makes consumers feel energized and feel that they are experiencing something special. Brands that evoke feelings of excitement may result in consumers feeling a sense of elation, of “being alive,” or being cool, sexy, and so on.
 4. Security: the brand produces a feeling of safety, comfort and self-assurance. As a result of the brand, consumers do not experience worry or concerns that they might have otherwise felt.
 5. Social approval: the brand results in consumers having positive feelings about the reactions of others; that is, consumers feel that others look favorably on their appearance, behavior, and so on. This approval may be a result of direct acknowledgement of the consumer’s use of the brand by others or may be less overt and a result of attribution of product use to consumers.
 6. Self-respect: the brand makes consumers feel better about themselves; consumers feel a sense of pride, accomplishment, or fulfillment. (p. 90)
-

Braunstein and Ross (2010) utilized prior conceptualizations concerning brand personality to analyze and introduce a scale that would account for special characteristics of professional sport

brands. The scholars confirmed that the success, sophistication, sincerity, rugged, community-driven, and classic factors (i.e., traits) served as a foundation for future scholarly work (Braunstein & Ross, 2010). The scholars admitted that the study yielded mixed results. Specifically, while the data represented a good fit for the model, the reliability and validity of the brand personality in sport scale did not support the overall usefulness of the instrument (Braunstein & Ross, 2010). Despite the insufficiency of the results, this research provided a sound foundation for brand personality scholars in the sport management field. Schade, Piehler, and Burmann (2014) expanded on the Braunstein and Ross's (2010) work and developed a brand personality scale for the professional sport club setting. The dimensions of the Schade et al.'s (2014) scale included extraversion (i.e., traditional, faithful, sociable, family-oriented, humorous, and cheerful), rebellious (i.e., rebellious, bold, and alternative), open-mindedness (i.e., open-minded, tolerant, sophisticated, and social responsible), and conscientiousness (i.e., hard-working, fighting spirit, diligent, and tough).

Carlson, Donovan, and Cumiskey (2009) analyzed brand personality and its impact on identification in the context of a collegiate basketball team. The data revealed that sport consumers related to a sport team due to distinct personalities possessed by that program (Carlson et al., 2009). Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Salmi (2016) studied a Finnish hockey team to further analyze the team's personality characteristics, consumers' identification, and the influence of the length of relationship on consumer loyalty. The data supported the mediating role of team identification in brand personality and its effect on attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). The authors found that brand personality had a stronger impact for newer fans and their attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). In addition to validation of the existing research on brand personality (Tsiotsou, 2012), Mitsis and Leckie

(2016) extended prior scholarly work by applying the sport team brand personality scale to the individual athlete setting. Further, the researchers assessed predictability of the athlete brand personality scale on the role model construct (Mitsis & Leckie, 2016). This study solidified our overall understanding of the brand personality construct and how different facets associated with an athlete (i.e., competitiveness, morality, and authenticity) can influence an athlete's persona as a role model.

Carlson and Donovan (2013) used professional athletes (i.e., focal brands) to study brand personality attributes outlined in Carlson et al. (2009). This research expanded on the endeavors of Aaker (1997) and Thomson (2006) to justify the application of brand personality characteristics in the context of athletes. This scholarly work is particularly intriguing considering the contributions to the sport-related identification (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Donovan, Janda, & Suh, 2006; Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011) through athlete identification. Athlete prestige and distinctiveness were found to influence identification with an athlete (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Furthermore, consumers' identification with an athlete predicted an emotional connection with an athlete's team, purchasing behavior, and an athlete's team viewership patterns (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

Athlete Branding

There is a general consensus that superstar athletes should be viewed as brands. Celebrity athletes (e.g., LeBron James, David Beckham, and Roger Federer) are capable of impacting sales of companies they endorse (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Rojek (2006) asserted that "Sports celebrities like David Beckham, Roy Keane, Michael Jordan and the Williams sisters are aware of their advertising and merchandising potential as brands and endeavor to legally codify their

image rights” (p. 684). Distinct athletic ability exhibited by professional athletes coupled with their unique access to a wider target audience allows these individuals to promote personal brands beyond the playing field. It has become exceedingly important for sports agencies to promote professional athletes and maximize their earning potential (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018; Mullin et al., 2014). Importantly, it has been emphasized that marketing a sport entity such as a professional athlete entails selling their personal brand image (Cordiner, 2001). Indeed, Gladden and Funk (2001) reported that a unique brand image can be developed around a superstar athlete. Mullin et al. (2014) reiterated that “player agents should view the players they represent as brands and attempt to develop strong brand associations with their clients” (p. 174). In a similar manner, Thomson (2006) argued that celebrities (e.g., professional athletes) can be professionally managed due to their ability to create relatable and memorable brand associations.

An athlete brand is referred to as a public persona of a professional athlete who differentiates his or her image based on unique consumer associations connected to their brand (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018). There are two different ways professional athletes can build brand image. First, athletes can create memorable and distinct brand associations based on athletic performances, style of play, and various signature moves (Mullin et al., 2014). An alternative way of developing strong athlete brand perceptions is to promote an athlete’s off-the-court persona (Mullin et al., 2014). Both approaches are utilized by athlete brand managers to solidify an athlete’s image and in turn strengthen their revenue streams (Arai et al., 2014; Mullin et al., 2014).

Celebrity athletes are recognized based on the special characteristics related to their appearance, similar to traditional brands. For example, David Beckham is considered someone,

who exemplifies a branded product, because he possesses essential elements of a brand including a name, logo, and a set of design components (Keller, 2008). Sports fans admire superstar athletes' on-field performances (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) and develop a meaningful sense of connection with an athlete's off-the-field persona (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Some scholars insisted that the influence of professional athletes expands beyond the playing field, which allows athletes to create a unique cultural platform for social impact and community engagement (Gilchrist, 2005; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). Moreover, in terms of the power of celebrities to influence the perceptions of a business they choose to endorse, these individuals can have a significant impact on a company's position in the marketplace (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, & Daza-LeTouze, 2011).

Thomson (2006) believed that human brands (i.e., a well-known persona) are most easily identified, which presents a special opportunity for marketers' promotional initiatives. The scholar explained that the attachment to human brands can be affected by the quantity and quality of interactions with that brand (Thomson, 2006). Attachment was defined as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human being" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). Specifically, "With direct interaction, consumers are more likely to view the human brand as accessible, increasing the opportunity for feelings of autonomy and relatedness...although "being seen" (e.g., public appearances) may be acceptable as a form of indirect interaction" (Thomson, 2006, p. 116). Restated, Thomson (2006) indicated that autonomy and relatedness determined the attachment to human brands. Autonomy relates to consumers' freedom in terms of preferences of activities and expression (Thomson, 2006). Consumers' perception of connectedness constitutes the relatedness construct (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Silvera and Austad (2004) claimed that direct interactions could make consumers feel appreciated, despite commercial intentions held by

human brands. Furthermore, consumers are inclined to value human brands that represent authentic intentions (Cole & Leets, 1999; Perse & Rubin, 1989).

Loroz and Braig (2015) expanded on Thomson's (2006) scholarly work by refining the understanding of consumers' connection to human brands. The authors used Oprah Winfrey as the focal human brand due to her connection with consumers. Through the analysis of data derived from the qualitative study, the scholars confirmed that antecedents of consumer attachment (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) and brand personality appeal dimensions (i.e., favorability, originality, and clarity) were important components of connection to the human brand (Loroz & Braig, 2015). Loroz and Braig (2015) observed the brand personality appeal as a significant moderator of the impact of antecedents of attachment, resulting in identification with the studied human brand (i.e., Oprah). Specifically, Loroz and Braig (2015) elaborated:

Attachment strength was represented in three distinct ways: (1) by emotional attachment behaviors (such as separation distress and proximity maintenance), (2) by the perceived quality of the consumer's relationship with Oprah (specifically in terms of the consumer's commitment to Oprah), and (3) by the consumer's loyalty to the Oprah brand and intent to purchase products recommended by Oprah. In all of these cases, there was a significant interaction between the antecedents of attachment and BPA such as that as the perceived appeal of Oprah increases, the impact of the ARC dimensions on attachment also intensifies. (p. 760-761)

This research corroborated the existing contentions (Thomson, 2006) concerning the relationship between consumers and human brands and provided a deeper understanding of how personal brands of celebrities can affect intrinsic attachment to human brands.

Sport organizations employ brand names, design features, and memorable symbols as a means of differentiation from competition (Shank, 2001). Superstar athletes' personal brands are retained in their name, style of play, and unique personality features (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016). An athlete's brand reinforces a memorable impression, allowing these players and teams to expand sponsor portfolios and target markets (see Mullin et al., 2014). Personal brands of professional athletes serve as reliable promotional vehicles to enhance fan engagement and foster additional revenue streams for sport organizations and their stakeholders. It is an important factor considering the role of fan engagement in consumer spending choices, organizations' positive reputation, and achievement of strategic revenue goals (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014). In fact, strong associations allow athlete brand managers to build equity around brands of professional athletes.

Sport consumers discern among a variety of meanings attached to a superstar athlete's name (Mullin et al., 2014). Arai and colleagues (2014) proposed a conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI). Arai et al. (2014) suggested that the athlete brand associations can be classified into three higher-level categories (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) that break into ten sub-dimensions, representing a complete athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014). The proposed dimensions associated with an athlete brand contributed to prior literature concerning attachment to human brands and formation of human brand equity (Thomson, 2006). Arai et al.'s (2014) conceptual model of athlete brand image is provided here:

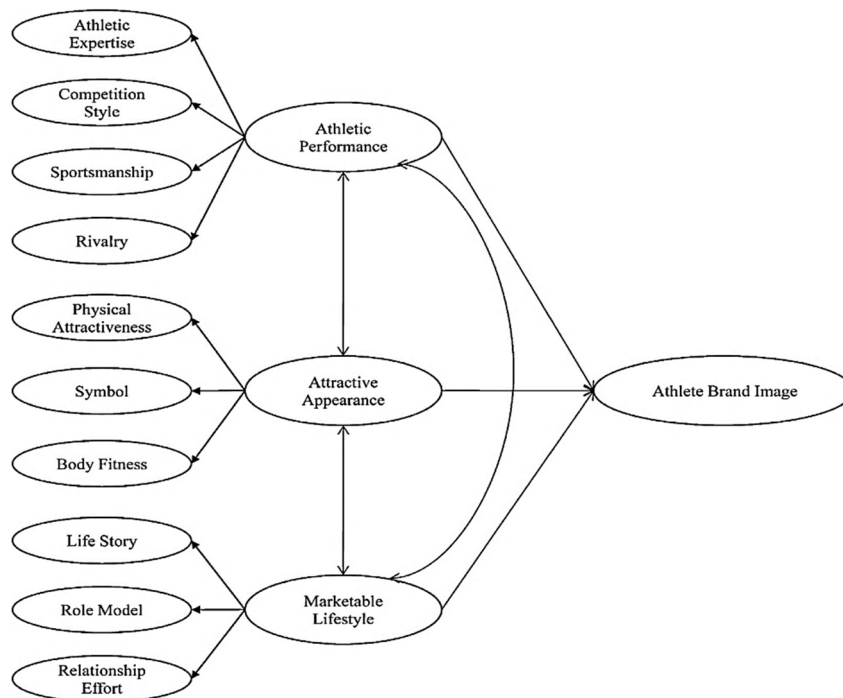


Figure 4. Conceptual model of athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014)

Specifically, athletic performance describes sports performance of an athlete (Arai et al., 2014). This dimension categorizes into athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry facets (Arai et al., 2014). An athlete’s individual sport accomplishments and proficiency in their sport constitute the athletic expertise category (Arai et al., 2014). Arai et al. (2014) argued that Gladden et al.’s (1998) definition of success goes beyond the winning record when applied to professional athletes. Richelieu and Pons (2006) suggested that distinct records can serve as a competitive advantage for athletes’ personal brands, whereas previously, scholars argued that winning contributed to “all of the desired consequences of brand equity” (Gladden et al., 1998, p. 6). Arai et al. (2014) contended that athlete brand managers should promote athletes’ unique athletic skills because some fans may have a stronger connection with these images and related associations.

Competition style was termed as unique characteristics related to an athlete's performance in a contest (Arai et al., 2014). In addition, "If the athlete has a clear and unique playing style that fans can easily identify with, strong identification will likely develop and lead to loyalty" (Arai et al., 2014, p. 101). Honesty, dependability, trustworthiness, and reliability (Ohanian, 1990) are crucial components of sportsmanship that have a significant influence on how sport consumers perceive a relationship with an athlete (Arai et al., 2014). Ohanian (1990) argued that trustworthiness of a celebrity is particularly important to persuading the followers, which is extremely relevant in the context of athletes as brands. The rivalry facet was defined as an athlete's competition with other athletes for superiority in a sport (Arai et al., 2014). Richelieu and Pons (2006) indicated that sport teams promote their brand in relation to their toughest competition. Rivalry is particularly important to consumers' perception of personal identity and appreciation for an athlete brand (see Arai et al., 2014). Attractive appearance (Arai et al., 2014) was described this way:

Attractive appearance refers to an athlete's attractive external appearance and is defined as physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness. The primary dimension works as a "trademark" for athlete brands. Attractiveness can be any arbitrary, distinctive and non-descriptive features of an athlete brand that the public recognize or appreciate... The physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness are the fundamental factors that work as "trademark" for athlete brands. (p. 102)

Physical attractiveness could contribute significantly to credibility of a celebrity (Ohanian, 1990). It is interesting to note that when the audience already positively perceives the source, less-credible message could still be interpreted as valid (see Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978). Arai et al. (2014) described the symbol sub-dimension as "an athlete's attractive personal

style, fashion or any outward unique features of the athletes; athletes often utilize their personal style to express their personality or character” (p. 102). To demonstrate, Arai et al. (2014) used Brett Favre as an example of an athlete with distinctive looks. Similarly, Dennis Rodman is remembered for his outlandish outfits at appearances in public (Arai et al., 2014). It is evident that the associations related to an athlete’s symbolic meaning play an important role in differentiating his or her brand. Body fitness was defined as an athlete’s level of fitness in their sport (Arai et al., 2014). This facet of an athlete brand could be associated with the athletic component of the athlete brand construct (Arai et al., 2014).

The next dimension of the athlete brand concept is marketable life style. Arai et al. (2014) referred to this element as “an athlete’s off-field marketable features that could be indicative of his or her value and personality” (p. 102). Off-the-field athlete initiatives could greatly contribute to his or her brand image, reveal an athlete’s personal intentions, and in turn influence consumers’ perceptions and attitudes (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). In fact, consumers wish to connect with an athlete’s personality considering “personality refers to the internal characteristics of a person” (Mowen & Minor, 1998, p. 220). Expanding on this argument, Arai et al. (2014) stated, “As the recent Tiger Woods’ infidelity scandal proved, sport spectators cannot always know the athlete’s true personality. However, sport consumers can see athletes’ lifestyles can reflect their personality and personal value” (p. 102). In a more recent work, Walsh and Williams (2017) focused on investigating the perceived fit between professional athletes and brand extension product categories. In addition, the scholars analyzed consumer attitudes toward extensions of personal brands of athletes (Walsh & Williams, 2017). The authors found that athlete prestige had a significant impact on perceived fit (Walsh & Williams, 2017). On the other hand, the Walsh and Williams (2017) admitted that:

For brand extensions in which there may not be a direct logical connection between the image of an athlete and the image of the new product or service, the success of the extension may rely on how emotionally attached an individual is to the particular athlete who introduces the product. (p. 57)

Arai et al. (2014) termed the life story sub-category as a unique life story that represents personal beliefs and values of an athlete brand. Consumers tend to develop more meaningful relationships with their brands when they can relate to their story on a deeper level (Escalas, 2004). An athlete brand's "ethical behavior that the society has determined to be worth emulating" constitutes the role model sub-dimension (Arai et al., 2014, p. 102). The scholars further explained that these behaviors are perceived in a positive light due to athletes' consistent contribution to society and their communities (Arai et al., 2014). Athletes' meaningful interactions with followers were termed as relationship effort (Arai et al., 2014). This aspect is particularly important considering the role interactions play in fan attachment (Arai et al., 2014; Thomson, 2006).

Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) developed the Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI) to test the proposed Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). The authors asserted that the data supported the proposed model, validating the main dimensions of the athlete brand (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) (Arai et al., 2013). The scholars concluded that SABI provides a concrete instrument for evaluation of athlete brand images and associations (Arai et al., 2013). To extend the literature on athlete branding, Hasaan et al. (2016) created a framework covering antecedents and elements of the athlete brand construct. The authors proposed five antecedents and two dimensions related to the athlete brand (Hasaan et al., 2016). To be specific, a proposed framework outlined five antecedents (i.e., media, oral communications, impression management, social agents, team and sport) that help create and

reinforce an athlete brand (Hasaan et al., 2016). Further, each of the antecedents breaks into sub-categories demonstrated here: media (i.e., mass media, social media, major sport events, and video games), oral communications (i.e., word of mouth, rumors & narratives), impression management, social agents (i.e., parents, family members, friends, and community), and team & sport (i.e., sport interest, team interest, and team geographical location) (Hasaan et al., 2016).

In terms of the attributes of the athlete brand construct, the scholars put forth the on-field component (i.e., behavior, teams, achievements, skills, and style of play) and off-field attributes, consisting of physical attraction, personal appeal, lifestyle, ethnicity, and entertainment (Hasaan et al., 2016). For example, Michael Jordan resonates with clutch player, prolific scorer, and champion (Mullin et al., 2014). It is also important to point out Jordan's "off-field marketable features that could be indicative of his or her value and personality" (Arai et al., 2014, p. 102). Importantly, in terms of athlete brand implications, both of these components (i.e., on-field and off-field attributes) could influence athlete loyalty, team loyalty, and purchase intentions of sponsored products (Hasaan et al., 2018). Evidently, an athlete brand can develop numerous associations in consumers' minds, thereby building their brand equity. A complete framework of athlete brand construction (Hasaan et al., 2016) is provided here:

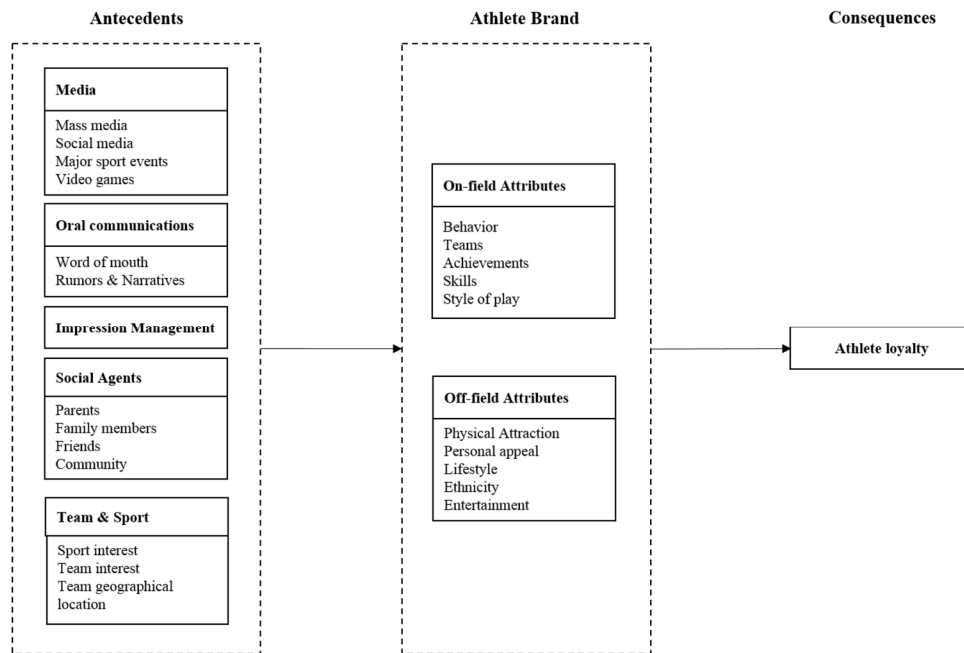


Figure 5. Framework of athlete brand construction (Hasaan et al., 2016)

As evidenced by prior literature concerning athletes as brands (Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018), athletes' off-the-field persona is equally important to his or her image and earning potential (Mullin et al., 2014). Put differently, off-field activities (e.g., community engagement) can contribute significantly to how an athlete's image is perceived by the fans and key stakeholders.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Prior scholarly work validated the ability of social initiatives implemented by sport organizations to enhance the overall image, provide value to their brand, and impact donor commitment (Ko, Rhee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Walker & Kent, 2009). In general, sport represents a multifaceted platform for deployment of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Emphasizing the significance of CSR activities, Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) suggested that "sport business given the media scrutiny under which they operate-must have a core competency, an ability to create a positive public perception of the organization" (p.

21). CSR initiatives have the potential to enhance public perception, purchase likelihood of certain products, drive incremental revenue, and expand existing customer base (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). It is a common practice among sport organizations to utilize internal efforts and athletes to deliver social responsibilities (see Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). In fact, superstar athletes take on the role of influential agents in terms of economic and cultural impact (Gilchrist, 2005; Kern, 2000). Since good relationship with adopted communities has a positive impact on perceptions of athletes among their followers, these athletes often engage in various community initiatives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009).

More importantly, Babiak and Wolfe (2009, p. 722) asserted that “athletes promoting, for example, healthful living, may generate a larger, more attentive audience than would employees in other fields.” In the college sport setting, well-organized CSR programs can result in a better overall image and enhanced reputation (Ko et al., 2014). Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, and Clark (2003) contended that these actions can be carried out through financial donations, community engagement, and personal foundations. Corporate social responsibility was referred to as “a company’s commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society” (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001, p. 47). Mohr and Webb (2005) claimed that CSR initiatives can include support of employees and non-profits, environmental causes, and initiatives related to human rights. This in turn allows organizations to improve their image and gain a competitive edge (Brietbarth & Harris, 2008).

The literature concerning CSR construct received considerable attention by past scholars. For example, Walker and Kent (2009) analyzed the relationship between CSR initiatives and followers’ evaluation of reputation and patronage intentions. The scholars stated that “the examination of a consumer-level framework linking CSR to organizational evaluations and

patronage intentions revealed a general positivity in sport consumers' responses" (Walker & Kent, 2009, p. 758). The qualitative component of Walker and Kent's (2009) investigation confirmed CSR's value to sport consumers. Ko and colleagues (2014) investigated the relationship between perceived CSR and trust, commitment, and donation intention within college athletics. The data confirmed the positive influence of CSR on trust (Ko et al., 2014). Furthermore, the authors stated, "perception of CSR had a significant direct effect on commitment" (Ko et al., 2014, p. 81). The scholars also found that CSR activities would positively impact donation intentions (Ko et al., 2014). Babiak and Trendafilova (2011) found that CSR initiatives were driven by strategic reasoning as well as institutional expectations. The authors reported that these sport organizations perceived CSR as a way to gain "advantages in different areas (i.e., enhancing reputation, addressing demands and expectations of consumers, mitigating negative media reports, and developing a stronger network of partners resulting in deeper linkages into the communities in which these teams and leagues operate)" (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011, p. 17). In addition, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) proposed external (e.g., stakeholder-centric) and internal (e.g., strategic) factors that may trigger initiation of CSR programs in the context of professional teams.

Specifically, context (i.e., external) relates to sport organizations' inclination to engage in CSR, given pressures created by the professional field (e.g., teams, media, sponsors, and municipal governments) (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). The authors explained that "a professional sport team relies heavily on partnerships with corporate sponsors, media, and local and state governments, and in particular, the league governing body" (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009, p. 728). The content factor was described as an organization's actions in relation to its overall goals and short-term objectives (see Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). In terms of the constituents driver, Babiak and

Wolfe (2009) asserted that “in the professional sport world, a number of key constituents (e.g., employees, players, sponsors, the local community, spectator/fans) could be important drivers of community outreach efforts” (p. 729). “Control” was mainly found to represent pressures that came from governing bodies, while “cause” was a response to these external pressures (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). The internal motives for implementation of CSR were driven by the following resources: “valuable,” “rare,” and “inimitable” (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). According to Babiak and Wolfe (2009), valuable resources are those that:

Contribute to a competitive advantage [and] are valuable in the sense of enabling an organization to uniquely exploit opportunities. Given the feelings of identity, admiration and, not infrequently, passion, that many individuals have for athletes and teams, the latter have opportunities to influence (a) individuals concerning positive behavior changes and (b) other corporations concerning alliances and/or financial contributions to social causes. (p. 731)

“Rare” category constituted the resources that were only available to certain teams (e.g., media access) (see Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). In terms of the uniqueness of sport organizations (i.e., inimitable theme) the scholars argued that “other organizations do not have employees with which the public identifies as they do with professional athletes and coaches. Even team owners have personas that are identified as being a unique resource for professional sport teams” (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009, p. 732). It is clear that CSR initiatives can play a significant role in brand construction and cultivation for sport organizations and professional athletes. Indeed, CSR activities are perceived as “a value driver with many benefits that are not reflected in traditional financial terms” (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2010, p. 21). Additionally, Babiak and Trendafilova (2010) acknowledged that CSR practices in sport are influenced by organizations’ intentions to

validate their status and sustain their competitive edge. Restated, these socially responsible actions implemented by sport teams and athletes provide a number of options for sport marketers in terms of unique competitive advantages and customer satisfaction programs.

Role Modelling

Much of the literature agrees that professional athletes should be perceived as influential role models (Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Feezell, 2005; Fleming, Hardman, Jones, & Sheridan, 2005; Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2007; Guest & Cox, 2009; Rojek, 2006). Fleming et al. (2005) referred to a role model as the subject of emulation and admiration. Feezell (2005) asserted that role models can help people navigate through life's challenges. The scholar termed the construct as "an object of imitation when we reflect on the larger ethical questions: How should I live? What kind of person should I be?" (p. 21). For example, the desire to be like Michael Jordan could impact a person's nonathletic aspects of life (Feezell, 2005). In fact, by emulating others' actions, individuals can develop personal behavioral habits (Bandura, 1977). Fleming et al. (2005) explained that "children may 'model' or copy some aspect of the appearance of these people and/or their behavior" (p. 53). It is due to distinct values, courage, fairness, and determination, people desire to associate with role models (Fleming et al., 2005). Interestingly, Feezell (2005, p. 23) asserted the following with respect to role models:

1. If a person has a heightened influence on the conduct of others, she should be sensitive to this fact.
2. If a person should be sensitive to this fact, she should admit that she has additional moral reasons to behave well (to act virtuously) beyond the reasons that everyone has to encourage virtue and discourage vice.

3. Celebrated athletes have a heightened influence on the conduct of others (especially children).
4. Therefore, celebrated athletes have special responsibilities to be good role models.

This evident proliferation of sports in our society has made professional athletes the center of attention and allowed these individuals to have a major influence on our culture (Feezell, 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009; Rojek, 2006). Aside from their unusual, widely recognized on-field talents, professional athletes live relatively ordinary lives; however, athletes are expected to personify all positive qualities and inspire people toward responsible lives (Sailes, 2001). Furthermore, prior research shows that athletes have a social and moral responsibility to serve as role models (Sailes, 2001). As demonstrated by Biskup and Pfister (1999), superstar athletes are capable of raising profile of the sport:

In the wake of sporting triumphs certain types of sport have enjoyed a upsurge in popularity in Germany: Steffi Graf and Boris Becker triggered a tennis boom; Henri Maske made boxing socially acceptable; and soccer, finally, is popular not least because of its great footballing personalities. (p. 212).

On the other hand, the qualities that people expect athletes to exhibit may vary. Specifically, Fleming et al. (2005) found that young players admired the sports stars because of the following qualities: technical competence, physical characteristics, temperament, decision-making, and identity. “Technical competence” was described as a set of unique technical skills, contributions to a team, and consistent performance level (Fleming et al., 2005). The scholars referred to the “physical characteristics” theme as the athletes’ physical strength and power exhibited in their sport (Fleming et al., 2005). “Decision making” was labeled as understanding of the sport, the ability to read the play and be aware of game situations (Fleming et al., 2005). Aggression,

determination, fearlessness, and professional attitude constituted the “temperament” facet of the role model concept as shown in Fleming et al. (2005). The last theme represented the local and national identities (Fleming et al., 2015), which echoed Rojek’s (2006) assertion regarding superstar athletes’ ability to adopt the identities of cities and regions they represent.

Another study (Biskup & Pfister, 1999) indicated that boys and girls chose their role models based on traditional gender ideals. To illustrate, boys were more likely to view athletes as role models due to their masculinity and fighting strength (see Biskup & Pfister, 1999). To be specific, Biskup and Pfister (1999) stated:

Sportsmen and women were explicit role-models for only some of the boys we interviewed; on the other hand a relatively large number of boys attributed to their idols such ‘sporting’ qualities as stamina and fighting strength. Sportswomen, by contrast, are rarely chosen as role-models; and girls look for their idols almost exclusively outside the world of sport. (p. 212)

Giuliano et al. (2007) conducted a study to acquire a deeper understanding of what sports stars meant to people. The authors admitted that not only is there evident difference in coverage of male and female athletes, but there is also an issue with the way these athletes are portrayed (Giuliano et al., 2007). Interestingly, Fleming et al. (2005) explained that the media portray both positive and controversial aspects related to the lives of sports stars. Giuliano and colleagues (2007) found that participants had more athletic role models while growing up. However, the authors reported that this number decreased as participants got older (Giuliano et al., 2007). Additionally, this study showed that the gender factor was important in athletic role prevalence over time (Giuliano et al., 2007). It was specifically stated that, “unlike in childhood, when males

had many more athletic role models than did females, men and women were equally likely to have public athletic role models as adults” (Giuliano et al., 2007, p. 188).

It is apparent that superstar athletes possess the qualities (i.e., personal and/or professional) which people tend to emulate; therefore, the public expects professional athletes to act as responsible role models in our society (Guest & Cox, 2009). Guest and Cox’s (2009) exploratory study with 39 elite women soccer players attempted to identify the athletes’ own perceptions regarding the role model concept and their perspective as role models. As shown in Table 3, Guest and Cox (2009, p. 580) proposed several conceptual themes that derived from participants’ responses.

Table 3. Characteristics of “good role model” (Guest & Cox, 2009)

Skills, Abilities, and Competencies. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions skills and abilities that contribute to excellent performance. Examples might include characteristics or traits related to athletic ability, physical talents, competencies, intelligence, etc. Lower-order themes include: sports specific skills, non-sport specific competencies, and creativity.

Morality and Honor. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions characteristics that associate with implied “goodness” as unrelated to conventional achievement and/or success. Examples might include characteristics or traits related to moral character, fairness, honor, valor, courage, class, etc. Lower-order themes include: morality and integrity (including “fairness” and “character”), honor and valor, modesty and humility, and selflessness and team orientation.

Meritocratic Personality Traits. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions characteristics that our popular culture generally associates with success,

achievement, and the “American dream.” Examples might include characteristics or traits related to discipline, determined, ambitious, positive, leader, “does their best,” committed, resilient, tough, passionate, enthusiastic, etc. Lower-order themes include: effortful (hardworking; disciplined; determined; dedicated; ambitious; responsible), positive, leadership, resilient and tough, and passionate.

Interpersonal Abilities. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions traits or skills focused on relating well with others in a socio-emotional sense. Examples might include characteristics or traits related to being caring, loving, generous, loyal, concerned for others, trustworthy, respectful, outgoing, social, etc. Lower-order themes include: caring and loving, generous, loyal, friendliness and kindness, and trustworthy.

Self-Actualization. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions characteristics that emphasize having a strong sense of self that is authentic and evolved. Examples might include characteristics or traits related to “being real,” being one’s true self, being balanced, self-confidence, individuality, etc. Lower-order themes include: being real or true, and having self-confidence.

Generativity and Citizenship. This higher-order theme is present if the response mentions characteristics that focus on concern for others and for one’s community. Examples might include characteristics or traits related to being concerned with the greater good, devoting oneself to good causes, being socially responsible, being a “role model,” etc. Lower-order themes include: social responsibility, and being a model for others.

Social Identity Theory

Past literature recognizes two main dimensions associated with individuals' identities including personal identity (Burke, 1991; Stryker, 1968) and social identity theory (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Burke (1991) referred to identity as "a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation defining what it means to be who one is" (p. 837). Specifically, a role was termed as "the set of expectations tied to a social position that guide people's attitudes and behavior" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 114). An individual's personal identity manages their self-control and adaptation to different settings (Burke, 1991). Hogg et al. (1995) contended that identity theory explains individuals' behavior based on the roles they choose to accept. Jacobson (2003) echoed this point by emphasizing that decisions regarding roles are tied to one's identity salience. Stryker (1968) posited that the self is an organized structure wherein an individual accepts distinct identities that in turn comprise the self. Furthermore, an individual tends to follow a specific identity hierarchy within the self (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The context of interactions and salience of various identities determine the priority within the hierarchy of an individual's identities (Stryker, 1968). Stryker (1968) detailed this process this way:

The hierarchy of salience becomes important in the prediction of behavior in the event of what may be called structural overlap, that is, when analytically distinct sets of relationships are mutually contingent at some point in time and so do invoke concurrently different identities. More often than not, perhaps, one faces situations in which more than one of his identities is pertinent. (p. 560)

Indeed, the activation of an individual's identity results in behavioral motivations and intentions (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Felps, & Lim, 2009). These roles in turn, give individuals a sense of

structure, organization, and meaning (Stets & Burke, 2009). Burke and Stets (2009) explained further the aforementioned social positions as:

For example, tied to the social position of “student” are the roles of learning new knowledge and skills, establishing an area of study, passing courses, acquiring a degree, and so forth. Associated with “teacher” are the (role) expectations of being knowledgeable and instructive. The position of “friend” may include the expectations of being supportive and trustworthy. (p. 114)

Burke (1991) argued that the identity formation process operates based on how an individual internalizes their desired roles implied by social contexts. Ultimately, a person strives to achieve congruence with the inner nature to decrease distress (see Burke, 1991). It is important to note that individuals may perceive outside feedback as negative which could lead to incongruences in role adoption; however, over time, people tend to overcome these barriers and identify external identities as congruent with their own (see Burke, 1991).

However, personal identities are embedded in broader social positions and settings (Carter, 2013). Mead (1934, p. 228) cogently explained that “all living organisms are bound up in a general social environment or situation, in a complex of social interrelations and interactions upon which their continued existence depends.” This unique identification with a social group is defined as social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Tajfel (1981) recognized the construct as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Ashforth and Mael (1989) termed social identity as “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate” (p. 21). Social identity theory is understood using the perspective of intergroup relations and group processes, through which

individuals compare themselves and others, categorizing persons as members of two distinct groups (i.e., in-group and out-group) (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Jacobson (2003, p. 4) offered the following contention: “individuals strive to maintain positive social identities, which are primarily derived from favorable comparisons to group members and non-members.”

A group in this context is referred to as individuals who view themselves to be “members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 15). The authors noted that high-order categories are defined and characterized without involvement of group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Furthermore, the essence of social identity theory stems from Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory which explains individuals’ intentions to associate with people like themselves or slightly better than themselves (see Jacobson, 2003). In addition, Jacobson (2003) asserted that the way individuals perceive their social selves may ultimately affect how they construct their roles or positions in organized social relationships. Table 4 demonstrates specific consequences related to group membership (Tajfel, 1981, p. 256):

Table 4. Consequences of group membership (Tajfel, 1981)

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- a. It can be assumed that an individual will tend to remain a member of a group and seek membership of new groups if these groups have some contribution to make to the positive aspects of his social identity; i.e. to those aspects of it from which he derives some satisfaction.
 - b. If a group does not satisfy this requirement, the individual will tend to leave it unless: (i) leaving the group is impossible for some ‘objective’ reasons, or (ii) it conflicts with important values which are themselves a part of his acceptable self-image.
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- c. If leaving the group presents the difficulties just mentioned, then at least two solutions are possible: (i) to change one's interpretation of the attributes of the group so that its unwelcome features (e.g., low status) are either justified or made acceptable through a reinterpretation; or (ii) to accept the situation for what it is and engage in social action which would lead to desirable changes in the situation. (Of course, there may be various combinations of (i) and (ii) such as, for example, when the negative attributes are 'justified' and social action to change them is undertaken at the same time.)
 - d. No group lives alone – all groups in society live in the midst of other groups. In other words, the 'positive aspects of social identity' and the reinterpretation of attributes and engagement in social action only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparisons with, other groups.
-

Social comparisons and categorizations trigger the perception of distinction among members of the same group, which makes these individuals favor their fellow, like-minded in-group members (Burke & Stets, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Interestingly, Burke and Stets (2009) argued that this uniformity of thought among the in-group individuals eliminates the need for interactions in order to act like other in-group members. Indeed, in-group members may not require consistent interaction to remain affiliated with a certain group (Stets & Burke, 2000). To illustrate, "simply identifying with the group is enough to activate similarity in perceptions and behavior among group members" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 118). In terms of the consequences of self-categorization and social comparison, an individual may observe different outcomes. Specifically, self-categorization affects how a person views the values, beliefs, and attitudes characteristic of their own group (Stets & Burke, 2000).

This personal evaluation is consistent with Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) process of cognitive identification, referred to as one's conscious recognition of his or her membership in a social group. However, social comparison could lead to "the selective application of the accentuation effect, primarily to those dimensions that will result in self-enhancing outcomes for the self" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). By contrast, the outgroup members are viewed as outsiders and can cause negative and competitive reactions among members of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In line with Tajfel and Turner (1986), Hogg (2006) argued that in-group individuals positively view others in the group and have a negative perception of the out-group members. Additionally, Hogg et al., (1995) posited that an individual's feelings and behaviors are influenced by the dynamic characteristics of the group they elect to associate with. This argument echoes Burke and Stets' (2009) contention, according to which certain individuals may join a group for self-enhancement reasons and to reduce uncertainty. As a result, the individuals in a group may develop a sense of "we" or "us" while the out-group members are perceived as "them" (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The status of a group may influence an individual's perceptions and value of group affiliation. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argued that, "the lower is a group's subjective status position in relation to relevant comparison groups, the less is the contribution it can make to positive social identity" (p. 19). Add to this, negative social identity may result in individual mobility where people intend to dissociate from a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Moreover, a group could try to achieve positive distinctiveness to enhance its status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These social group dynamics stem from the following assumptions discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1986):

1. Individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem: they strive for a positive self-concept.
2. Social groups or categories and the membership of them are associated with positive or negative value connotations. Hence, social identity may be positive or negative according to the evaluations (which tend to be socially consensual, either within or across groups) of those groups that contribute to an individual's social identity.
3. The evaluation of one's own group is determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparisons in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics. Positively discrepant comparisons between in-group and out-group produce high prestige; negatively discrepant comparisons between in-group and out-group result in low prestige. (p. 16)

Restated, members of a particular social group involve in the on-ongoing comparison process by evaluating fellow members as positive and seeking constant affiliation with that group of individuals (Burke & Stets, 2009). These social groups (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports teams), which one chooses to identify with, provide a status for a particular category and in turn assist individuals with identification of their self-concept (Hogg et al., 1995).

Community

There has been a considerable research devoted to the analysis of the community concept. Community, according to Colclough and Sitaraman (2005), refers to a network of people bonded by social relationships. These social relationships derive from shared community experiences and ultimately foster personal attachments among community members (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Conceptualizing community as a cluster of diverse individuals, several categorization criteria have been proposed by Colclough and Sitaraman (2005) including the types of member

experiences, sought dimensions of everyday life, and the complexity of group social organization. While the cultural aspect is of critical importance, communities revolve around the dynamics of collective actions present within certain locations (Delanty, 2003). The quality of social networks that exist within communities is dependent on social trust community members build through reciprocated responsible actions toward one another (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Social networks contribute to fostering of trust and are “maintained through communication among members, whether in face-to-face situations or facilitated by media such as letters, telephone calls, or the Internet” (Kavanaugh, Reesem Carroll, & Rosson, 2005, p. 119). In terms of individuals’ group efficacy discussed earlier, Bandura (2000) suggested the following:

People’s shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective actions, how well they use their resources, how much effort they put into their group endeavor, their staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that beset taking on tough social problems. (p. 76)

Delanty (2003) argued that communities are essential to the demands related to individuals’ sense of belonging and attachment created by insecurity and uncertainty of the modern society. Both trust and reciprocity between the individuals within a community contribute to the perceptions of inclusiveness, belonging, community-level integration, and support (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Furthermore, the social relationships that connect members within communities rely on common understanding and mutual support among members of the same community (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005).

The existing literature recognizes two distinct types of communities. Specifically, the first type is simple communities that form based on simple dimensions of local, everyday activities (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Shared hobbies, sports, or volunteer initiatives may contribute to formation of simple communities (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). In contrast, complex communities “contain many more groups or divisions, and typically include numerous activities in the life worlds of their members – work, family, and friendships” (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005, p. 478). The scholars noted that both simple and complex communities can interact with other surrounding communities which allows individuals to remain members of multiple groups at the same time (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). However, and what is more important to our understanding of brand-based communities, an alternative interpretation of a community concerns with a relational approach, in which quality and intricacies of human relations are given priority over location (Gustfield, 1975; Obst, Zinkiewics, & Smith, 2002). Put differently, relational communities refer to non-geographically bound communities. This approach stems from Durkheim’s (1964) observation, according to which people in modern society organize into communities based on common interests rather than certain location.

Psychological benefits derived from community affiliation constitute a deep sense of community and relationships with fellow members. Sarason (1977) viewed the concept of psychological sense of community as perceived similarity with others and interdependence with fellow members, which in turn triggers a sense of responsibility toward other members who belong to a larger, stable structure. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) termed the sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.” The conceptual framework proposed by McMillan and Chavis

(1986) consisted of four elements such as membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership was defined as a feeling of belonging; however, membership has clear boundaries between the ones who belong to a community and those individuals who do not (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Boundaries represent an important element of community identification and serve to separate “us” from “them,” the element crucial in unification of community (Burke & Stets, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

An individual needs to have control over the group for the “influence” factor to occur (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Furthermore, members tend to perceive a community as attractive if they have some influence over it (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The scholars admitted that, “influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently, and one might expect to see the force of both operating simultaneously in a tightly knit community” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). An association with a certain community must be rewarding for an individual to remain a member. This condition constitutes the “integration and fulfillment of needs” facet of the sense of community construct (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). One of the ways to meet this condition is to have shared values within a community. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 13) cogently explained that when “people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek.” As shown in Table 5, the scholars summarized these conditions related to integration and fulfillment of needs.

**Table 5. Implications of integration and fulfillment of needs in a sense of community
(McMillan & Chavis, 1986)**

-
1. Reinforcement and need fulfillment is a primary function of a strong community.
 2. Some of the rewards that are effective reinforcers of communities are status of membership, success of the community, and competence of capabilities of other members.
 3. There are many other undocumented needs that communities fill, but individual values are the source of these needs. The extent to which individual values are shared among community members will determine the ability of a community to organize and prioritize its need-fulfillment activities.
 4. A strong community is able to fit people together so that people meet others' needs while they meet their own. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 13)
-

The last element is “shared emotional connection,” which was termed as perception of shared history in a given community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The authors suggested that community members must identify with the history to construct meaningful relationships with fellow members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Additionally, the quality of group interactions within a collective has a direct effect on the strength of the community ties and its overall status (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Brand Community

Prior research has informed conceptualizations regarding communal consumption and made significant progress in enhancing the understanding of consumer identification within communities surrounding a brand. Marketers utilize brand communities as a vehicle for

enhanced consumer-brand connection (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Community, in this sense, consists of individuals who share social relationships with fellow brand admirers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006, p. 45) defined brand community as a “group of consumers with a shared enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity, whose members engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or express mutual sentiments and commitments.” As termed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand community is “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). This identification with a brand community allows consumers to feel a kinship with fellow brand enthusiasts (Keller, 2002).

Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) analysis of face-to-face and computer-mediated settings revealed three specific brand community markers (i.e., shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and sense of moral responsibility) that were present within the investigated brand communities (i.e., Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and Saab). Termed as an “intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community” consciousness of kind is the most salient characteristic observed in brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). It is due to a deeper level of identification with fellow members, individuals are able to connect with one another and recognize the sense of difference from consumers of competing brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This sense of connection with a brand community and its members (e.g., company employees, key representatives, and fellow brand consumers) can engender positive attitudes and loyalty toward a brand (Keller, 2008). For example, Apple facilitates the development of local consumer groups to enhance these in-group relationships and the perception of the focal brand among its followers (Keller, 2008). Keller (2008) noted that these Apple brand communities allow their members to

share product updates, sponsor activities, and computer-related ideas that make members engage in community initiatives.

As it relates to consciousness of kind, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggested that brand consumers recognize a distinction between the focal brand and other brands, and detailed that this critical demarcation "includes a reference to brand users being "different" or "special" in comparison to users of other brands" (p. 418). The "legitimacy" aspect of consciousness of kind relates to the aforementioned boundaries established by members of a brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 419) described legitimacy as "a process whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space." In the brand setting, legitimacy is shown as truly knowing a brand and its value as opposed to merely exploiting a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In addition, while brand communities are generally welcoming in nature, they do have specific status-related hierarchies in place (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, the process of identification and selection of "true" members is vital to the essence of brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The next element, which solidifies consciousness of kind, is oppositional brand loyalty. Members of brand communities internalize their affiliation with the name and meaning of the brand, and in turn bond with fellow, like-minded members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) hypothesized that oppositional brand loyalty is necessary in the environments with stronger market share brands and is mainly utilized to counter real and perceived threats (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The second marker was referred to as "rituals and traditions" and represented important social activities that assisted with implementation of meaning of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Rituals and traditions revolve around shared brand consumption processes and

may not be interpreted the same way by all community members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) emphasized that some members may have a deeper understanding of rituals and traditions, while others are not inclined to adopt those community practices. The rituals and traditions marker is instrumental in preserving the culture and identity of brand communities as well as the overall brand consumption modes (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Add to this, celebration of brand history is the component which recognizes "true" brand admirers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Appreciation of brand history is the route to special status that brand community members "obtain from migration from marginal to insider community status [and in turn] adds value to the consumption experience, and is an incentive for becoming a stronger and more informed brand advocate" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 422-423). Therefore, one of the main goals of strategic marketing communication is to focus on communication of histories and memorable brand stories (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) recognized storytelling as an important method for fostering brand communities and highlighting unique traditions used to define those communities and their culture. Furthermore, the authors insisted that brand stories are used to communicate community-related values which ultimately reinforces the perception of sameness within a collective (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The last marker was termed as moral responsibility. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggested that "moral responsibility is a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion" (p. 424). It is especially important for community survival to integrate new members and retain existing ones (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Additionally, moral responsibility constitutes assistance with brand consumption (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The scholars posited that this assistance takes the form of "actions to help

fellow community members repair the product or solve problems with it, particularly involving specialized knowledge acquired through several years of using the brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 425). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) asserted that moral responsibility goes beyond just assisting with the consumption of the focal brand. To that end, the authors claimed that providing information regarding brand resources (e.g., preventative materials or brand promotional materials) manifests itself in enhanced brand consumption and member engagement (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

It has been asserted by previous scholars that the customary consumer-brand model should be replaced by the customer-centric, experiential approach to enhance overall consumer-brand community identification (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Specifically, McAlexander and colleagues (2002, p. 39) expanded on Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) brand community work and indicated that brand communities are “customer-centric, that the existence and meaningfulness of the community inhere in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves.” The scholars put forth a four-attribute construct related to relationships within brand communities including the connection between the customer and a brand, the company, the product, and other fellow customers (McAlexander et al., 2002). Importantly, McAlexander et al. (2002) argued that these meaningful relationships could result in more structured, brand-focused interpersonal connections (see McAlexander et al., 2002).

Stokburger-Sauer (2010) demonstrated that community marketing initiatives can positively impact the aforementioned relationships (i.e., between the customer and the product, the brand, the company, and fellow customers). These relationships have a direct effect on consumer-brand identification which consequently results in enhanced consumer satisfaction,

loyalty, and advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Algesheimer et al. (2005) put forth a conceptual framework of customer-brand community relationships and their effect on customer intentions and behaviors. Studying the sample of European car club members, the scholars confirmed that the quality of consumers' relationships with the brand has a positive effect on their identification with the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Stronger identification in turn resulted in better community engagement among consumers (Algesheimer et al., 2005). However, it is interesting to note that brand communities were capable of having a negative impact on their members. Specifically, Algesheimer et al. (2005, p. 30-31) demonstrated that "normative pressure, an extrinsic obligation to abide by the community's norms, results in reactance, a motivational state of resistance, and both are found to influence the customer's behavioral intentions negatively."

Expanding on the importance of engagement and its outcomes in the brand community setting, Brodie et al. (2011) proposed five specific engagement factors. Specifically, Brodie et al. (2011) identified "learning" as the initial process in consumers' acquisition of information about a product. The second factor (i.e., sharing) was described as "sharing of personal relevant information, knowledge and experiences through the process of active contributions to the co-creation of knowledge" within brand communities (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 110). "Advocating" was referred to as consumers' diligent promotion of the brand and assistance with brand use (Brodie et al., 2011). Brodie et al. (2011) indicated that "socializing" constituted meaningful interactions among consumers to satisfy specific brand community norms. The last engagement factor (i.e., co-developing) was termed as "a process where consumers contribute to organizations and/or organizational performance by assisting in the development of new products, services, brands or brand meanings" (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 110). It is evident that

consumer engagement within brand communities triggers specific, meaningful experiences and impacts member satisfaction with the brand and commitment to the collective.

Other scholars attempted to systematically classify specific brand community practices and analyze each of these practices' roles in value creation and brand community experience (Schau et al., 2009). Through the analysis of past research and nine brand communities (i.e., 3Com Audrey, Apple Newton, BMW Mini, Garmin, Jones Soda, Lomo and Holga, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, StriVectin, and Xena: Warrior Princess), the authors organized these practices into the following four categories: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use (Schau et al., 2009). "Social networking" practices concentrate on initiating, improving, and maintaining connections among members of brand communities (Schau et al., 2009). Social networking breaks into welcoming, empathizing, and governing practices that are utilized to foster moral bonds within brand communities (Schau et al., 2009). "Impression management" practices are mainly used to create a positive impression of the focal brand outside of a brand community (Schau et al., 2009). These practices include the evangelizing component wherein members act as ambassadors of goodwill and employ such practices to justify their brand devotion (see Schau et al., 2009). The next set of practices (i.e., community engagement) includes staking, milestone, badging, and documenting (Schau et al., 2009). These practices are used to protect "brand community heterogeneity, or the distinctions among brand community members and subsets of members" (Schau et al., 2009, p. 34). Moreover, these practices facilitate development of social capital for brand community members (Schau et al., 2009). The last set of practices was associated with the use of a brand. Brand use (i.e., grooming, customizing, and commoditizing) practices contribute to a better use of the focal

brand (Schau et al., 2009). In terms of the operation of brand community practices, Schau et al. (2009) stated that:

Each practice exhibits a common anatomy, which can be described as (1) understandings (knowledge and tacit cultural templates), (2) procedures (explicit performance rules), and (3) engagements (emotional projects and purposes). Each practice similarly demonstrates a physiology in which these anatomical parts function together. Practices vary in their anatomy, but in their physiology, they vary across communities. (p. 35)

As evidenced by Schau et al. (2009), brand community practices operate together and influence one another. For example, impression management practices may have an effect on the social networking set of practices and hence influence introduction of new brand community members (Schau et al., 2009).

The analysis of patterns within an abandoned brand community (i.e., Apple Newton) revealed the existence of supernatural and religious motifs that were characteristic of consumer-to-consumer narratives (Muniz & Schau, 2005). Members of the brand community felt a sense of responsibility in maintaining the overall brand community experience (e.g., modifying and repairing the product, writing brand promotions, and performing the experience) (Muniz & Schau, 2005). These actions manifested themselves in brand revitalization and utilization of religious language (see Muniz & Schau, 2005).

Heere and James (2007) argued that the fans of sports teams should be viewed as community members rather than product consumers. The scholars contended that sports teams must consider external identities that they can represent to attract new consumers and enhance connections with current fans (Heere & James, 2007). To be specific, Heere and James (2007) hypothesized that “the team is perceived to have developed multiple points of attachment for the

fan...if the fan were to abandon his or her team, it might be thought of as abandoning a salient external identity such as city, nation, or university identity” (p. 331). In addition, the proposed model takes into account the significance of membership organizations (e.g., profession, religious identification, and political identity) as external sources of identification that could lead to fans’ enhanced connection with a team (Heere & James, 2007). Other scholars (Underwood et al., 2001) demonstrated the role of social identification in creation of brand communities. The scholars investigated four characteristics (i.e., group experience, history/tradition, physical facility, and rituals) applied to sports service realm. Underwood et al. (2001) suggested that firms should rely more on social identification, group experiences, and heritage to foster shared experience among brand consumers. Additionally, the authors indicated that “these elements provide opportunities to create more elaborate cognitive structures that surround the consumer identity and evoke strong affective ties to the firm” (Underwood et al., 2001, p. 10-11).

Expanding on the Underwood et al.’s (2001) work, Grant et al. (2011) analyzed the markers of community in the new team setting. The authors found that the team managers viewed the group experience, traditions and rituals, history and heritage, and facility as important components of team brand development (Grant et al., 2011). However, the scholars reported that the managers failed to develop specific initiatives to utilize these brand community markers (Grant et al., 2011). Other scholars (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015) employed a longitudinal method to investigate the effect of consumers’ attitudinal indicators on loyalty. The scholars found that the community attachment was a strong indicator of future attendance (Yoshida et al., 2015). This finding (i.e., community attachment) was particularly notable considering “it was far more predictive than other, more examined consumer behavior constructs in previous research (e.g., team identification, consumer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions)” (Yoshida et al.,

2015, p. 328). Woolf, Heere, and Walker (2013) investigated the influence of a charity sport event, as a brandfest, on the sense of identification with the cause. Interestingly, the findings pointed to the event's minor effect on participants' identification with the charity (Woolf et al., 2013). To that end, the scholars suggested to further examine specific social interaction strategies and celebration-related elements within brand communities in the context of charity sport events (Woolf et al., 2013).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation aimed to analyze emotional responses and experiences associated with consumption of athlete brands and interactions with like-minded consumers. Considering there is no reliable empirical evidence to show how brand communities operate in the context of athletes as brands, my initial study was instrumental in enhancing our overall understanding of this evolving phenomenon. My plan of inquiry to address the previously mentioned research questions involved assessment of general philosophical stances, implementation of data collection, and analysis procedures. Prior to undertaking this study, it was important to consider the following steps that outline a systematic research process:

1. The stage before data collection, where the researcher decides upon the research question, the aim of the research, the research objectives and theoretical framework that underlies the research.
2. The stage of designing of how to collect the data to answer the question, or the research design.
3. The actual data collection stage, where the data is collected by one or more research methods.
4. The analysis of the data – with reference to the theoretical framework adopted – to answer the question.
5. The reporting of the research to communicate the findings to others. (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 5)

Given the absence of familiarity with the question under study, it was important to discuss relevant knowledge positions to understand how they would apply to the empirical evidence derived from the present research endeavor. The current chapter provided details to describe the

ontological and epistemological backgrounds of research and implemented methods for data collection and subsequent analysis.

Epistemology and Ontology

Multiple understandings of philosophical approaches to knowledge development and reality allow us to understand how we decipher and internalize the world around us. Two of these approaches are ontology and epistemology. Ontology was termed as the philosophical study of knowledge (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011). Gratton and Jones (2004, p. 15) referred to epistemology as “the branch of philosophy that deals with how knowledge of such phenomena is acquired.” To simplify these assumptions, ontological and epistemological inquiries seek to answer the “What is?” and “How?” questions related to our interpretation of the nature of research (Andrew et al., 2011). From the standpoint of knowledge production, each of these approaches (i.e., ontology and epistemology) has an impact on how a researcher designs data collection procedures and ultimately carries out a study. As it pertains to the design and implications of this dissertation, it was imperative to review the following interpretive paradigms influencing contemporary research: positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, and interpretivism.

Scholarship with positivist paradigm relies heavily on quantifiable, factual knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In positivism, academicians acquire knowledge by verifying hypotheses which allows them to report facts and formulate further laws (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In positivism inquiries, researchers’ role is limited to data collection and identification of total objectivity through scientific research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Other scholars refer to this philosophy (i.e., positivism) as “the school of thought that the only ‘true’ or valid form of knowledge is that which is ‘scientific’...which in itself is objective and

tangible in nature” (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 16). Interestingly, the scholars acknowledged that there is a considerable debate about positivism’s suitability for the sports realm. Gratton and Jones (2004) draw our attention to the fact that sport is a social phenomenon wherein participants’ behavior is explained plausibly by intangible concepts such as feelings, emotions, and beliefs, whereas positivist research utilizes exact measurements to provide precise answers and establish objective reality.

In contrast to positivism, in which scholars develop laws by using precise measurements, post-positivism recognizes the need to test causes and associated systematic procedures that ultimately have an impact on the outcome (Creswell, 2003). Post-positivists acknowledge the existence of hidden variables that may influence the reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As a result, while post-positivist scholars attempt to approximate the “truth,” they rather further our understanding of a given phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Restated, positivist inquiries are concerned with identification of scientific truth, whereas post-positivist approaches take into account various causes that may influence effects and outcomes of scholarship (Andrew et al., 2011; Creswell, 2003; Sharp, McDonald, Sim, Knamiller, Sefton, & Wong, 2011).

Constructivist scholars stress the importance of individuals forming their own opinions to interpret the environment. With respect to constructed knowledge, it has been posited that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experience – meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explained cogently that the constructivist approach carefully considers individuals’ interaction with the social setting and related experiences. Put differently, this assumption relies on individuals interpreting their social context as they engage with the environment, the perspective commonly referred to as interpretivism.

With regard to the applicability of the interpretative approach to the realm of sports, Gratton and Jones (2004, p. 19) emphasized that:

Sport is a social phenomenon, that is those who participate in, watch or manage sports are acted upon by a number of external social forces, but also have free will to respond to such forces in an active way, and are not inanimate objects, whose behavior can be understood in terms of causal relationships. When examining sport...we all have, to differing extents, freedom to act in a number of different ways.

Taking into consideration the studied phenomenon, it was imperative to delve into the perceptions, associations, and understandings shared by the participants to answer the questions posed in the present dissertation. Given the likely presence of complex perspectives, feelings, and associations related to participants' interactions with the athlete brand community, my goal was to uncover the impact of these social relationships on participants' experience and emotional well-being. As it pertains to research participants making sense of their own experience through meaningful interactions with the environment, Creswell (2003) suggested the following:

The goal of research...is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting. (p. 8)

Restated, I intended to provide a thorough description of the environment (i.e., athlete brand community), primarily from the viewpoint of my participants, the approach typically accomplished by conducting qualitative research.

The Qualitative Inquiry

In order to achieve the purpose of the present dissertation, I utilized qualitative approach to understand the community of consumers with shared values and interests who identify with the focal athlete brand. Qualitative inquiry “takes place in the natural world, draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study, focuses on context, is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured, and is fundamentally interpretive” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 2). Qualitative scholars’ main objective is discovery of a phenomenon in an open-ended manner to capture participants’ feelings, thoughts, reflections, and experiences (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Creswell (2014, p. 186) explained cogently that “in the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about a problem or issue” to gain a deep understanding of underlying opinions and the setting under study. This approach was particularly relevant given the context of the studied athlete brand community in which a wealth of detailed data concerning participants’ perceptions and associations was necessary to interpret the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). In contrast to quantitative methods wherein it is assumed that a social phenomenon is constant across various settings, Creswell (2003, p. 18) contended that:

A qualitative approach is one in which the enquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e., the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives...The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data.

Put differently, and as it pertains to the study at hand, my goal was to explore the meaning of the athlete brand community phenomenon and associated experiences as perceived by its members.

Relying on my participants' lived experience with the athlete brand community, this study was guided by data-informed conversations with participants, with the ultimate purpose of understanding the meaning of this notion (i.e., athlete brand community). Given the recent trends concerning athletes as brands discussed in Chapter One and the apparent scarcity of scholarly work regarding this construct, the data generated by qualitative methods was deemed largely beneficial.

The unique nature of the studied athlete brand community provided guidance for my inquiry in exploring participants' underlying opinions regarding the environment, the aspect neglected by quantitative methodology. Importantly, Silverman (2000, p. 7) pointed to the fact that "a purely quantitative logic would simply rule out the study of many interesting phenomena relating to what people actually do in their day-to-day lives." Likewise, others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) expressed their concern toward the quantitative approaches by cogently stating:

Prediction and control cannot be accomplished without something on which to base predictions or formulate controlling actions...Convinced are many scientists that generalizations are the be-all and end-all of inquiry that they seriously question whether scientific activity aimed at something other than the establishment of generalizations is worth the effort. They assert that if one rejects the goal of achieving generalizations, all that can be left is knowledge of the particular – and they ask, "What value could there be in knowing only the unique?" (p. 110)

As previously stated, this study revolved around the athlete brand community members' lived experience and thoughtful interactions with the athlete brand. To that end, contextual factors and relevant participants' experience were critically important to our overall understanding of this construct. Furthermore, considering that athlete brand communities represent a poorly

understood concept, it was exceedingly important to delve into the “world” of my participants to determine how they personally internalize the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003).

It has been evidenced that sport can be affected by a number of factors including social forces and diverse cultural ideologies. As a result, a researcher must be able to adapt in an ever changing landscape of sports influenced by external forces. In fact, data collection in qualitative research could incorporate changes to the original plan of inquiry to gain a deeper insight into the question under study (Maxwell, 2013). Along the same lines, Gratton and Jones (2004) emphasized that in the realm of sport:

Qualitative research uses non-numerical data and analysis to describe and understand...concepts...The researcher may take an alternative approach to understanding spectators’ intentions to attend matches, by asking them to identify some of the reasons why they would not go to future matches. Such thoughts are difficult to meaningfully convert into numbers, and thus it is data in the form of words that have to be interpreted by the researcher that is relevant. (p. 22)

In all, considering the aforementioned research questions and the current lack of empirical research regarding athlete brand communities, the benefits of the qualitative approach suitable for this dissertation outweighed any potential drawbacks.

Data Collection Procedures

Taking into account that virtually nothing is known about how athlete brand communities create and maintain an indelible bond that reinforces athlete brand value and intangible, psychological benefits derived by consumers, this dissertation intended to delve deeply into what constitutes this notion through the participants’ perspectives. As previously stated, the current dissertation addressed the following exploratory questions:

RQ₁: How do prospective members assimilate into athlete-centered brand communities?

RQ₂: How do athlete brand communities develop shared cultures?

RQ₃: What are the emotional outcomes of shared consumption within athlete brand communities?

To that end, I conducted 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of a community built around an athlete brand. The National Basketball Association's (NBA) LeBron James was deemed the focal athlete brand for the purposes of the present dissertation. Widely recognized as one of the greatest players in the sports history, LeBron James has revolutionized the game of basketball and reshaped the entire sports landscape. More importantly, he has long been recognized as a cultural icon who has a profound impact on local economies and broader, cultural ideologies. James's impetus for philanthropic endeavors has far-reaching implications, well-beyond his individual, on-field accomplishments. In line with prior conceptualizations concerning athletes as brands, the current example (i.e., LeBron James) has demonstrated that the proliferation of sports and new media contributed to the landscape where the athlete brand became a recognizable figure of idolization outside of his team brand and the realm of sport (Walsh & Williams, 2017). To illustrate, LeBron James represents an athlete whose larger-than-life persona has an impact of various segments of society. As it pertains to the dissertation at hand, the athlete brand's public image and widely acknowledged achievements aligned closely with this study's context and intricate objectives.

The athlete brand community (i.e., fan club) was established in the early 2000s in a large Midwestern city to closely follow and support then budding career of LeBron James (i.e., athlete brand). The fan club's purpose describes the entity as "a social organization desiring social interaction with other fans. This organization may take on many forms from casual conversation,

email, and face-to-face meetings to promote national and international friendship and understanding through a common interest” (Fan Club Bylaws, 2018, p. 1). From the fan club’s archives (History of the Fan Club, 2018):

A young man [LeBron James] made us proud! So, a group of [members] began following LeBron’s progress. In 2003 when he was recruited by the NBA to the Cleveland Cavaliers, [members] watched even closer. When games came on, they would interact by calling each other and discuss the game over the phone, while cheering LeBron on, yelling at their TVs. (p.1)

The fan club has grown into a community-based organization, in which members strive to contribute to the local community and youth mentoring programs. In fact, with respect to mentoring, the fan club declares:

[Fan club’s] mentoring program envisions a community in which every youth experiences nurturing one-to-one relationships and community support, which in turn allows each of them to develop into their full potential, capable of making informed, responsible decisions as involved members of our community. (Student mentoring program, 2018, p. 2)

The fan club makes it a priority to address youth-related issues concerning self-esteem, attendance, academic performance, positive behavior, positive attitude toward school/learning, involvement in community activities, and conflict management/problem solving skills (Student Mentor Program, 2018). Despite the fan club’s community-based, social involvement, the athlete brand (i.e., LeBron James) remains an integral part of the fan club’s identity. When combined, all aspects related to the current fan club (i.e., athlete brand community) fit precisely into the context of the present dissertation.

Documents. Admittedly, athlete brand community has not received much scholarly attention. In order to address the consideration related to contextual characteristics of the studied fan club, I collected documents relating to the history of the fan club, duties of committees, and community programs. In fact, organizations produce a large number of records and documents (e.g., archives) which prove beneficial in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Qualitative inquiries rely on multiple data collection techniques (e.g., interviews and documents) to understand the social phenomenon and, more importantly, provide the reader with the context in which these social interactions take place (Silverman, 2000). Furthermore, these printed documents represent easily accessible data which is critical considering possible high cost and time constraints characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). In all, fan club-related documents incorporated background information regarding the setting (i.e., athlete brand community) into the present study.

Sample. The sample for the current dissertation consisted of 31 female members of the aforementioned LeBron James fan club (i.e., athlete brand community). In order to identify a suitable sample for this dissertation, I held preliminary discussions with prospective participants. My goal was to purposively select eligible participants within the studied athlete brand community to address the research questions posed in this dissertation. In this type of sampling, only a certain number of participants, who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study, meet the selection criteria (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Patton (2002, p. 40) explained that in purposeful sampling, study participants “are selected because they are ‘information rich’ and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest.” Importantly, a researcher’s objective is not generalization from the data collection, but rather a deep insight into the complex, unknown phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, one of the main objectives was to shed light on the intricate processes within the athlete brand community through the experience of its members. To that end, purposeful sampling allowed me to choose only certain participants who would not only provide in-depth information, but also demonstrate willingness to take part in this study and express their experiences with the athlete brand community in an expressive and articulate manner (Bernard, 2002; Silverman, 2000; Spradley, 1979). Considering only a limited number of fan club members could serve as “information-rich” cases, and hence contribute to our understanding of athlete brand communities, my priority, through preliminary discussions, was to narrow down my qualified sample to elicit deeper responses from the participants. Restated, my goal was to illuminate this dissertation’s research questions by prioritizing data saturation, and hence gaining a comprehensive understanding of the studied construct, that is athlete brand community (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Accessibility was another factor which went into the decision to rely on purposeful sampling for my data collection. It is a common practice in qualitative research to select participants using the purposive sampling technique, given limited access to a specific subset of participants and a study’s narrow objectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In fact, Andrew et al. (2011) emphasized that “a researcher who uses a purposive sample is more likely to get the opinions of the target population; however, he or she is also likely to overweight subgroups in the population that are more readily accessible” (p. 49). Put differently, my participants were chosen subjectively with a purpose to contribute significantly to the poorly understood phenomenon which is athlete brand community. On the whole, qualitative inquiry is particularly suited for exploring interpretations and meanings of unknown constructs such as athlete brand communities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

After purposively selecting a potential sample, I carefully screened each participant to verify their suitability for the present dissertation. Current participants' ages ranged from 61 to 87. The sample was predominantly African American (90%) followed by White/Caucasian (10%). As stated earlier, I held preliminary discussions with each of the study participants to analyze their level of involvement with the fan club including tenure, possible committee responsibilities, and intention to join the club. Characteristic of non-probability samples, purposeful sampling allowed me to select participants based on the questions needed to be addressed in the present dissertation. It is important to note that for qualitative researchers attempting to reach data saturation, "sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (Patton, 2002, p. 244). This factor was particularly advantageous, given an absolute dearth of scholarly work concerning athlete brand communities. The final number of members of the studied athlete brand community, who participated in this study, stood at 31.

Interview. Data collection for the present dissertation was performed from June to August, 2018 with each semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews conducted during data collection offered a balance between a pre-determined set of questions and unplanned, unanticipated probes (Richards & Morse, 2007). The purpose of adjusting the sequence and adding follow-up questions to semi-structured interviews is to delve deeper into a poorly understood phenomenon by means of participant reflections and feelings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002). The majority (i.e., 25) of participants engaged in face-to-face interviews and the remaining six interviews took place over telephone.

As previously indicated, the purpose of this dissertation was to gain insight into the intricate elements underlying athlete brand communities. To that end, an elicitation of detailed participants' responses concerning the research topic was heavily prioritized throughout data collection. Interview questions sought elucidations of the notion under study (i.e., athlete brand community) and associated experiences from each of the purposively selected members of the fan club. Throughout the interviews, I intended to allow my participants to drive the conversation, with the ultimate goal being richness and quality of responses pertaining to the current phenomenon. Gratton and Jones (2004, p. 142) detailed several important benefits of interviewing as a primary qualitative data collection method as follows:

1. Interviews enable participants to talk about their own experiences in their own words, and allow them to elaborate on any areas of particular interest or importance.
2. The interview can be more insightful than other methods... This allows the respondent to become more of an 'informant', providing data from their own perspective, which is often desirable, especially within inductive research.
3. Interviews allow unexpected data to emerge. Unstructured, or semi-structured interviews allow the emergence of important themes that may not emerge from a more structured format. This enables the subjects to reveal insights into their attitudes and behavior that may not readily be apparent.
4. A face to face interview allows you to access the participant's body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. which may be useful in some cases.
5. By using interviews, the researcher can introduce him or herself to the subject and establish trust and rapport, especially if any information is considered confidential, or sensitive.

6. Interviews may allow the researcher to develop a sense of time and history, rather than providing a series of 'static' responses, which may be the outcome of a survey. They allow the responses to be put into context, rather than providing a 'snapshot' picture.

Although there are several arguments in favor of in-person interviews, it was deemed advantageous to rely on both approaches (i.e., in-person and telephone) due to participants' location and availability. In-person interviews tend to provide more detailed, non-verbal information regarding participants (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). Additionally, face-to-face interviews may allow a researcher to establish a positive rapport, which in turn would facilitate information sharing (Shuy, 2003). In fact, it has been suggested that the in-person mode results in authentic and deep descriptions of the studied phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1994). But the ideal approach nevertheless needs to be determined based on the boundaries of the study and factors that best serve data gathering. Given the evident limitations concerning geographic location of the participants, it was deemed appropriate to incorporate telephone interviews into my data collection. As stated earlier, the benefits of in-person interviews are clear; however, in some cases, the telephone interview approach is more preferable.

Specifically, in its essence, telephone interviews as a data collection method "is less expensive than requiring the participant or the research associate travel for an in-person meeting" which in turn allows a researcher to expand the covered geographic area (Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor, & King, 2007, p. 1065). The time, required for in-person interviews, represents another concern for qualitative researchers (Worth & Tierney, 1993). The ability to take extensive notes and increased comfort level of participants can be another reason why a researcher would opt for phone interviews (Musselwhite et al., 2007). The remaining important

advantages of telephone interviews are appropriate rapport that can be established over the phone and a researcher being able to maintain one central location (Musselwhite et al., 2007). There is no clear preference for either approach; rather a researcher identifies the interview format to adequately address a particular set of research questions. Restated:

In determining which may be the preferred approach, researchers may want to consider both financial and time resources as well as participant accessibility, all of which may differ quite dramatically between phone and in-person interviews. Alternatively, and where feasible, perhaps participants could be permitted to choose how their interview conducted, in the hope that they would be more forthcoming in the approach with which they were most comfortable. (Musselwhite et al., 2007, p. 6)

In all, my reasoning behind the reliance on both modes (i.e., face-to-face and telephone) was drawn from the assessment of the aforementioned factors (e.g., time, preference of participants, etc.) and careful consideration of which approach would ultimately benefit the current data collection process.

The interview guide questions were developed as a result of careful analysis of posed research questions and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two of the present dissertation. An interview guide ensures the inquiry is consistent across all participants and provides “subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject...The interviewer remains free...to word questions spontaneously...with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Sample questions guiding each interview included:

1. How would you describe the fellowship aspect of the fan club?
2. How would you explain your identification with other members of the fan club?

3. What is your overall opinion of LeBron James?
4. How does thinking about LeBron James make you feel?
5. What do all members of the fan club have in common?

In order to establish a rapport, I asked each participant a few background, “warm-up” questions at the beginning of each interview to make a participant feel comfortable. As alluded to earlier, my intent was to fulfill the purpose of this dissertation by eliciting rich, detailed descriptions of the athlete brand community from the participants. The final sample of 31 participants proved to be adequate due to reaching the state of data saturation within the sample. The point of saturation, when collecting new data does not generate new ideas or result in additional themes, signals a researcher to stop gathering data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Put differently, data saturation occurs when collecting fresh data results in the same findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Gratton and Jones (2004) stressed the importance of achieving data saturation in qualitative research, which aligns with the purpose of this dissertation.

Data analysis. Patton (2002) emphasized that creating a coding scheme is the initial step of content analysis. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the subsequent analysis of transcripts led to a set of code categories. This initial process (i.e., open coding) assisted with determining patterns and key topics across the data (Berg, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Specifically, during this stage, “the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). The following specific steps guided creation of codes and categories for interview transcriptions:

1. Get a sense of the whole...Read all [transcripts] carefully...Jot down ideas about the data as they come to your mind.
2. Pick any data document [an interview]; the most interesting one...Pay attention to switches or transitions from one topic to the next...When you look at a piece of data, ask yourself ‘What is this about?’
3. Make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics.
4. Abbreviate topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories.
6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7. Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8. If necessary, recode your existing data. (Tesch, 1990, p. 142-145)

Relying on the codes developed during the initial stage (i.e., open coding), I reread the collected data to identify potential text fragments that may fall under any of the established categories, the process termed as axial coding (Gratton & Jones, 2004). According to the next step, a researcher’s objective is to “become more analytical, and look for patterns and explanation in the codes” with the intent to narrow down more general codes (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 220). The last stage (i.e., selective coding) requires a researcher to read through the findings for specific examples that demonstrate the analysis, and detail conceptualizations (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

The culminating stage of data analysis is instrumental in deciphering the findings through the lens of concepts in need of empirical attention. To that end, I conducted thematic analysis to

organize the aforementioned categories into overarching themes. In fact, researchers are expected to “use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories of themes” for further analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). Restated, my data was analyzed recursively to identify emergent themes and sub-themes based on the perspectives of the members of the studied fan club. Direct quotes from the fan club members were presented in the following chapter to illuminate each of the themes and accomplish readability of the reported findings. This approach aligned with Corbin and Strauss’s (2008, p. 198) argument stating that “though we break data apart, and identify concepts to stand for the data, we also have to put it back together again by relating those concepts.”

To address validity and reliability, the two instrumental criteria for qualitative data, I relied on the following verification strategies: methodological coherence, appropriate sample, collecting and analyzing concurrently, thinking theoretically, and theory development (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Specifically, the first strategy (i.e., methodological coherence) ensured there was coherence to the posed research questions and various components of the utilized method (Morse et al., 2002). In accordance with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidelines for research trustworthiness, a coherent research plan, developed at the research design point, was essential in directing the field actions and ensuring the proposed procedures were carried out. The purposively identified sample discussed earlier satisfied the second criterion in terms of participants’ knowledge and relationship with the studied athlete brand community (Morse et al., 2002). Consistent with the third strategy, I collected and analyzed my data concurrently (Morse et al., 2002). In fact, it is important to note that this dynamic between data collection and analysis is the guiding principle for reliability and validity in qualitative studies (Morse et al., 2002).

Casting light on an emerging concept (i.e., athlete brand community) was the present dissertation's top priority. Specifically, I attempted to understand the connection among members of the athlete brand community and how like-minded sport consumers reinforce the relationship with the focal athlete brand. More importantly, however, it was vital to delve into how members derive psychological benefits that ultimately contribute to enhanced self-concept. To that end, it was important to think theoretically, following the validity and reliability strategy "which requires macro-micro perspectives, inching forward without making cognitive leaps, constantly checking and rechecking, and building a solid foundation" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18).

The deductive reasoning was advantageous in this regard to analyzing the data through the lens of existing theory (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). To implement this approach, I opted for a set of a priori themes drawn from prior conceptualizations regarding athletes as brands and brand communities. Then using inductive reasoning allowed me to incorporate themes derived from the collected data (Patton, 2002). The last strategy, revolved around theory development (Morse et al., 2002), was of paramount importance, considering the evident dearth of research on athlete brand communities. On the whole, these verification strategies "incrementally and interactively contribute to and build reliability and validity, thus ensuring rigor... The rigor of qualitative inquiry should thus be beyond question, beyond challenge, and provide pragmatic scientific evidence that must be integrated into our developing knowledge base" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 19).

In addition to the aforementioned verification strategies (Morse et al., 2002), I relied on the following guidelines to establish the credibility of the present findings: adoption of well-established research methods, early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations, triangulation, frequent debriefing sessions with project supervisor, and thick description of the

phenomenon under study (Shenton, 2004). Specifically, the semi-structured interview was in line with Shenton's (2004) well-established research method provision. I conducted preliminary visits to the organization (i.e., fan club) to familiarize myself with the studied environment (Shenton, 2004). Data triangulation involved the use of a broad range of participants (Shenton, 2004). This data source triangulation ensured that "individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under [study] may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people" (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). Consistent with Shenton (2004), I conducted frequent debriefing sessions with the present dissertation supervisor throughout data collection. Thick description of the phenomenon under study (i.e., athlete brand community), including rich contextual data and participants' views provided in Chapter Four, aligned with the last provision (Shenton, 2004).

The responses elicited from the members of the studied fan club (i.e., athlete brand community) were presented verbatim in the following chapter. I carefully weave in the quotes to give my participants a voice and clarify their experiences with the athlete brand community. In some cases, I summarized the participants' reflections to ensure coherence and cohesion in the report of my findings. The protection of privacy and identities of participants are paramount for any research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To address this concern and protect the confidentiality of my participants, pseudonyms were used throughout Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Analysis of the 31 interviews revealed the following themes pertaining to the athlete brand community: adoption, culture, ideological uniformity, and sustainable development. The main themes divide into the following sub-themes based on interview testimonies by fan club members: external assimilation, athlete brand idolization, responsible community engagement, athlete brand centrality, allegiance to the athlete brand, and engagement derived self-fulfillment. Throughout the present chapter, I incorporated representative participant quotes to illustrate the aforementioned primary themes and their sub-themes.

Athlete Brand Community Adoption

External assimilation. External assimilation represents the shared demographic traits of participants such as location, age, occupation, and socioeconomic status that creates horizontal integration of the group. Participants act as evangelists for the fan club within their natural sphere of influence (e.g., family, acquaintances, and friends) to grow the club's membership. For example, Evelyn learned about the fan club "through a girlfriend that is also a member" and added that "a lady that worked at the library told me that they met there. I found out that they were meeting at the library and then the next month they had the meeting, so I went. That is when I met [club President], I knew her because she was in the school system and I had kids, so I knew her...She was always active in the community. That is how I became interested in the club." Likewise, Lindsey discussed the process of joining the club by stating, "I had a couple of friends who were in the club and I had the opportunity to go to basketball games with them and I just loved the fun way they responded to each other." She added, "The love they had for LeBron...was just contagious and I felt like I needed to join. I went to one meeting and right off

the bat I joined, it has been a good decision, I really enjoy it.” Sofia explained this process by saying:

I had heard about the club when I was exercising at the community center and there were some ladies there who were telling me about it. But my friend got me into it, because she belonged to it, we have been friends for years, our kids grew up together.

According to Sandy, “It was exciting, a bunch of ladies get together for the game...get together to have watch parties and just have fun. I wanted some of that since I had retired and I was looking for something else to do.” The external memberships and categorizations ultimately influenced how athlete brand community members became aware of the benefits of joining the fan club. Pervasive throughout interviews, my participants alluded to various demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, family status, etc.) that related to positive perception of the studied fan club and made them consider joining the collective. Present participants described in detail how their common personal traits facilitated a smooth entry into the fan club. To illustrate this process, Megan reported the following:

I had a friend that was a member of the group, and she was talking about it, and I asked her a few questions about it. I am in a couple of other organizations, but I wanted something that was fun. LeBron had just come back and I have always been a fan and wanted to partake in getting an opportunity to go to the games. So that is what I did. I have followed LeBron since his high school days. I have a daughter that played basketball and graduated in 2002, so we went to a lot of basketball games and AAU games. We supported and ran into him. So they kind of grew up at the same time. I knew I was going to have some opportunities to spend time in some group and that was one I thought sounded like I wanted to be in. I really enjoy the social part of it. I am a little

younger than most of them...I do not have any grandkids. My two kids are grown and gone, but it just seemed like something I wanted to do.

Some members learned about the fan club by communicating with colleagues in their immediate circle. In this case, ongoing social interactions with like-minded people guided the conversation naturally and allowed members to discover shared interests. Consider the response provided by Lucie which describes her introduction to the fan club:

I am a realtor here in the community, I have been a licensed realtor since 1989, and one of my associates, she was already in with the group and she invited me to come to an actual meeting to see if I like it. And I liked it, so I filled out an application. There are a lot of applications and we love LeBron so there was no questions asked, so I got into the club. My coworker, she was the one who invited me to come and take a part and after I joined, I have worked pretty close with the [club] President. You know any kind of decisions that had to be made or anything if she wants me to call or have my team call, if I have an idea or something, we talk once a month, we have an executive board meeting where all the executive people meet and brainstorm and share our ideas and go over the agenda for the club...I am in contact a lot with the [club] President. Some of the other members, we talk, we like to go out to dinner...share ideas.

Another manifestation of uniformity in internal differentiation along with passion for sports demonstrated by family members was noted by Jackie. It appeared that the desire to reconnect with old friends was prioritized in making the decision to join the fan club. Specifically, Jackie detailed:

I have been a member for about six years, I have seen the club in the paper and I have seen some people I recognized at the time. My son and LeBron used to hook up together,

we lived in the same neighborhood for a while, so I was introduced to him long before the club, but I lost contact when he went away and my son went the another way, so I lost contact, but when I had seen the club in the paper and I have seen a couple ladies that I knew and I was like ‘well, let me give them a call and see how LeBron is or whatever.’ And I knew Gloria when LeBron was just a baby, and always seen him with a basketball in his hands, you have never seen him without a basketball, so we go way back. But what made me join this organization, like I said I wanted to touch base and recognized some people and it sounded interesting. And I wanted to do a little bit of traveling and see about basketball, because I grew up with six brothers and they were all about basketball. I learned to like basketball because of Michael Jordan and then LeBron. By knowing about him, that gave me a little pep in my step about basketball and seeing him with that ball bouncing it as a kid, I wanted to see how he matured a lot and that is what brought me to this club.

Similar to Megan’s view, Joanne explained that she heard about the fan club from a friend. She went on to share with me some of the community activities initiated by the athlete brand and general aims and values of the fan club. Specifically, Joanne said:

So one of my friends talked me into it when they were doing a Bike-a-thon. He [LeBron James] used to have a Bike-a-thon for the kids, and we would go down there and help pass out water and t-shirts, and get them registered. The club was designed for fun, not for profit or anything, just getting together, supporting him and have fun. That was the main objective, doing some community work and help with his foundation.

The responses indicated that some members acquired information about the fan club from family members. It was clear from a number of participants that family interactions acted as the catalyst

for conversations about the fan club and made them consider acquiring membership. Illustrative of this, Heather articulated:

I am a sports person and I am sixty nine, so I have been doing this for about forty seven years, watching sports. And my ex-husband was a fanatic, sports person, and me and him and the boys would always go to basketball games, Cavs games and football and when I retired four years ago, and my sister was talking to me and she asked me ‘why are you not in that...fan club?’...So my sister told me they are [fan club] having a meeting and that is when I found out, and that is when I joined the club. And a friend of hers told her about it [fan club]. She is not even a sports person, she knows nothing about it, she knew I liked sports, she found out when their next meeting was, and I drove down there to find out what it is, because I have heard about it a little bit, but I did not know much about it. And I saw that this was going to give me something to do, so that is how I got hooked up for going and supporting LeBron.

Similar to the aforementioned opinion, Marisa stated that her mother was the first one to inquire about the fan club. As indicated in the following response, Marisa’s mother assumed her daughter would express interest in joining the fan club:

My mom saw information about the club in the paper and she called the club to get more information about it. And she asked me ‘would you want to go to a meeting?’ My mom and I do a lot of stuff together and I said ‘sure, I will go,’ so we went to a meeting and really liked what they [fan club] were doing and decided to join, and we have been members ever since.

Michelle, a short-tenured member of the fan club, was given the information about it by her sister. Interestingly, the club's mentoring program sparked the interest in supporting local, at-risk youth for Michelle. She conveyed the following:

I have only been there, at the club, for about a year. I was sitting with a group of women and one of them said 'I belong to the LeBron James fan club.' My sister, she had joined and she never said a word to me, so I said 'call me and let me know, and I can do this.' I have been retired since 2003. So then she called me and we got a group of women together...And that is how we got started. I like what they are doing, I am not a participant in the mentoring, but now that I am not working maybe I will have the time. We need someone to work here with these kids. These poor kids have nothing to do in this area, they get in trouble, and they have nothing to do. Let us worry about our youth and getting something done, give these kids something to do.

As explained by the following participant, the members congregate and in turn form social circles outside the fan club. This facilitates many different ways in which the prospective members connect to other social categories and ultimately show interest in becoming a member. Consider the following brief comment provided by Emma to understand shared external commonalities characteristic of the club members: "A lot of them [fan club members] come through the Choir Group, or Church Group." It is clear that external identities and relationships facilitated entry for prospective athlete brand community members. As evidenced by the participants' responses presented earlier, many attributes and shared experiences at functions outside the studied fan club, bond prospective members and encourage them to join the collective. Put differently, these social groups that club members are associated with contribute

to initiation of conversations about the fan club, which in turn sparks initial interest in joining the group among prospective members.

Athlete brand idolization. Many participants explained how they held admiration for the focal athlete brand (i.e., LeBron James) and how this affection turned into the primary reason for joining the fan club. It was clear that participants perceived the focal athlete brand as the leading figure in their life. As a result of this idolization of his persona, prospective members were naturally inclined to associate with the community of like-minded individuals who share similar passion for the athlete brand. Prospective members often compared themselves with personal qualities of the athlete brand and his off-court life story, when evaluating their own self-concept and purpose. As an illustration of this, Louise simply stated, “I came to be a part of the club because I love him [LeBron James].” Lynn had a similar response in which she mentioned the athlete brand being the driving force behind her decision to join the fan club:

[It was] more LeBron when I joined. Because when I was there and joined, a lot of them women had been there for 14 years, so I am pretty sure a lot of them were there when he had left, but they stayed. Then 09 came and you know I was so glad to hear that LeBron was coming back because we kept praying, I know we did not give up hope.

It was clear throughout the responses that watching the athlete grow up into an iconic figure, who cares about the community and underserved youth, resonated with the present participants on a deeper level. The appreciation for distinct athletic achievements coupled with charitable actions initiated by the athlete brand was discussed by the current participants as the main motive for affiliation with the athlete brand community. Such opinion was expressed by Brooke: “It was LeBron. Just the fact that we had seen him grow up in his school years in Akron and for him to become an expert player, just following him as a hometown cult boy.” Lucie reinforced this

notion by reporting, “It was more connection to LeBron James and the Cavaliers, because I love basketball and I love LeBron and I am a supporter of his and I just wanted to be involved in this wonderful group [club President] started many years ago.” Similar to those experiences, Becky highlighted her incentive to get involved with the fan club by noting, “I went because I really love LeBron, I have him all over my classroom, I have a bobble head and posters.” Valerie explained the reason to initiate the club by stating the following: “Our love of the game and our love of LeBron James...He articulates well and when he is on the court, he is a leader...Mainly what I think about him is he works in the community and he gives back.” The comments provided by Emma echoed this opinion: “Members want to be a part of something with LeBron, the love for LeBron, even people who are not here in Akron. People all over the United States are appreciative of what he [LeBron James] does. I do not know if there is another club like this.” To further demonstrate the present theme, Lynn elaborated:

I got retired and joined in. Also, I found out that LeBron James was coming home and I said ‘okay’ and then that is when I found out about the LeBron James fan club. That is what made me really interested in coming to be a part of this, because I have always been a fan of LeBron and I said ‘this is a great way to participate with the LeBron James fan club.’ And also, since I am retired, to be able to volunteer at all these different programs they have going on. This is another thing I said ‘okay’ I found there is a lot of opportunities for me in here to go forth and like I said do the mentoring. Also, sometimes you go to different places and we help at the schools, we help with the food programs and stuff like that.

Shelbi, one of the original members, discussed the sense of admiration for the athlete brand and how the feeling of pride motivated several original members to initiate the athlete brand fan club. Specifically, she conveyed the following:

[I have been a member] since the very start. I am one of the charter members. There were twelve of us...I used to go to St. V. when he [LeBron James] was on the team there and I would go and watch him play and we were all so proud of him. The first meeting we had was at East High School. We were just so proud of the hometown boy shooting baskets from the center of the floor and then he makes the basket! We were just too proud.

Similarly, for Nicole, it was the athlete brand who served as the source of motivation to join the fan club. Nicole also articulated her love of basketball which in turn influenced her decision. It was evident that there were multiple explanations for Nicole's reason to become a part of the club. Specifically, she reported:

Actually, to hear about the club, it was LeBron James. My daughter was a friend of his mother and they talked about LeBron James all the time. And then I used to play basketball, I like sports, so I used to watch him [LeBron James]...the talk of his, he was an influence on my grandson when he was a little boy.

Karen had a twofold response. In her view, prospective members' actions depend on their perception of the focal athlete brand and access to special events and social gatherings organized by the fan club. To describe this process, Karen articulated:

I think people join for two reasons. One, we are focused on LeBron because he is the number one basketball player on the planet and just the person that he is, it is such a great thing coming from our community. It is just like you could not ask for anything better representing you, little Akron, out on the world stage. The other thing is the social aspect

of being retired, being older. Many of the women did not have husbands or lost their husbands. One person joined after the loss of her significant other. I do not think they were married, but her boyfriend that she had been with for a long time had died and she needed an outlet to help her get over the grieving. So she came to the club and she was our latest activity committee person. She did good and grew in the organization. People join for different reasons depending on what their social need is or their interest in basketball or their interest in LeBron. We are a fan club... We just hoop and holler for him [LeBron James]. People join for different reason, but it is all focused around LeBron, socialization, and just being active...and keep living. Go home and sit down and do not do anything or you stay active even when you do not feel like it. Sometimes getting out is the best thing for you. Sometimes when you are down in the dumps and do not want to be bothered, the best thing for you is to get out and get active.

Similar to Shelbi, one of the original members, Emma, discussed in detail how the inspiration for the focal athlete brand led to a consideration to start the fan club. As evidenced by the current participants, this perceived bond prospective members had with the focal athlete brand was the trigger for interactive communication for many members among the fan club. This perception of similarity and external identities (e.g., location) verified members' beliefs against the athlete brand and related community engagement projects. Furthermore, and as revealed in the interviews, vertical connections between members and the focal athlete brand sparked the conversations among members. As a result, the present members act as advocates to support and promote the community work being done by the athlete brand. To clarify, consider Emma's elaborate response:

I loved him [LeBron James] playing ball at St. V. We enjoyed that. We would watch him and then he started getting involved with the NBA and we would watch the game or listen to the game and we would call each other and talk to each other about it. We would make sure everything we had to do would get done before the game's start. So the club started off with us just communicating and talking about what a good basketball player he was and a very intelligent young man. When we listened to him we thought he was three or four year old with a degree because he is very articulate. Just from the young boy that we most remember, him playing basketball, playing football, because he played football too...his mom, she made sure that he was in the right place. That is what we admired about her. She made sure he was with the right people whenever he would play and she would never miss a game. He would always look up and see her sitting somewhere, even if she is fussing which mothers do.

With respect to the community programs initiated by the athlete brand, the fan club's support of these activities, and other aspects related to fan club initiation, Emma added:

From then, we started helping with the Bike-a-thon, then with giving out food. While I was working with the Foundation and I was thinking about the people that I was associated with...I thought 'well we could get involved with that.' Because we were already involved in the Bike-a-thon. That is when we started going to the meetings and seeing how we are as a group. At that time it was about three or four people that were involved...We would meet together, like I said, on the telephone we would talk about life and everything, then we started saying 'what can we do as a group?' Then I thought a fan club! A friend of mine helped me with the research of a fan club and how we could get involved. But we wanted to go a little bit further, we wanted to be active. That would be

part of it. So we started going to the games, and we started meeting. Our first meeting was on the phone with each other. Then we found out how we could become a fan club. We did not always have money. I was working, but we did not have a lot of money. So we decided to do it without paying dues. Every time you get into a club or something, you have to pay dues, and that would become a responsibility, and sometimes people cannot do it because they have to pay dues.

For many members, the athlete brand's athletic performance coupled with memorable sports achievements set him apart from others. In other words, these prospective members lived vicariously through the successes of the focal athlete brand. Based on the responses, many participants sought recognition from the association with the athlete's accomplishments, which in turn manifested in unwavering support of his athletic performance. As an illustration, Evelyn highlighted her appreciation for the athlete brand and motivation to support his on-court and goodwill endeavors this way:

I started to watch because I was a sports widow. He [LeBron James] was always helping the young people that did not go to college. He would help them, they would play basketball in little leagues. That was my way of knowing what he was about. Then I would start hearing about him on the radio and they were winning every game. So I just got interested in it. I would start watching them every time they play. I went to several games at St. V. simply because they were just talking about him. So I was proud of him. I knew his mother was struggling, I was just proud that he was from Akron and he was doing well. Then when they won the championship, and the club, they started praying for LeBron James, we started praying for him, for his success. So when we got together, we

would have our meetings and we would pray that he would do well and God would stay with him. That is when the club was small.

The following opinion demonstrates that the stories about the athlete brand piqued prospective members' interest and fueled conversations about the fan club in an organic way. In the following excerpt, Sandy talked about hearing about the athlete brand and his athletic accomplishments that motivated her to attend the game and in turn spread information about the fan club throughout her immediate circle. To illustrate, Sandy said:

I was at work and I heard about this guy from Akron. I was not into basketball, I heard about this guy...this phenomenal player from Akron. And then after I retired, my friend had to ask me. She said 'would you like to go up to a basketball game you know and see LeBron play?' I said 'yes,' because she worked over there, and I said 'yes.' So after that, we just started going to the games and ended up joining the club together, but we found that out from another friend. Then I called up a cousin and asked her if she would like to join and we all went over and joined in the club and went from there.

It was evident from the participants' responses and memories that the focal athlete brand served as the main source influence for joining the studied fan club. Many participants explained an emotional bond they maintain with the focal athlete brand and sentimental memories associated with his childhood years in the local community. In all, as demonstrated by the aforementioned opinions, the athlete brand triggered indelible associations with the members of the fan club, connecting them to desirable past times and aligning the athlete brand's persona with their personal values and beliefs. In the mind of prospective members, the affiliation with the fan club brings them closer to the focal athlete brand and his community programs, consequently complementing members' self-concept.

Athlete Brand Community Culture

A systematic schedule of club functions ranging from watch parties to volunteer outings bond the members by providing opportunities for meaningful, social interactions. These regular gatherings, social outings, and fundraising events are embedded in the fan club's identity. By having regular social activities and events, members gather together and bond with like-minded individuals, enjoying reciprocal relationships and nurturing the fan club's social well-being. These regular, meaningful social interactions with in-group members bind the collective and promote liking between the fan club's members. Furthermore, members meet monthly to discuss each committee's activities and provide reports that summarize social outreach, youth mentoring, and volunteering. Lindsey described the culture of the athlete brand community this way:

It is a social group that is more than a social group. It is a social group that likes to have fun and do good for the community. A lot of them are much older, and it is a way for them to keep in touch. It keeps them engaged. They are doing fun events, and what is really fun about it is getting together and going to the basketball games, that is the peak for me. Having a lot of fun at the basketball games, representing with our t-shirts and letting LeBron know that we are there for him. And then we have the watch nights for the games. We all get to our restaurant, we support a restaurant, and watch games, eat, drink, and just have fun whether we lose or not.

Reports of social events and community-related activities are presented at monthly meetings held by the fan club. Importantly, the fan club meetings and events simplify the process of meeting fellow members which contributes significantly to the bond within the membership. Lucie offered the following comment regarding the fan club meetings:

Well, they come to the meeting and we, each chairperson, get up and give our report and we talk about our activities and things that we plan for the year. And a lot of the people are widowed, are alone and everything and it gives them something to do, you know, we are like a family. 'Love and fun' is our motto. Love and fun so when the members get sick or have surgery or need someone to talk to, they can call one of us and we go to the hospital or nursing home and visit them and stuff like that.

Apparent from the interviews, the satisfaction that comes from supporting and guiding young people is unmatched. The fan club members aspire to be role models who provide children with critical guidance and support. Furthermore, participants reflected on the rewarding experience of supporting the local community and its at-risk youth. For example, Clara acknowledged that both mentoring and community support resonated with her on a deeper level. Clara described this special feeling of fulfillment by stating:

Mentoring does mean a lot to me. As a mother of one child, my daughter had asthma attack and she died at 48. And I always tried to see her and somebody else, and it brings joy... We have participated and still do in the coat giveaway, we bring coats and hats and make sure kids have them, and that is joy and it is always a blessing when you give back. It is always a blessing that you are able to give back, and sometimes it makes you feel a little ashamed when you complain about what you do not have or what you have lost.

When you see people who have less and who you can help, when you see the perspective, it puts everything in perspective for you.

With respect to the importance of the events initiated by the fan club and their positive influence on members' social relationships, Emma had the following opinion:

Well we got, obviously, the basketball games. But...just like I said, going shopping, going to look at a different part of our world here...I have a plan, most of us go to church on Sunday. On Saturday we go shopping for food and during that...we have a conversation with other people and see how people live. We are still active, and your mind does not get stale...If you do not know what [you are] going to do today...for dinner, 'Oh no! I am going on a boat cruise!' We can have someone to feed us and we can have friendship with somebody else. On the boat, we are still learning, even without dancing and we can move. We are still active, that is the most important thing, being active and doing something. And making sure that as you get older, you do not feel that your life is passing you by, you are going right along with it.

Members' social lives are important for their overall well-being. The events organized by the fan club intend to foster these interactions among members and promote sense of belonging among membership. With regard to this inclusive culture of the studied athlete brand community, it was indicated by nearly all participants that socializing with fellow members contributes significantly to their emotional balance. In response to the question regarding the events and game outings organized by the fan club, Cathy noted:

We have an annual picnic in August, so all the members and our guests we all hang out, we hang out at Metro Park on Newton street, just hanging out and enjoying together, and have activities around what LeBron James did maybe a trivia or something. So this is just a gist of it, just getting together and enjoying our love for LeBron, and then for annual banquet at the end of the year in December...I am always on bus trips, we went to D.C., it is on my Facebook page, we went to [African American History] museum and the Washington Monument. We sponsor bus trips to the games, so I have been to most of the

games except for two and I am the one who gets there early and helps pass out the snacks. And then we do trivia of LeBron on the bus, we sing our cheer and since I have a loud mouth, I am usually the one who leads that. And at the games, we have different signs that we hold up and people have blankets and stuff. We took the bus up to Cleveland when they won the Championship and that is on my Facebook page. Our bus was the first one to go down the parade line, and they had it all blocked off and you could just see them stepping back, and we were just going down and we are going 'LBJ, LBJ' and we got to stay there with all the million people.

Mary explained that not only does she enjoy interactions with fellow members at social gatherings, but also makes it a priority to support those who need help. To be specific, Mary shared the following:

When we have a picnic, we have a picnic every year, in the park. We interact with children, the [members] bring their children and their grandchildren. We have fun with the children, we play games...We are a supportive club. If another member needs a ride to the store...or was sick and needed a [member] to come, I would be the one that would go and I have another lady that goes with me. Or whoever, it does not have to be my little committee, I invite them to go with me...My day to day, I plan to go to a high school and visit a young woman that is in high school, she is not a member. I reach out to members and non-members, we let them know that we are here for them, and if they want to join us, they can.

Personal satisfaction from youth mentoring was evidenced by many participants' acknowledgements. Youth-oriented support programs such as coat drive positively influence members' interpersonal relationships among members through internalization of the common

goal revolving around community outreach. In an in-depth response regarding the club-related events and community outreach, Emma shared the following:

In October we start off with our coat drive. And we ask the public to bring new and lightly worn coats, gloves, hats, and things like that so kids that are not in school that they can have them, and we ask them to bring it to the school. It helps the young people there. Sometimes they bring their coats sometimes their families come in and help, that is our coat drive. It lasts up until the Christmas party. It is one of the biggest things we do in the winter, we get together and collect the coats. Then we have the event where we cook the food. We start off with our songs and we start off with the drums, that was the way of getting music out, getting communication out. We do the song, this is the one with the gospel, then we have story telling. So before they get to the song we have story telling. One of the ladies in the community, she tells the children a story. Before we had TV or any of those things, we had people that told stories. So we are trying to get the children back to sitting and listening and talking about the story because TV was not always available, and sometimes it needs to not be available now...So we have a lot of variety of things that we do and along with the gospel, there comes the blues. And blues is also story telling. We also have jazz...We just try to give them a background in taste and sound, that is not just rap. We also took the children to the zoo, the Cleveland Zoo.

Evelyn described in detail the sense of fulfillment that arises from sharing meaningful events with other members. It was clear that these membership-oriented events contribute significantly to the overall culture of the athlete brand community. More importantly, the following comment indicates that the experience of supporting those who are in need is very satisfying. As acknowledged by the present participants, many are aware of the fellow members' struggles.

This sense of belonging to the athlete brand community and activities in support of fellow members result in the personal feeling of comfort among the club. To be exact, from Evelyn's perspective:

We are a very loving group. It is a lot that we do. Our purpose is getting together once a month...we can have a very lonely life. It takes up the space where our kids and grandkids, but you do not always want to be with the grandkids...so you want quality time with people of your age, so we get together, we have committees for different things. We have one that goes out to see the sick. We have a committee that we travel, and I am on the social committee. I was in charge of the 14th anniversary. We had a really nice time at the party center, that was our time to dress up...That is our outing. We get together, watch the games and we do not have to cook that day, because we get to the restaurant and eat and we just do a lot of things in the neighborhood...it is like a good time to get together and find out what is going on.

The interviews demonstrated that members share common life experiences and offer companionship to those in need. Evelyn stated that club members are empathetic to fellow members' sadness and uncertainties. Specifically, she said:

If someone has a death in the family, we will be there for them. By having the club, it helps us to be active. We are at an age where aches and pains we have that every day...If we are going to have them, let us be all together and have aches and pains together. You forget about how you feel by socializing with someone around your same age. You do not have to have pity parties as much. I believe in taking your life and using it in the best of your ability. There is always someone worse off than you...We have our days were our arthritis takes over, but we pick ourselves up and make the best out of the day. We try

to serve our community, we do things that make someone else feel well and good. If you are in the nursing home and somebody comes and you give them that time of day, you have made someone feel better. We have a committee for that, we just like to do things.

Evelyn also added that members enjoy sharing their creative side with the fan club and derive satisfaction from this mutual appreciation and camaraderie:

We have our Christmas dinner and everyone will bring a covered dish, we have a long line of sweet potato pies and apple pies and turkey and dressing. A soul food feast. They give everyone a chance to do their part. Some people do, we specialize, we say 'we want your chicken and dumplings, we want your cookies' and that makes people feel better. We are making people be appreciated, that is what we are about. If somebody is down, we are there for them to give them support as a group. That is what we are about. A lot of people are saying 'what do you get out of it?' 'his [LeBron James's] name, that is it.' We are just like any other fan club, we love him and follow him... We do other things.

Anything to make us proud. We do things that seniors do.

In response to my question concerning different traditional events shared among the members of the club, Karen indicated:

We have our annual things in the history, we annually do a picnic in August. We have our anniversary banquet in September. We have Christmas dinner in December. We have taste and sound of soul in May...we do a coat drive from October to February every year for Helen Arnold students. Those are our annual things, aside from going to the games and other side activities like going to Amish Country...trips to Washington to go see the museum and that kind of thing. That is pretty much our schedule, then go watch games of course. We will go watch games at a bar or club, a sports place.

The aforementioned functions arranged by the fan club help these members to stay active and connected socially. For many of these participants, various events such as picnics, game nights, and shopping outings are very important to bonding social capital and associated positive health benefits. To demonstrate, my conversation with Becky regarding the fan club activities and her experience revealed the following:

We always have a picnic and that is always fun. It is outside, and it is nice to be around and you can bring your family if you want. We went on our boat trip, good times. We went around Cleveland in the canals up there. We went to a casino the same day... We went down to Hartville which is Amish Country. And we got to see things down there and went on a bus all day. That was really a memorable event. The bus driver was not sure where he was at, because we were bumping the ceiling. It was like we were going on a roller coaster.

It was clear from the responses that this strong sense of belonging fostered at club-organized events, in addition to various opportunities to engage in impactful community work, ultimately prevents isolation and loneliness among this athlete brand community. As an illustration, when I asked Jenny about the activities arranged by the fan club, she reported:

Labor Day weekend, they have a big picnic and we go and there is normally 80-100 that turn out for that. And that is fun. So that is another way to get together as a group. Then we have a wonderful Christmas party and I love it, because it is soul food and some of these gals can sing. Oh my God! They are in their 80s and could bring the house down in the lounge. In fact, I keep telling Mary, she can sing at my funeral. We always have that in December usually around the 10th and everyone brings something... we always meet at the school and they use the kitchen and make turkeys and ham and we just all bring

something. It is a nice way to get together and celebrate the holidays and each other. So that is how I got involved. And I am on the telephone committee, because I can at least do that. I would love to be able to mentor the kids and the reading program and like I said, that is an everyday thing and there is no way I could do that. So that is why we do the coats. We are going to give more coats this year...we can afford it and they need it. It just breaks my heart to think that they do not have clothes to keep warm.

To summarize, various social events, orchestrated by the fan club, contribute to regular interactions among the members. This in turn helps the club to maintain group solidarity which members find extremely important for personal satisfaction and community service projects. As perceived by the current members, it is due to the sense of unity emphasized and practiced at social gatherings that the members are motivated to remain as an active participant within the studied athlete brand community. The bond that the participants felt with the group resulted in an open knowledge sharing environment, ultimately enhancing the members' self-concept and social well-being.

Responsible community engagement. Members of the fan club internalize the impact the group has on the local community and its youth in need. Nearly all participants reflected on a deep sense of achievement that comes from doing good for other community members and those in need of members' assistance. Inspired by the focal athlete brand's charitable efforts across the local community, current participants took on various community outreach activities. The fan club members aspire to work collaboratively with various entities within the local community to address important social issues. For example, Maria stated, "We are starting to do more service things. Like the mentoring program they started. And a bunch of us go to the Red Shield. It is an offshoot of the Salvation Army, and it is a food giveaway." The responses obtained from the

interviews pointed to a profound sense of purpose and direction in the fan club members' lives due to systematic volunteerism. Supporting fellow members and the community at large during challenging times and dedicating time at assisted living facilities resonate with the members' personal level. Restated, volunteerism cultivates the fan club's sense of purpose and distinct identity. It was evident that the participants found responsible citizenship fulfilling which in turn enhanced members' self-worth and social relations within the studied fan club.

The following responses illustrate the significance of community engagement as perceived by the participants. Inspired by the athlete brand and his desire to empower children through model experiences, the members of the fan club intend to do likewise. For example, Lindsey stated the following:

We want to make LeBron proud of us. We are just taking some of the things that he believes in, and he is putting his money in, and we try to do the same thing... We are trying to help at-risk children just being a [mentor] to them and help them make better decisions, be excited about their future, just trying to do some of the things LeBron does. We also do some of the things like coat drive, coats, hats, scarves, and gloves for one particular school and it just feels good. And that is something LeBron would do, and we are trying to model ourselves after some of the things he [LeBron James] believes in.

Brooke echoed such perspective:

The main mission in life is to help people and give back, so this is avenue for us to do it. You work and then you retire and so this is something to do and basically we are just helping people and socializing. The things he [LeBron James] is doing are really needed, he is actually helping kids and he did not forget where he came from. That is pretty much where he started from, where he lived, his sympathy. I wish more people could learn

from him, because it is our mission, as people, to help others and when you are in the position to help others, and you do it favorably, that makes it nice. He is doing his part, he has not forgotten where he came from.

As it pertains to the members' willingness to give back to the local community in any way possible, the responses were consistent throughout the interviews. To demonstrate, Jenny described the fulfilling experience of giving back as follows:

In July, I was given weeks to live and obviously I am still here and I am not ready to go yet. We buy coats for kids and last Christmas we bought and donated 20 coats. This year, I want to do 30. These kids do not have coats, oh my God, and I make sure it has a hood, because they do not have hats or they lose their hats and I pin gloves to the sleeve and buy different sizes, half for boys, half for girls, and then if they do not have coats, they go to the office and they give them one. Some gals donate boots, some do gloves and hats, so it is not just coats.

As reflected in the interviews, donating to causes is one of the most fulfilling uses of the participants' time and effort. For example, Megan opined that showing support for local youth in need through donations and mentoring enhances their lives and learning opportunities:

The things that I have done, I joined the social committee. We did the banquet and we do our Christmas party and the two years I have been in there, I donated coats and gloves and other needed things to our adopted school, over at the Helen Arnold Center. Last year I had more time, and I tried to find used coats, I bought a couple...I was able to go find new coats and gloves and things and I got personal 'thank you' from the principal there at the school, so I think they really appreciate the things we do. I have some friends that are teachers and principals, and they share with me sometimes some of the problems with

learning...they cannot even get to the learning, because they got to deal with the social issues. It gets mighty cold if you do not have boots and socks and coats and things to cover yourself up with. It is hard! If those are some of the little things I can do to help the kids and the public schools that need these things so they can get an education, I do not mind doing that...I volunteer at the food bank. One of the things that I think I am willing to join is right now they have a project where you can go through the Akron public schools and get trained and certified, so you go into the schools and go help with some of the programs they have.

The focal athlete brand is known for his support of local youth and families through charitable donations and comprehensive community programs. As stated earlier, these community-oriented resources, provided by the athlete brand, influence the fan club's performance and sense of belonging among its members. Take into consideration the comment shared by Emma, which accurately illustrates how the members model their actions after the focal athlete brand:

So we wanted to do something to let him [LeBron James] know that we feel the same way. That is why we have our mentoring program. Our mentoring program is not only to give them some insight into life, but to make them feel good about themselves. Once a person or child starts asking, and growing up, if you feel good about yourself you can make it no matter what. Do what you do best and do what is good for you, and we still love you.

The excerpt below demonstrates that in helping others in the community, the members find fulfillment and joy. It was clear from participants' comments that kind and helpful intentions, exhibited by the fan club members, caused them to feel satisfied. For example, it appeared that

for Mary, involvement in the community and volunteering at a nursing home had a profound impact on her sense of meaning in life. To illustrate, Mary shared with me the following:

I think what makes us popular is because we are out in the community. We do things. We have outings. We let people know, we have a publicity chairperson that puts out events in the paper and lets people know. I said people are the best advertisement in the world. We are in the newspaper, the things that we have done...we collect coats, hats, and gloves for the children, that the parents cannot afford to buy...I go out to the nursing homes. We went last year during the holidays and did some Christmas Caroling. We went and sung to the patients. And they just enjoyed it, you know, singing along with us. I let them lead, I say 'what do you want to hear?' They like Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. They can relate back to those songs once a person gets old, because their mind is not what it once was...I enjoy that. I enjoy going to the nursing homes. Singing to the elderly. And there is young people there, some young people there that had a stroke or different things happened in their life. When we go, I talk to them, you know. We had one [member]...she lived to be 102 years old. I was able to sing at her homecoming, it was just awesome. I just say when I get to that age, I hope somebody be around that, want to do what I do.

As evidenced by the interviews, volunteerism has profound benefits for the members of the fan club. In particular, being able to help others in need provides a sense of purpose to the fan club and its members. For many members, volunteerism is a way to stay active in retirement, engage in a variety of community-oriented activities, and meet new people. The social interactions with fellow members and kind acts, which come from helping other people, bring joy for many members and make their lives feel meaningful. Lifting others and helping at-risk children to

overcome challenges related to self-esteem and positive behavior enrich the social life of the fan club and maintain members' wellness after retirement.

Athlete brand centrality. Despite various social gatherings and functions arranged by members, the fan club's identity revolves around the focal athlete brand (i.e., LeBron James). It was evident from the current participants' responses that the primary reason to maintain membership is an admiration for the athlete brand and his charitable initiatives. Present participants' comments centered on the athlete brand, his contributions to the local community, and personality traits which in turn evoked deep feelings of pride and satisfaction among the members of the studied fan club. For example, Kelsey expressed her view by saying, "I just admire him [LeBron James] so much, because he cares about the people. That is one reason why he came back here. I knew he was coming back, even when he left, I knew he was going to come back." Valerie posited, "He [LeBron James] is a worldwide basketball player...I just think [his] character...and he came from a single family...how he behaves himself in the community. And he loves the game." The following example shows how the focal athlete brand provided a participant with a sense of pride which triggered feelings of joy. Specifically, Karen opined:

We watched him grow up in Akron. That is where that pride comes from. He is one of our kids, and for him to come from the place where we are, it is being proud of someone from your hometown who is making a difference. He is a great role model and that makes everybody proud.

In response to the question concerning the athlete brand's personal qualities, Evelyn elucidated, "He struggled, but he has such a big heart, he is honest...his caring for people and his honesty of wanting the world to be right is much higher than the game." Rebecca described in detail how much it meant to have the athlete represent her community and care about its youth:

To look back on where he [LeBron James] grew up, single family and for him to turn around and not turn back on his community, you know he wanted to help because he did not have that when he was growing up. For him to turn around and pass something on to children being raised now, that is just so awesome to me. It is not that he made a bunch of money and forgot about Akron. He went to play for Cleveland, but he still remembered Akron, he has home here, he has not forgotten his roots you know, that means a lot...it is a big thing, little Akron, but he still remembers where he came from and a lot of people do not.

What impressed Brooke about the athlete brand was his distinct traits of a true family man who sets high standards for his children:

I think what makes him [LeBron James] a good role model is his reputation...he is a family man. He takes care of his family. He has not had any scandals in the newspaper. He is truly a hometown and he looks out for all the children, specifically now for the third grade that he is opening the school for the youth here. I think he is a good person with the heart for family and children.

Mary explained why the athlete brand's persona resonated with her on a deeper, more personal level by sharing the following story:

The most outstanding thing he [LeBron James] did was, there was a little girl going to school and she had a handicapped brother, and she wanted her house fixed up. Her mom was struggling, she was a single mom, and she had a house on Rhodes Avenue. They had it on TV, and LeBron and his crew, and he had his children helping, and they went in there and remodeled that house. Just tore it out, gutted it out, and that was just awesome because he filled the girl's dream. He filled her dream. That was just awesome. So the 'I

Promise' team went in there, and I think that made national news. He just did not mind working himself. It was not like, you know, he could have had them doing it, but he was out there, he was the one doing it. He had him and his children, they all pitched in and helped along with his foundation. He was right there with them, hand in hand. It is amazing, because a lot of people have money, they do not have the time to do all that, but he takes the time for the children. That is his thing, he is about the children.

In the same vein, Maria explained that the athlete brand is involved in the community through his foundation. From Kelsey's perspective, it is the athlete brand's tireless support of the local community and children that makes him a special role model: "The things that he [LeBron James] does for the children. That is what makes him a role model. He puts some events for the kids...and gives them bikes...I think that is really nice of him." More importantly, the opportunities available to families and children provided by the athlete brand are truly unique. It takes a special, unselfish person to involve in acts of kindness and altruism. Maria's sentiment, as demonstrated below, echoed the view of many other members of the athlete brand community. Specifically, our conversation revealed the following:

He [LeBron James] is a good family man. Children come first. What he does for the children in Akron to make sure they all have a better life, I mean it is just incredible. You know he makes a family that has nothing, it does not matter who you are or where you come from, you are chosen by the school for your children. And you have to follow rules that is why it is called the 'I Promise' program. When he came back four years ago and they had the event downtown, they had all the families there, all the kids, all the parents. You would see these parents come in there and some of them you just kind of had to shake your head, because they were poverty stricken. I mean really, really poor and I am

talking the white people were what you would call, if you want to be derogative, poor white trash. That is the perception, because they did not even have the proper clothes to wear. It was an event that should reflect, you know, LeBron, but they probably did not have the funds to do it. But he has made those families, because he writes letters to the kids. He sends out gifts to the kids. He will send them tickets, because I know some people who are in this, so the children have so much to look forward to. They do not have time to think about getting poor grades, it is about getting better grades and bettering themselves and at the same time it is about respecting their parents and bettering their family actually, and then they can go to college and it is on him. And this is what he wants, he wants a better core in this city. It starts here.

According to Heather, the athlete brand exemplifies many qualities of a noteworthy role model. Various programs established by the athlete brand that seek to promote educational success drive meaningful experiences and appreciation with the members of the fan club. To illustrate, she said, “I am just so proud of him as a person...he wants the kids to get an education and I admire that out of him...he cares about the kids and we need more people like him.” Lynn described her perception of the athlete brand’s programs that help at-risk children this way:

To me what makes him a role model is him giving back to the community. He spent not thousands, but millions of dollars that he put back into the community. That is what makes him so unique in a lot of the sports people. I am pretty sure there are others that have given, but I guess with him it is dealing with the children. We talk about our grandkids, we talk about our children, we talk about our nieces and nephews, and he is willing to help with their college. Not just the elementary and middle schools and high schools, but the college. He is willing to put so many millions of dollars into the college

that these kids that cannot afford college can really go forth now and have a good education. I think he put enthusiasm in these children, 'Oh one day I could go to college!' They did not have hope to go to college. The funds were not there for their families. And by him putting his money there to help them go to college, it gave them hope. I am thankful for so much that he has done for the youth of our city, I say the youth in general, not just the elementary, middle, senior high.

As reported by the present participants, what differentiates the athlete brand is his dedication toward students with low-income backgrounds. By stressing the importance of good grades and commitment among these children, the athlete brand ensures that each student is treated fairly in terms of educational opportunities within the local community. To illustrate, Sofia expressed her appreciation for the athlete brand-designed programs by commenting:

I think it is wonderful, the things he [LeBron James] does for the children and helping them to go to college. I have a couple of cousins who are in his program, they have been in his program for years and I just love what he does for them and the education that he is going to give them in the future, I think it is wonderful and I am so happy so many kids are going to benefit from him. I have met one young lady, and she said her son got picked by a lottery and that he will benefit from the LeBron college fund and he will be going to his school. And I think it is so nice and she was telling me about the things he will be getting and how they get to go to Cedar Point and even though my grandkids are not in it, my cousins are going to give them free tickets to go to Cedar Point this year, so that is a blessing right there that they get to share, and they are not even in the program.

Evidently, the athlete brand recognizes that education is the key to success in life for many children. Having a system, in which children are inspired and challenged to be successful, ultimately results in a lasting impact in their lives. Lucie shared with me that:

He is going to start the school...and as far as the student is concerned, promise is for children in Akron public schools to focus on their studies, to get a good education, to be able to read, math so they can advance and be a productive person when they get grown and go to college...I think he has a couple thousand children that when they finish high school, they have a free ride to go to college, if they keep their grades up. And I think it is Akron U he is affiliated with, the University of Akron and when they finish high school, they keep their grades up...the foundation will be paying for their college education. And they can study whatever they want to study as long as they get their degrees, so that is all I know about that and I know he has bought computers for the children and schools.

She went on to explain that the athlete brand's pursuit of excellence and qualities, widely regarded as authentic, make him a true inspirational role model:

I think he is wonderful young man, his mother did a fantastic job with him. I think he had other mentors in his life, adults, grown men and women to help him to stay out of trouble out here in the world. He has a good mind of his own, he followed his heart and his passion and that is why he is the greatest in the world. That is what he loves, basketball. And he followed his heart and he puts 110 percent into his job. It is a sport, but it is the job too, and that is what made him so great. And he did not get sidetracked with all these swirly things out here, he did not get sidetracked...He just stayed focused and he made it to big time. He is a family man, got children and his wife, he is just an outstanding human being and we need more people in the world like him.

As indicated in the following response, despite the athlete brand's professional accomplishments, fame, and popularity, he still recognizes the issues within his local community and makes it a priority to benefit others through various charitable initiatives. To emphasize, Brooke commented regarding the athlete brand's personal traits and character this way:

Truly caring, a nice guy, loves children, helps people with families. He [LeBron James] always pretty much does goodwill. He has not gotten tainted by his stardom or by anyone in the media, I do not think. He has been true to himself. He is a family man, so he has been there, he has done a good job about it. We do not have any complaints or can say anything negative about him.

Megan alluded to the aforementioned qualities by sharing the following view:

He is a father, he is a husband, he is an entrepreneur, and I respect what he has done and how he has done it. I know the things that have been said and the things that have been written, and I am just awfully proud of him, because with all the adversities...growing up, he has proven to be a real leader and I think he is an outstanding young man...I just admire him.

The fact that the athlete brand takes pride in community outreach resonates with the fan club on a deep level. Interestingly, and as indicated here, the athlete brand prioritizes the significance of the impact on his community over public recognition and praise. Specifically, elaborating on the impact the athlete brand has on the local community and its schools, Maria remembered the following:

He does things for his school, St. V., that nobody knows about...I can remember when one day he, this was when he was first into the league, and they had some computers down and they were without computers for 24 hours. He went and bought computers for

the school. He did not want for somebody to say ‘oh what channel can we go down and get these computers?’ he went down on his own. He does not ask for fame for that...He does not have to get any extra glory for it, he gets enough glory in the appreciation of the deed.

These examples demonstrate how the athlete brand’s personal traits and community-related endeavors resonated with the members of the fan club. This overarching theme further illustrates how the athlete brand’s persona affects the fan club’s identity in a variety of ways. It was clear that his influence goes beyond the playing field. Based on the participants’ views, it is the personal, leadership qualities characteristic of the athlete brand that have far-reaching effects on the members of the fan club. The athlete brand’s genuine desire to help his community comes from his upbringing and powerful feelings of empathy for the at-risk children. As reported by many members, the recognition of the athlete brand’s altruistic personality and empathy toward struggling families, enhanced positive attitudes towards his persona. In sum, one of the principal reasons for the fan club’s identity to center around the athlete brand is his trustworthiness and empathic feelings for the families and children in need of help.

Allegiance to the athlete brand. As admitted by the participants, the more they resonate with the athlete brand and his personality, the more likely they are to remain loyal to him, regardless of the lifecycle stage the members are in. Almost all participants suggested that the focal athlete brand earned loyalty and trust by being authentic and relatable. The emotional attachment to the athlete brand, triggered by geographical identification and his commitment to community service, enhances ongoing engagement among the fan club members. It was evident from the interviews that this indelible bond trumps the athlete brand’s team affiliation, because of his unwavering support for the local community. Restated, as indicated by many responses

provided by the present participants, they remain devoted and supportive of the athlete brand, regardless of his team affiliation. Consider the following evidence for participants' loyalty in this context. Clara explained it this way:

Everybody at my Bible class came and talked to me saying 'Are you sure you are alright? You got a fever?' I thought they were inquiring about my health, because you know every now and then you have to, I will be 80 this year. And then I come to find out they are checking my temperature to see how I am doing because LeBron is leaving. Let me tell you something, like I told Channel 5 they interviewed us when he went to Miami, 'listen I am a LeBron James fan and if he goes to play for D Y Diddy, then I am going to be a D Y Diddy fan.' I am happy for him, his boys, and his wife, and if he is happy himself, then I am happy for him, and I will still be a LeBron James fan.

The following opinion is a good example of participants' loyalty to the athlete brand. In this response, Megan rationalized the approval of the athlete brand's decision to leave the local team brand:

Some people I thought were crazy burning their jersey. There is no way in heck I would have ever burnt a jersey or acted crazy because a man made a personal decision to go to another job in another city. 'Did we want him to stay? Heck yeah!' 'Do we wish they could have worked it out? Yeah.' He went and who would have thought he would come back, but he did. That rarely happens that a player leaves and comes back, unless he comes back to retire at the team he spent most of his career at.

In the same vein, the following comment demonstrates that Sandy was very supportive of the athlete brand's decision to leave for a competing team brand:

I would say that he [LeBron James] is very impressive. He says the things that he wants to do and then he completes it. He does it by a wonderful way and nobody could understand why he was going away, but he wanted to reach out, he wanted to spread his wings out, so why not let him go when he left, you know. I thought that that was great.

He thought there was more in him, and that is why he wanted to go to prove himself.

Heather expressed her deep commitment to the athlete brand and support for his personal decisions. As alluded to earlier, the athlete brand's positive image and his foundation's charitable work resulted in a community of loyal fans who support and promote the athlete brand outside the fan club. In Heather's view:

Because that [move to Lakers] happened, it does not mean you stop loving. 'You know what I compare that too?' You know when he left for Miami, and the next day I was watching and tears came to my eyes...I have seen them burning his jersey and all such stuff up there in Cleveland and as time went I started understanding, but that was a negative way to react to that. People are people and all that he has done for Cleveland, and he got the right to do what he wants to do. And how am I going to love you today and hate you tomorrow? How do you do that? And I said 'we love him.' We love him, but they came out saying they hated his guts and I said 'how do you do that?' And there are probably some people feeling that way now, but they will get over it. He does what he desires to do and that is the way I feel, and it does not mean you have to stay in Cleveland. Yes, I would have loved for him to stay, but for his reasons or whatever he chose to leave and do something at the Lakers, make them a great city.

Athletes relocate numerous times throughout their professional careers. However, as acknowledged by many participants in the present sample, the image of the focal athlete brand remains intact. Sofia stated the following with regard to her estimation of the athlete brand:

No different, I think everybody got a life, and you do what you want to do with your life.

If he chose to go somewhere else, that is fine, and I do not think they should have been mad at him the first time he went anywhere. That is his life and if he wants to go

somewhere and do something different, then just let him, do not be mad, that is his life.

Lucie's comment was consistent with that of Sofia's in terms of emotional connection to the athlete brand. This positive perception of the athlete brand makes the fan club members ignore alternative team brands and focus solely on the focal athlete brand and his endeavors. As an illustration, Evelyn opined, "When he went to Miami, we had our Miami shirts. We [still] followed him." A similar comment was provided by Cathy, in which she demonstrated her unwavering support for the focal athlete brand: "It was just amazing how this club is supporting LeBron... When he went to play for Miami and came up here to play the Cavs, we still had to bring our signs and we loved him... no matter what." Consider the response Lucie shared with me:

Well, I feel like he [LeBron James] did what he had to do. He wanted to get a championship ring and he felt like the team might not have been at the level he wanted it to be at the present time, so he went to Miami and he did what he had to do. He left, but he came back home, but we all stuck by him regardless of wherever he goes. Whatever he does, we are going to be here for him. I mean he is not going to play basketball forever and so, but whatever path he chooses, the fan club will still be there watching him, keeping an eye on him, and rooting for him and his endeavors.

Karen voiced her displeasure with people who criticized the athlete brand for his decision to switch teams. Specifically, she explained her preferential attitude toward the athlete brand this way:

I was not upset with him at all. I was upset with the people...the people in Cleveland who built their whole economy around him...You have been in this place and not have had the success that you wanted, and you thought maybe I cannot do it here, I can do it over there, and guess what? He did it, two times. So I was not upset with LeBron. I was upset with the people that were upset with him...We still followed him, as he played down there [in Miami].

In the same way, Rebecca emphasized the following:

I am not upset with him because he did it. Because that is like with anybody who has a job and in order for you to make a decision to go somewhere else, it has to be something to benefit you and your family, and that is how I felt when he went to Miami. That was his decision to make...that would be like anybody making a decision for their life and family you know. I take my hat off to him, he did not let anybody influence him, that was his decision and that is a good thing. He has a wife and children, I hated to see him leave, but you know I am not going to stop being active in the club or anything.

The aforementioned participants' testimonies show that the fan club members' satisfaction with the athlete brand and his actions serve as a catalyst for enduring loyalty. It is clear that the athlete brand's relocation to a new city to represent a competing team brand does not diminish his influence within the studied athlete brand community. Throughout the interviews, members show support for the athlete brand's professional and personal decisions which in turn ensures continued patronage.

Ideological Uniformity

An affiliation with the fan club affirms the members' social identity through association with like individuals that share demographic features and most importantly, a common perspective. Participants adopt the identity of the fan club as part of their own and feel the satisfaction of belonging to a group membership with natural connections to a network of like-minded people. For many of the participants, who occupy a similar socioeconomic status, the club is a lifeline that keeps them active in retirement. To illustrate, Clara articulated, "That was the reason to join the club for me, it was to be with like-minded people who like basketball." Jenny had a similar view on shared characteristics: "A lot of them, their spouses are gone, most have children who live in the area, but these are people of their own age that they can relate to." Emma acknowledged that, "Most of us are on retirement, but you can still get out and about doing things that you like to do...Just being with someone, laughing, talking, and singing. Doing things together." The relationship with fellow fan club members was described by Brooke as follows: "I usually give everyone a hug when we have a meeting. I know most of them...I have a relationship with all of them. [I] even go to some of their homes, pretty much everyone knows me and I know them." With regard to shared interests and commonalities within the fan club, Shelbi opined, "That is the only way the community will know about us. And it is black and white in the club and we do not care what nationality, what race, just you want to be a member." The following response shared by Lucie accurately represents the present theme:

It is like sisterhood, and if we need something or someone is ill or something, we can call each other, like if you do not have a big family or something, it makes a difference, and some ladies were already friends before they got into the club, and some of them work together so that makes a big difference...Many of us are older, a lot of us are senior

citizens. I am a senior citizen and a baby boomer too, and we are active, everybody is not sitting in a chair watching TV. We like to do things, we are active, we are motivated with life and we go out and try to have a good time, and we like basketball, and we love LeBron, so that is what I have in common with other people in the group.

Sandy reiterated Lucie's opinion:

We have lots of connections. All of us, or most of us, are retired... We go out to, you know, games or... watch parties, we get together, some of us belong to the same church, so we are fellowshipping together and we just talk, and really, a lot of us show up.

Megan commented on the members' shared attributes this way:

I think it is a good thing for our seniors to have that outlet to get together and celebrate, you know move around a little bit. The good thing about this organization is it does not cost an arm and a leg. Most are retired, living on fixed income, living on mobility issues. It gives them something to live for and to celebrate. I just admire the ones that are still in their 70s and 80s, still kicking and glad to have a reason.

What started as a vertical reverence for the focal athlete brand iterated into a horizontal bond between members that enriches their lives and strengthens the organization. Across the responses, members admitted that they derive satisfaction from working together, and more importantly from socializing with people driven by the same interests. Jackie explained this dynamic by stating, "We are all good together... Few of them, I grew up with, but just seeing... where we came from, that was a big difference... It is just so important to be around people you know, it is the same flow." In a similar way, Shelbi elaborated on the current theme by saying, "I think if you talk to any of us, we all feel the same way, we like that bond, friendship, and love." The athlete brand no longer plays for the local franchise, but the fan club

survives on the ideological uniformity of the membership's collective identity. By idolizing one person (i.e., athlete brand), the fan club members discovered the value of many. The following response shared by Clara illustrated specifically the present theme:

[Fan club] is great for us, because we all seem to fit in the same category. Even though we are older, we are still enthused about it in our way and our speed. Like when you get with the young people, sometimes you cannot keep up. That is one reason why it is good. And then another thing is when you live so long, you start outlive like family friends, so then you make new friends, because I can be with women and they understand what I am going through and how I feel about certain things, like-minded individuals I would say.

Jackie went on to reinforce the theme by detailing:

What unites them is most...of them are retired. A lot of us love LeBron, and we love basketball, and we love to have fun together. What unites us is when we come together...It is just the unity of us, just to see him play and things and how he shares with the community. This is how we all feel. That is why we all believe and trust in God that this man is going to bring hope to our communities. He is going bring adventure, fun, and all that. This is what all of us believe. By us all agreeing and believing and unity together, that is what brings us together.

A commonality of interests binds the studied athlete brand community. Shelbi reflected on the athlete brand and the sentimental bond the membership shares by commenting, "It is just a good feeling that we have a common bond...He [LeBron James] is a part of us, he really is...The nice thing is we are just one." Brooke followed up on the point brought up earlier by stating, "It is great getting out and be social with other people...like age wise and LeBron that brings us together also...the fact that he is hometown guy who does a lot around here." The fulfilment,

derived from community-oriented projects, promotes collaboration and mutual liking among the members. Julie illustrated precisely how the uniformity of thought brings the fan club members together:

The love for the community and working with the children. The same kind of love that LeBron has. That is our spirit. Working with these kids, making sure they have what they need, and some of the things that they want. So that is the spirit that we have because everyone got their own life...When we come together, it is just for one cause and that is to make sure that we do something constructive with those kids. And the women get along real good, we have a lot of fun being elderly. We have a lot of aches and pains, but we get together, we comfort each other, and support each other. And we go our own separate ways until we come back again, come back together again...That is the only way I can describe what we have in common.

Valerie described her connection with fellow members the following way:

Number one, we love LeBron James and our motto is 'Love and Fun' and there is love all between us...all seem to mesh together and get along fine...We love each other, and if we only have one minute and if someone asks us to be at a particular function, we get together...A lot of groups, they start and they do not last that long, but we have longevity and that is because we love each other, we love LeBron, and we are community-based...Look how long we last, since 2003, that is a long time, especially with women.

A sense of sisterhood was pervasive throughout interviews, alluding to real care among the members. Interestingly, Becky acknowledged that the focal athlete brand brings the community together, beyond any barriers:

To me, it is the epitome of what LeBron is. LeBron is a very loving person, and we come together and we love each other. Like I was telling you, I went into the restaurant the other day and I did not have a place, because it was a little later, and [one member] said ‘Hold on, I will get you a chair.’ Then I am eating soup and I run out of crackers, and she went and got some more. People do not have to do that to you. They do not have to get you a chair, get you more crackers. She calls me and we talk on the phone...In between the games they have commercials or half time and [we ask] ‘How is the game going at your house?’...We just love to share LeBron. We love to share LeBron, because we love LeBron, period. He is a loving person. You would not want to be in this club and not be a loving person. You would not choose it.

In all, the members’ opinions show that while the athlete brand may serve as an initial source of motivation to affiliate with the athlete brand community, it is due to perceived sameness that the participants internalize the sense of belonging to the fan club. As indicated in the interviews, the fan club relies heavily on positive relations among the members. Participants’ perception of unity and tendency toward uniformity of thought is what drives members to be evangelists. More importantly, the inclination for uniformity contributes positively to the athlete brand community’s identity and overall cohesion.

Engagement derived self-fulfillment. The relationship with fellow athlete brand community members fosters emotional fulfillment through a sense of belonging that enhances the membership’s self-esteem, social life, and overall well-being. The responses obtained from the interviews communicate profound, positive emotional benefits the fan club members attach to membership. The current participants found uniformity of behavior among fellow members when engaging in community service projects. Being around and interacting with like-minded

people are prioritized by the members of the athlete brand community. In fact, many members' lives depend on the quality of social interactions and group activities implemented by the fan club. For example, Kelsey explained it like this: "It is just exciting to be in the club, because you get to meet new people and everything. Everybody is so friendly, loving, and kind...that is the type of individual I like to be around." According to Sandy, "When we go out, we get a chance to meet people, and people are excited about the group and other ladies want to join in. And they see you maybe with a t-shirt on, so it is a fun thing to do." Brooke said, "We are usually excited and tell people about joining the fan club, following LeBron, watching games, fellowship, so a lot of people come to us." As indicated by the current participants, social support and gatherings play an important role in their emotional well-being. Becky put it this way:

I really look forward to [events], because I know most of the ladies pretty well, and it is a joy to look forward to being with them. When we schedule something and I am going, I do not have any reservations, like 'Oh this is going to be terrible.' If something goes wrong or is not exactly as you expected, you still have your friends there who are there with you. It is like we went on a boat ride couple years ago and air conditioning went out, and none of the windows opened. We just took it in stride, we just go together and went up on the deck on the top...there is fumes there, but you just did the best that you could and just enjoyed each other and boat ride was secondary, because you were boiling so, but we were all hot. If the things are not going the way that you expected, it is still ok because you have friends who are there with you.

Becky's experience is testimony to the fact that annual events, organized by the fan club, help members to remain socially active and reap the benefits of systematic interactions with like-

minded people. This emotional satisfaction from connections with fellow members was explained by Mary this way:

We are a fun loving group you know. I think that brings us together. Everybody seems to be, most of the time, an upbeat type, spirited. Attitude is basically good...Everybody has bad days, but they are very supportive when we have the meeting. We have a lot of [members] come out. We have some that are not able to come out, they would love to come out, but because of their age they cannot. We have a [member] that is 90 some years old. Right now she is in rehab at the nursing home...We lost a [member], she was like in her 90s, last year...I am 75 myself...People say you do not act like you are 75, but I say 'well, I do not give up.' I push, even if I do not feel good, I push. I mean I do not give in to feelings, I just go on until I cannot go. I tell my kids 'You know what? I am going to go where I can, and if there comes a day I cannot go, I can always say I went when I could.' I enjoy my life, you know, and I enjoy people, and helping somebody if I can. I am a senior, you know. A lot of the [members], we just had a lunch at Guy's Party Center, and a [member] wanted me to sing 'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke. She loves when I sing and wanted me to sing, she said 'Oh you gotta sing my song.' It was about two hundred almost of us there. It was nice.

It is evident that the athlete brand community is the lifeline, empowering the members to engage in social events. More importantly, however, it was consistent throughout interviews that the sense of togetherness among the participants ultimately led to enhanced self-concept, appreciation of the focal athlete brand, and deep feeling of happiness. Consider the following elaborate response provided by Jenny:

A lot of these women are very caring, very nurturing, and wanted to carry on what he aspires. I think that is what brought us together, is the respect and like I said, it is just a very kind group of women. Just like they embraced me. One of the Channel 5 cameramen said 'Oh the token white [member] is here' so I think that is just kind of neat. There are four or five of us, [and] that to me was very special, because they embraced us and took us into their group. The club President is a very, very special woman. She darn near died a couple times earlier this year. We are just happy she made it and is back with the group. I think that is what brings us together...Number one is just LeBron and what he stands for and the love of the game...We buy tickets several times a year...They have a fan bus with the 'Cavs' painted. A couple years ago we took the fan bus into Detroit, I am telling you that was a traffic stopper. To drive through inner-city Detroit in a Cavs fan bus. They could not snap the pictures fast enough, it was a hoot. Then we get tickets for maybe three home games...We are taking our kids and grandkids...That is fun, just us coming together and being able to cheer him and the Cavs, cheer them on during a game, it is a fun time. Then we meet a number of times during the year...That is fun, to watch the games together. A lot of the women are widows or alone and it gives them a place to go and be with each other and cheer them.

Along the same lines, Valerie articulated how much it meant, when the fan club got together to visit her father at a nursing home. Specifically, she shared with me:

The one that means a lot to me is my father, he died unfortunately in a nursing home. We went to visit that nursing home and it means a lot. And the facility, they enjoyed that too. Even though they have an activity director they do things with, for us to come in there

and change a person's life is amazing. I was in tears seeing my dad interacting with the [club members]...LeBron and our club, we are on the same page.

My conversation with Lynn revealed that prospective members recognize the benefits for emotional well-being associated with the fan club's events and volunteerism and in turn express strong interest in joining the collective:

A lot of them love the things that we do in the [fan club]. They see the things that we are doing and the way we volunteer and not only have fun going to the games. I feel they see the excitement on our faces, the excitement of being able to do things and commit to the community...A lot of people want to be a part of us and doing something, because they feel like we are going somewhere. People call from New Jersey, New York, different places. They want to be a part of us.

In Emma's view, the emotional satisfaction comes from participating in club-organized functions and assisting fellow members in need:

Because we are out there and doing things, that other people even though may have limitations, we have [members] that have to have someone take them out and do things with them, we will make arrangements for them to get to the games. Anything else we do, we make it easier. When we go to the games, I make sure to find how many people will be in a wheelchair, because going to the stadium, there is a lot of walking so we make arrangements to make sure people can do the things they need to do...Being out laughing and still able to do your thing that you like to do...I encourage us, as older Americans, you get to the point you say 'What am I doing? What is out there for me as in a senior?' That is one of the reasons we started the club, so we would get to go to the games, we could do things in the community.

For Jackie, the affiliation with the fan club enhanced the relationship with the focal athlete brand and brought her closer with the members:

What it means to me is that I feel like a part of LeBron, because I know him personally. I know I can never touch base with him, but this is as close as I can get, so I am happy with that, and I have been able to explore a lot of things with the club that I have not been able before, and then people my age...being around them you know.

Many participants admitted that staying social can be a challenge. The present athlete brand community provides these members with friendships and support that have a positive impact on feelings of inclusion and overall well-being among the fan club. It was clear from the interviews that the participation in productive, interactive activities brought feeling of purpose to the club members. It is through the fan club's social gatherings and game outings, participants internalize sentimental bond and meaningful interactions as stated by Lucie:

The cookbook is good, we share all of our recipes and then new members come in and we all have our spin on it and as far as aprons are concerned, we use aprons at different activities like at Christmas party or the picnic, we wear our aprons. We have different hats and when we go to the games, we call it our gear, we would be all dressed up in our gear and everything. It is really nice and when we go up to Cleveland, they give us royal treatment at the stadium and they are waiting for us at the bus. Last time one of Cavaliers' photographers or reporters, he would meet us and was taking pictures and he said we were celebrities up there, so we were happy about that...It is like a boost in our life.

Heather's opinion corroborates precisely the current theme (i.e., engagement derived self-fulfillment):

Not everybody is a sports person, but [members] will always be there, and I will be sitting there watching the game, and they do not really know the game, but they will be just happy, they know when the basket is made, everybody does not know the game, but it is fun. And then we have our picnic, and then Christmas, we do the banquet, you know gather together and show love to everybody. Just because we get older, it does not mean we have to sit up at the house every day and do nothing. That deteriorates our body, I think.

The significance of social activities for the fan club members was described by Clara the following way:

It is socialization for you and that is what older people must continue to do. Now we start passing, we each have different ailments or what have you, we have people on walkers, but then when we open our mouths, we start to cheer.

Another quote, representative of the present theme, was provided by Chloe:

A lot of us, we may not have big families where we go to gatherings and stuff and it is [fan club] an outing for us and you are meeting new people and you are there for each other and I like that...I started looking forward to when the meetings come...It is like this happiness being around them, because they are out doing something. We are together and sharing love with each other, laughing and talking, looking forward to the next function that we are going to do.

The athlete brand community makes it a priority to engage its members in creative, social activities to avoid isolation among its members. A number of systematic functions promoted by the fan club help members to stay active, both emotionally and physically. Many participants

agreed that socializing with fellow members at various events benefits their emotional health.

Shelbi said that the fan club's events help:

To stay mobile, and the thing is we all enjoy each other's company. It is like no chit chat you know, you and I are talking and they are sitting over there, we do not have that, it does not work, we are all happy to see each other, we all hug when we get there, we hug when we leave sincerely. [We say] 'Did I not just hug you? It is ok, I will hug you again.'

According to Kelsey, members "greet each other with lots of love." Megan expressed her view regarding enjoyment of being around fellow, like-minded members by stating, "It is just a good thing, we play games and have fun...I just enjoy being with them. I respect them and I understand them." Taking care and visiting fellow members can provide comfort and a sense of purpose, as indicated by Kelsey: "We visit some in our group when you are sick or something...We do not just do it because of the group session, we do it for people that we know. We visit and pray for them to get stronger."

Giving back to the local community through volunteerism has been perceived in a positive light by many members of the studied fan club. More importantly, volunteer work is a way to enhance the sense of meaning among the fan club members. To illustrate, Jackie shared with me the following profound response:

We have things for kids, you know coat drive, we mentor young kids and it is just an enlightening experience knowing that you are giving that community something back. It is not even so much about LeBron, but what we are doing through the LeBron James fan club. The whole thing is to give back and inspire people. We are all on the same plateau, all this is about giving love and fun. That gives us older ladies something to do and keeps us going. For a lot of people, when they get to a certain age, they want to exercise. This

right here, it keeps us going, it motivates us to do a lot of things, and we are just having fun, and just going to basketball games is so enjoying. LeBron came to town a couple times and we were able to be right there with him and parade and stuff you know, and it really gave me more insight on what is going on with basketball, and I learned a lot through that. See I had six bothers and did not care about the ball anymore, but being closer to LeBron and relate to the game and seeing how it is played and what to look for and what not to look for, it made it really interesting...He [LeBron James] takes interest in kids and gives back to the community, he inspires me about wanting to help the young kids and then he gives kids something to work for, you do this we give you a scholarship, you do this we do that and that gives a kid something to look forward to. And that has a lot to do with the community knowing what he is doing and what he has done and what he is going to do, he just got started...He is a father figure first, he has not forgotten home, he never forgot where he came from and he empowered a lot of young kids, a lot of young kids in Ohio.

Likewise, Heather commented on the mentoring initiative for local youth and own personal, meaningful experience this way:

It will be a good thing, helping kids, that is my understanding. It seems like it would be such a big help for the kids who are not getting that help at home. My son works over on the North Hill with these kids and he would come by here and he would be talking and he says 'thank you mom for you and my dad...you brought us up.' And he would tear up sometimes, and he would say we did everything together and I say we did, we did everything with the kids, and my house was the hangout for the kids, and I get my joy from watching some of the kids that played ball with my kids and I see their kids and I

say ‘I do not believe this.’ I see his kids and I have seen him grow up from pee wee ball on through high school and I see his kids and I just shake my head. I thank the Lord and say I did something for the kids. And I would tell them, ‘tell your mom to give you a blanket because I do not have the bedrooms for everybody, make a pallet on the floor and I would be in the kitchen making a big roasted pan of sloppy joes, chili dogs.’ They loved that, they would have the best time of their lives and I would go outside, because I like being outside gardening, and they loved being at my house. They might have thought I was doing something for them, but the joy I got from watching them being happy, because a lot of parents did not participate and you see the parents now, and that is sad.

Indeed, community outings and volunteer work promote a sense of purpose among the members of the studied athlete brand community. Illustrative of this, Sofia stated, “If I was not in the club, I would be sitting at home doing nothing. It keeps you from sitting at home being lonely and thinking negative, so I enjoy it.” In Sandy’s view, “We are excited about basketball, volunteering in the neighborhood, just being a part of the group, because...we like to have social time, so it is a nice thing to be involved in, especially around the community.” The importance of staying connected after retirement was emphasized by Megan this way: “It was nice to be retiring and suddenly be able to get on a bus and be able to do all these little things that they do...[and] have fun doing it.” In a similar manner, Mary commented, “It is rewarding...we have a lot of functions...we have trips...we get together and go out and cheer on LeBron...he is like our child...it is very rewarding.” Through activities aimed at helping at-risk youth, members find a larger purpose in their lives. For example, take into consideration Rebecca’s opinion:

It is just [happiness] to be a part of the [fan club] and working with the President...help whenever we have coat drive, just stuff in the community whatever we can do...it means

a lot to me that I am able to help somebody whatever it is, just glad to be able to be available, my grandchildren have grown, so I could not think of anything else I would rather be doing...I just like to be around people and if I am able to help somebody, it is even better...staying active and putting my hands to something, like the coat drive that was something to be able to help the kids, to be a part of it you know...very satisfying for me.

Additionally, Rebecca went on to explain:

To be able to make a difference, you do not know who you might influence and even if I am able to influence one person, one child you know, it will mean a whole lot to me you know...not just sitting at home and watching the world go by, and as being in the club, we come in, contact a lot of people who I would not have if I had not been in the club, so it is a good thing...[and I] enjoy going to the games.

Recall Jackie's response in which she commented on the athlete brand's influence on the fan club and members' intentions. In the following excerpt, Lindsey echoed that opinion:

Well for me I think that is what LeBron represents. For us to be able to tell a child and for them to be able to see that they can do whatever they aspire to do, wherever they came from, because of LeBron's background. It is just amazing that we can show a child that from that background you can become a very decent, kind, and generous young man and maybe that is why he is who he is and he does what he does because of his background. There are so many athletes, who have that background, that are not LeBron James. It just makes me feel good to be able to try to have an impact on a young person, and I just feel like them knowing that we are a part of the LeBron James fan club helps them to believe

that they can be anything that they would like to be, it just makes me feel good inside to try to help children in our community.

As stated earlier, most participants were appreciative of the fan club's efforts to facilitate social events and promote positive sense of community. Members recognize this emotional support and attention nurtured by the athlete brand community and in turn feel connected to the collective. Furthermore, some members receive attention from others in the local community which makes them feel valued and appreciated. As an illustration, Lucie described her satisfaction derived from engagement in the events and associated recognition the following way:

It is a boost and sometimes when we are in a different place and not together, I have talked to several reporters and I have been on TV several times. They go 'It is like I know you from some place,' and then I go 'Do you watch the Cavs?' Or 'have you seen this and that?' and then they say 'oh I have seen you on TV.' They recognize me sometimes and sometimes I just let them wonder... Yeah, it is a boost and we enjoy the publicity. It is nice and other reporters have contacted us too, and we have been on different stations and when he came, there were all these photographers from all over the world. There is a photographer from ESPN who came and the one from Channel 19 came and they spent the event with us at the watch night and we are all happy about it. Like I said, it is a sisterhood and we stick together. There is never a group like this, it is a different atmosphere, so it is a wonderful club. It is really nice how it came together.

Jenny provided the following comment regarding the emotional satisfaction of hosting fellow members at her house:

We have watch parties...and finally, I said 'we are getting sick of the restaurant and I am going to have it at my house.' I had what, 25-30 people maybe...I made ham and some

macaroni salad and there was not a square inch on this table that did not have food on it, disserts on the sideboards, wherever we went there was a TV, we had the best time and they cannot wait for me to do it again. So if I am here, I will do it again in the fall. And it is funny, because I always make extras and everyone went home with a bag of ham and some macaroni salad. They are funny, because they bring their purses and they have baggies in their purses just in case there is leftovers, somebody wants something. We had the best time, everybody stayed afterwards and it was a hoot. These gals are educated women, retired school teachers and we have some school administrators...it is just a really, really nice group of women.

In the following detailed response, Becky exemplified completely the current theme, related to members' engagement and associated emotional benefits:

I think when we see each other once a month we are so excited to find out, 'How are you doing? What is going on? How have you been? Did this dream you were going to dream about come true?' Your grandkids, whatever, you just cannot wait. It is very hard to sit in a meeting and shut my mouth. I want to talk to the people beside me. Poor [club President], she is banging 'Ladies! Ladies! Call to order! You have to talk later!' It is so hard because you want to talk to everyone and you do not get to talk to them all every month, because they have other things that are scheduled. They are demonstrative with their affection. People hug and kiss me, I hug and kiss them... We are more than friends, we are bonded. When I had my chemo, I did not have hair and I had to wear a hat sometimes, and they always admired my hat or my hair when it started to comeback. They just made me feel so wonderful, and come up to me and [said] 'How are you doing? What is going on?' I just felt at home... People are so helpful. We have a license plate

that says [name of fan club], [and] when I go to the grocery store and they say ‘Oh you like LeBron?’ I say ‘Yeah!’ and then we talk about it. The girl that went through the effort to get the plates, you are just so thankful they do those things for you [and] then it just brings more joy and it continues... You have more people supporting your issues, and if they had a problem with something I had, then I would speak up and give them a hint or two. [Fan club] is a great place to be whether you are well or whether you are not well, being around your friends, they all care about you... Because we have fallen in love and that is the real nature of what we do, we love each other, and you want to be with people you really care about, so even outside of him [LeBron James], we really got together.

As demonstrated by numerous responses, social engagement, facilitated by the athlete brand community, is extremely important for participants’ emotional well-being. Some members express interest in watch parties, game-related outings, and events in the greater community, whereas others prioritize volunteerism as the main source of self-fulfillment. Based on the interviews, participants value the opportunity to build new relationships that result in various emotional benefits. But more importantly, it is through meaningful acts of kindness, members internalize the sense of closeness and in turn derive multifaceted, emotional rewards. It is apparent that the fan club gives the participants a sense of purpose. Meeting up with fellow members at community functions, social outings, and basketball games is vital in finding the sense of meaning in life among the members of the studied fan club.

Sustainable Development

Present participants illustrated that in order to achieve the goals of the fan club, the membership needs to extend the club’s presence into the local community. While feeling confident about the future of the fan club, these participants provided opinions on implementing

change into the existing initiatives and community outreach. Many of the participants discussed the need for increased member engagement and membership growth. As an illustration, Cathy believed that, “We are going to sustain, I think we are going to have members in other states coming to connect with us.” The statement provided by Clara shows a similar reaction: “I think the [fan club] will hold its own...I think it will continue...I feel very strong about what they are doing and what they are a part of.” Sandy echoed this confidence by conveying, “It is going to be huge...As soon as someone hears about the [fan club], they are excited. Then they find out what we do, and they come to the next meeting...then they end up joining the club.” The focal athlete brand cemented his legacy from the participants’ perspective. Interestingly, it was apparent from the interviews that the athlete brand’s influence extends beyond the playing field, thereby making his persona more relatable. The athlete brand embraced his local community, which in turn had a profound impact on the fan club and its members. His on-field accomplishments and charitable contributions establish his legacy and in turn ensure continued growth of the fan club, as per current participants’ opinions. To illustrate, Kelsey opined that, “[The fan club] is going to go on. It will be around. I feel he [LeBron James] made such an impact on everyone...He will be remembered forever...He really made Akron proud.” Restated, the athlete brand and his programs have far-reaching effects on member retention and overall development of the fan club going forward. Consider my conversation with Karen:

[Fan club] is way bigger than me...With everything in the right place, I see replicates of our club in other states, replicates by the community service aspect. It may not be mentoring like we are focusing on, but they may do tutoring...one from New York is doing entrepreneurial things. It could go as far as the love for LeBron goes you know.

When people come here and they hear about it, one lady went to Georgia and tried to start

a club down there. I see that it can happen, it is just the logistics and the mechanics of how it would all unfold and how it would work. [That is] how we can ensure the process that we have can be replicated and accounted for. There could be a [fan club] in every state. It could start in Ohio, and there could be various chapters in every city in Ohio.

Some members believed that the fan club will benefit from incorporation of more diverse community activities. It became apparent that the members will continue to prioritize support of local, at-risk youth and grow the influence of the fan club through community outreach. Consider the following representative opinion regarding the fan club's sustainable development shared by Rebecca: "Doing more than we are doing now, outreach for children as well as adults...[members] have a lot of knowledge, and we can help people...everybody wants to help where they can...and it just makes me proud to be a part of it." Lucie elucidated the following: "I see the future. We are going to keep the club active as long as we can...we are starting a mentoring group...so elementary students, and a certain group of people will be mentoring students." Lynn's comments further illustrate the present theme:

I see us doing more and more volunteering in the community. There are so many, especially at the schools, so many children who need mentoring...There is a lot of people at...nursing homes that need somebody there for support, and I see us doing more of that...So, a lot of things in the community I see we can do...at schools, salvation army places like that...the club is a stepping stone for us to find out what other areas need help in the community, this is really good, that is the desire.

Jackie had a similar perspective on the development-related strategies for the fan club:

I would like our mentoring program to grow, helping children with reading, math, just being a friend. Because I have a granddaughter and I think children need someone older

to be a friend that is not necessarily a relative, but someone who they know cares for them that they can ask. Talk to them about something that their family members may not feel comfortable talking about. That is what I would like to see more of.

Another representative opinion was shared by Brooke:

I think we will continue to do what we are doing and become better at it. We will continue fellowship and socializing over the games. I think we will be getting better as far as increasing mentoring or doing some type of activity. So we are pretty close, we have our specific events yearly...that makes it nice.

Consistent with the earlier responses, Sofia stated the following regarding her vision for the fan club going forward:

I hope they do more, fundraisers, more in the community, get out there and tell people more about us, and get more people to come and help, and maybe we can do bigger and better things. I tell people all the time about the club. I have been trying and asking if they would want to come to a meeting with me and things like that. I have been trying to have my niece to come, I have been trying to have younger people to come, but she is only three or four years younger than me and she will be sixty this year, so I have been trying to have her come and join.

Interestingly, some members expressed concern over the sustainability of the fan club, mainly related to age and ailments the members are faced with. As an illustration, Heather admitted, "I hope it stays. A lot of us are getting older and older, and leaving." A similar reason gave Jenny cause for concern, as demonstrated in the following quote:

If they would still stay together after he [LeBron James] retires or whatever, I do not know. Unfortunately the group is aging. We have a lot of gals in their 80s. There are not

too many younger ones. I am not young, I am 71. I would say the group is 70s and 80s...So I have no idea what will happen. You need the people...to keep the group together. People want to join, but they do not want to take charge and play a role, whether it is activity director or chairman or whatever. So, it will be interesting to see. The younger ones are just not coming in and taking over. Because of the age...that locks you into a particular age group...I could see the group staying together if Bronny Jr. became a professional, but that is just speculation. Time will tell.

In line with the aforementioned view, Megan opined:

It takes a lot of time to plan all these trips and things that we do. Like I said, they probably need someone...younger...to get involved and do some of these things...These [social events] take a lot of mobility and running around, and since I am one of the younger ones, I try to participate in that group and do what I can to keep it going on. Our older generation has a lot of wisdom and they have seen and done a lot and you know you need to learn from them and listen to them.

Julie shared a similar perspective with me:

A lot of us are going to leave here, but what we want to teach the 40 and 50 year old women to just keep it going. Right now that is what we are hoping for, to keep the legacy going as long as we can...we can do really, really big things.

It is clear from the responses that the fan club members intend to grow their positive influence within the local community and attempt to incorporate more community-oriented events into the current calendar. Whether it is through volunteerism or youth-related programs, the participants recognize incremental possibilities and ways for the fellow members to get engaged. However, and as articulated by some members, the fan club faces some challenges. Specifically, as

perceived by the current participants, the fan club must find ways to integrate younger members into the collective to sustain its community programs and established traditions.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this dissertation I explored how the brand community is structured and operates in the context of the athlete brand. Importantly, this endeavor shed light on the emotional benefits that draw members to the focal athlete brand and the collective of like-minded consumers. As mentioned in Chapter Four, four main themes emerged from my data analysis, including athlete brand community adoption, culture, ideological uniformity, and sustainable development. Throughout the current chapter, I will highlight major emergent themes and discuss the significance of my findings. Furthermore, I will analyze my findings in relation to prior conceptualizations provided in Chapter Two of this dissertation. To that end, I will discuss the interpretations of the findings at hand as related to the existing knowledge regarding athletes as brands and more importantly the associated, profound effects on the fan community bounded by common traits. Along with explaining the meaning of my findings, I will acknowledge this dissertation's limitations and propose directions for future research.

Previous scholarly work regarding athletes as brands reported that high-profile athletes resonate with legions of fans based on athletic ability, meaningful personal interactions with fans, and display of a glamorous lifestyle, the marketing methods intended to impact consumer purchasing patterns and key cultural ideologies (Arai et al., 2014; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Feezell, 2005; Fleming et al., 2005; Gilchrist, 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Mullin et al., 2014). Athlete brands and their influential stakeholders such as teams, sponsors, and leagues create indelible images and associations that trigger consumers' emotions, experiences, and behavioral responses (Arai et al., 2014; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). Athletes turn into recognizable brands, figures of admiration and idolization, which in turn inspires sport

consumers to form fan communities driven by the appreciation of athletes' personalities, sport achievements, and social responsibility (Arai et al., 2014; Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Hasaan et al., 2016; McAlexander et al., 2002). As it pertains to consumption of sports content, Mullin and colleagues (2014, p. 20) strongly suggest that "Enjoyment of sport, as a player or fan, is almost always a function of interaction with other people." Although athlete brand image and brand communities have been conceptualized independently, a more profound understanding of how brand communities exist and operate in the context of athlete brands is virtually non-existent.

Therefore, my dissertation was an initial attempt to fill this void and analyze in detail the intricacies, dynamics, and implications of athlete branding initiatives on tight-knit communities of like-minded sport consumers. My goal was to develop a more complete understanding of consumer attitudes and decisions, relationships and experiences with fellow consumers, and the culture of the studied fan club (i.e., athlete brand community). Specifically, the following research questions guided my dissertation:

RQ₁: How do prospective members assimilate into athlete-centered brand communities?

RQ₂: How do athlete brand communities develop shared cultures?

RQ₃: What are the emotional outcomes of shared consumption within athlete brand communities?

Figure 6 serves to illustrate the organization of interrelated components of the athlete brand community as perceived by its members.



Figure 6. Four-stage circuit of athlete brand community construct

As previously reported in the literature concerning brand community practices, the initial introduction into the brand communities could have a profound impact on ultimate consumer engagement and brand experience (Schau et al., 2009). The present fan club relies heavily on word-of-mouth marketing in which members take on roles of volunteer promoters to increase club awareness and membership numbers. In this context, prospective members value recommendations from their colleagues, friends, family, and social circles that contribute to a person's identity. Brand communities must regularly recruit new members to achieve sustainability. As reported in past literature concerning membership recruiting, this process is implemented by demonstrating perceived value to brand consumers (Schau et al., 2009). The scholars refer to this social networking practice as welcoming which focuses on developing and

sustaining relationships among members of a brand community (Schau et al., 2009). Specifically, this practice (i.e., welcoming) constitutes “Greeting new members, beckoning them into the fold, and assisting in their brand learning and community socialization. Welcoming occurs generally into the brand community and locally as members welcome one another to each practice” (Schau et al., 2009, p. 43). It was also reported that welcoming manifests itself in exposing new members to various community resources and knowledge (Muniz & Schau, 2005) or passing down of brands from parents to the next generation (McAlexander et al., 2002). While previous scholarly work mentions the role of positive word of mouth marketing in creating initial interest to join a brand community (Schau et al., 2009), the findings at hand shed light on prospective members’ acquisition of information regarding the athlete brand community and their intricate motives for joining the collective. The findings, based on discussions with more than 30 participants, show that new member awareness of the fan club occurs in two stages.

External Assimilation

Current evidence points to shared characteristics of participants’ social circles that facilitate interest in joining the fan club. For example, as previously mentioned, Lucie described her experience as:

I am a realtor here in the community, I have been a licensed realtor since 1989, and one of my associates, she was already in with the group and she invited me to come to an actual meeting to see if I like it. And I liked it, so I filled out an application. There are a lot of applications and we love LeBron so there was no questions asked, so I got into the club. My coworker, she was the one who invited me to come and take a part.

Similar to Lucie, many others indicated that the shared identities of fan club members (e.g., age, occupation, and acquaintances), and face-to-face interactions influence how members acquire

initial information about the fan club and evaluate long-term benefits associated with membership. The present data further clarifies how social categorization (Tajfel, 1981) manifests itself in athlete brand communities. Specifically, the present findings echo what Tajfel (1981, p. 254) referred to as the “process of bringing people together social objects or events in groups which are equivalent with regard to an individual’s actions, intentions and system of beliefs.” This uniformity of perceptions and in-group classifications (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000) conjure up motivation for prospective fan club members and solidify the perceived value of the athlete brand community. In fact, in prospective participants’ view, the benefits of joining the fan club lie in a significant contribution to their social lives and overall happiness. It was evident from the current responses that engagement and social actions play an important role for decision-making among new members. As we recall, Megan said “I knew I was going to have some opportunities to spend time in some group and that was one I thought sounded like I wanted to be in. I really enjoy the social part of it.” The finding is rather intriguing considering the role of a person’s sense of community with fellow members and its influence on the overall relationship with the brand (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008).

This theme further corroborates what Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) postulated with respect to storytelling and maintaining a brand community. Stories and experiences shared by existing members ultimately inspire prospective members by accentuating consciousness of kind and value alignment. This experience manifests itself in the realization of benefits associated with affiliation with like-minded individuals (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Importantly, the present findings provide additional evidence with respect to consumer recruitment and retention in brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002). The scholars posited that “customers who are highly integrated in the brand community are emotionally invested in the welfare of the company and

desire to contribute to its success” (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 51). Put differently, consumers integrated into a brand community take on the role of brand missionaries, delivering the brand community message to other spheres and communities (McAlexander et al., 2002). In addition, it is exceedingly important to review my findings in the context of the existing knowledge concerning long-term impact of brand communities, and specifically how they foster positive attitudes and meaningful relationships among consumers. McAlexander and colleagues (2002, p. 50) suggested that:

Customers who purchase a branded product often do so with the support of others, which leads to the possibility of brand-focused interpersonal bonds. Social support from such relationships may, in turn, influence increased personal investment in a customer’s consumption of the product and the brand...Customers value the relationships available to them as a result of brand ownership. For some customers, the expectation of developing these types of relationships motivates initial product acquisition; they are looking for a sense of community.

It is clear that my findings further support what McAlexander et al. (2002) posited with respect to expected value of belonging to a brand community. In line with the aforementioned, the initial motivation to join the athlete brand community among prospective members came from desiring to partake in a social, community-oriented organization (i.e., fan club).

The emotional involvement with the brand makes consumers care deeply about the company’s well-being and sustainability, aspects instrumental in brand community development (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The current data takes previous assertions concerning integration of new members into brand communities a step further. As evidenced by the current participants’ perceptions, members’ evangelism and loyalty to the focal brand had a

profound influence on prospective members. Illustrative of this, in the previous chapter Lindsey articulated:

I had a couple of friends who were in the club and I had the opportunity to go to basketball games with them and I just loved the fun way they responded to each other.

The love they had for LeBron...was just contagious and I felt like I needed to join.

As perceived by many participants, the affinity for the athlete brand is infectious, making the stories about shared experiences go viral. More importantly, however, welcoming new members into the fan club (i.e., athlete brand community) and retaining the existing ones protects its culture and legacy.

Athlete Brand Idolization

The affectionate interest in the athlete brand and his initiatives was the deciding factor in consideration to join the fan club among many members. Participants' responses reported in this study provide a clearer understanding of how an athlete's achievements and notable skills resonate with consumers and influence the decision to join the collective. My findings also suggest that the basking-in-reflected-glory theory (Cialdini et al., 1976) is at play in determining the motives for association with successful athlete brands and ultimately congregating with a like-minded collective. Cialdini and colleagues (1976, p. 374) explained cogently that "people make known their noninstrumental connections with positive sources because they understand that observers to these connections tend to evaluate connected objects similarly." It can be assumed that the admiration of the focal athlete brand helps to preserve and protect the status of the fan club as perceived by the out-group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Recall Becky simply stating, "I went because I really love LeBron, I have him all over my classroom, I have a bobble head and posters." It has been suggested that some

fans are captivated by the athletic expertise of athlete brands (Arai et al., 2014). Consider as evidence the opinion shared by Emma, “So the club started off with us just communicating and talking about what a good basketball player he was and a very intelligent young man.” In fact, this finding is in line with previous suppositions concerning the impact of success on brand perceptions, long-term brand equity (Gladden et al., 1998), and brand awareness (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), attributes instrumental in development of strong brand equity and market permanence (Mullin et al., 2014; Shank, 2001). More importantly, however, memorable brand images and associations could result in sport consumers’ inclination to purchase branded offerings and services (Shank, 2001).

However, the participants’ responses presented in this study cast a new light on how brand awareness, influenced by the athlete’s on-field performances and major accomplishments, encourages members to associate with like-minded individuals among prospective members. The comment provided by Brooke illustrates this concept: “It was LeBron. Just the fact that we had seen him grow up in his school years in Akron and for him to become an expert player, just following him as a hometown cult boy.” My findings are in agreement with multiple affirmations concerning the vital role consumer awareness plays in brand equity (e.g., Yoo et al., 2000; Keller, 1998; Keller, 2002) and more importantly, elucidate processes underlying construction of brand communities in the context of superstar athletes. The fact that many members saw the athlete brand growing up in the local community resulted in a lift in brand recognition which Keller (1993, p. 3) referred to as “consumers’ ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when given brand as a cue.” Taking into consideration that athlete brand recognition within fan communities has received little scholarly attention, it is rather encouraging that the results at hand fit into the context of some previous conceptualizations concerning athletes’ athletic

performance (Arai et al., 2014) and its influence on athlete brand awareness, given the effect of this equity-related component (i.e., brand awareness) on the strength of positive associations (Keller, 1993). Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that this high level of consciousness of the athlete brand is derived from members' individual self-concept, aligned with the athlete's image (Biscaia et al., 2013). Put differently, my findings are broadly in line with previous literature pertaining to an individual's self-perspective based on the supported sport brand and its effect on brand equity (Biscaia et al., 2013).

Consistent with Berry's (2000) evidence regarding consumer experience with a company and services, the findings emerged from the present study further support the significance of relationships consumers have with their admired athletes. However, my findings take this a step further in confirming that interactions and relationships with athlete brands can influence what Shank (2001) termed as the need for the community affiliation. In terms of the benefits for the focal athlete brand, the current data mirrors the assertions made in past literature pertaining to the impact of internalization of brand meaning and values on positive brand equity (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993; Keller, 2008), which could in turn result in repeat purchasing behavior (Shank, 2001). In fact, previous studies validated brand community-related experiences' ability to influence relationships with the brand community, the focal brand, and more importantly, purchasing behavior (Kim, 2015).

On the whole, it was evident across participants that there are two ways prospective members socialize into the fan club (i.e., athlete brand community). As previously shown, the response shared by Karen summed up this process:

I think people join for two reasons. One, we are focused on LeBron because he is the number one basketball player on the planet and just the person that he is, it is such a great

thing coming from our community. It is just like you could not ask for anything better representing you, little Akron, out on the world stage. The other thing is the social aspect of being retired, being older. Many of the women did not have husbands or lost their husbands. One person joined after the loss of her significant other. I do not think they were married, but her boyfriend that she had been with for a long time had died and she needed an outlet to help her get over the grieving. So she came to the club and she was our latest activity committee person. She did good and grew in the organization. People join for different reasons depending on what their social need is or their interest in basketball or their interest in LeBron. We are a fan club... We just hoop and holler for him [LeBron James]. People join for different reason, but it is all focused around LeBron, socialization, and just being active...and keep living. Go home and sit down and do not do anything or you stay active even when you do not feel like it. Sometimes getting out is the best thing for you. Sometimes when you are down in the dumps and do not want to be bothered, the best thing for you is to get out and get active.

Athlete Brand Community Culture

In Chapter Four, I outlined a variety of community programs and annual events attended by the fan club members. From watch parties and volunteer initiatives to casual social gatherings, members keep with the mission of the club and carry out individual responsibilities assigned by the committee chairs. Each committee has its purpose related to the fan club's vision. For example, the Activities committee is responsible for "working with the President to plan activities for basketball games...parades. Assist at events with volunteers and schedule of clean up duties" (Duties of Committees, 2018, p. 1). Recall the meaning of group activities initiated by the fan club as perceived by Lindsey:

It is a social group that is more than a social group. It is a social group that likes to have fun and do good for the community. A lot of them are much older, and it is a way for them to keep in touch. It keeps them engaged. They are doing fun events, and what is really fun about it is getting together and going to the basketball games, that is the peak for me. Having a lot of fun at the basketball games, representing with our t-shirts and letting LeBron know that we are there for him. And then we have the watch nights for the games. We all get to our restaurant, we support a restaurant, and watch games, eat, drink, and just have fun whether we lose or not.

The evidence obtained from the current participants goes beyond previous contentions concerning community attributes and member roles. In contrast to Colclough and Sitaraman's (2005) conceptualizations pertaining to social relationships and shared experiences, the present evidence points to the athlete brand's important role in brand community development and functioning. Similar to Lindsey, many others discussed the enjoyment that comes from socializing at basketball watch parties and attending games involving the focal athlete brand, whereas in Colclough and Sitaraman's (2005) view, communities rely mostly on social relationships among members and common experiences which follow horizontal pattern. The scholars argued that "membership implies a responsibility toward other members, reciprocated by the premise of support from other members, leading to a general trust extending throughout the community" (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005, p. 477). From a number of conversations with current participants, it was clear that the members utilize social relationships and share common ideas, interests, and mutual support, aspects highlighted in past literature (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). However, the present brand community's vicarious sense of connection with

the focal athlete brand advances our understanding of the driving force behind these social relationships and shared interests as demonstrated throughout present participants' views.

By contrast, my findings suggest that idolization of the focal athlete brand complements group efficacy detailed by Bandura (2000) wherein a group's sustainability revolves solely around shared beliefs and collective actions. Participants' responses provide further insight into the emotional connection with the focal athlete brand and common traits (Durkheim, 1964) present within the athlete brand community. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Durkheim's (1964) concerns are related to the society's and communities' lack of unity and shared objectives. The scholar calls for uniformity of beliefs and common consciousness (Durkheim, 1964). Most significantly, the present data broadens our understanding of how the athlete brand ultimately contributes to those collective beliefs that follow the horizontal structure in the studied athlete brand community. Specifically, the responses elicited from my participants demonstrate that the image of the athlete dictates its community's functions and more importantly, members' social relationships. These interpersonal interactions among members of the athlete brand community are triggered by perceptions of common identities and connection with the focal athlete's image. In fact, the existing work confirms that marketers utilize brand communities as means to underline the consumer-brand (e.g., athlete brand) relationship (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

As previously stated, however, academic work regarding the sentimental bond that athlete brand community members maintain with the focal brand and fellow consumers is limited, which validates the significance of the findings discussed in the current study. My findings are instrumental in understanding the universal shift in consumption from individual to group processes detailed by Cova (1997). The scholar argued that postmodern consumers tend to derive satisfaction through shared experiences. As a result, products and services serve the

person's individual needs and connect them with fellow consumers in a given setting (see Cova, 1997). Put differently, while previous generations of brand consumers made purchasing decisions based on product features, benefits, and personal preferences (see Cova, 1997), the modern consumer makes purchases that reinforce their self-concept and places it within a community (e.g., athlete brand community). Moreover, more recent scholarship suggests that the proliferation of communal consumption and brand communities can be attributed to loyal brand enthusiasts' co-creation initiatives (Cova et al., 2007; Schau et al., 2009). Specifically, from the perspective of brand value development, it is clear that the focal athlete brand is capable of illuminating the value of shared consumption as perceived by consumers, which in turn results in communal interactions and connections among the fan club members. The Social committee designated to "plan and execute event planning for the Annual Picnic, Banquet, and Christmas Party. Assist at events with volunteers" (Duties of Committees, 2018, p. 1) exemplifies this bond and member engagement. For example, it is clear from the following excerpt that the recurring functions organized by the fan club explain how the aforementioned conceptualizations function in athlete brand communities. To be specific, recall my conversation with Karen:

We have our annual things in the history, we annually do a picnic in August. We have our anniversary banquet in September. We have Christmas dinner in December. We have taste and sound of soul in May...we do a coat drive from October to February every year for Helen Arnold students. Those are our annual things, aside from going to the games and other side activities like going to Amish Country...trips to Washington to go see the museum and that kind of thing. That is pretty much our schedule, then go watch games of course. We will go watch games at a bar or club, a sports place

These comments yield evidence of a kinship with fellow members, consequently motivating brand admirers to participate in group events and social outings (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Keller, 2002). While this particular finding is in agreement with previous research, it lends itself as useful in interpretation of the influence different facets of the athlete brand image have on consumer satisfaction and loyalty. The athlete brand's values and ethical behavior are deemed to be worth imitating, which encourages members to model their actions accordingly. My findings support Arai et al.'s (2014) conceptualizations with respect to athletes' active contribution to society and virtuous behavior as role models and provide concrete examples of the members' intention to mimic the athlete's contributions to society. In Chapter Four, Lindsey explained:

We are just taking some of the things that he believes in, and he is putting his money in, and we try to do the same thing... We are trying to help at-risk children just being a [mentor] to them and help them make better decisions, be excited about their future, just trying to do some of the things LeBron does. We also do some of the things like coat drive, coats, hats, scarves, and gloves for one particular school and it just feels good. And that is something LeBron would do, and we are trying to model ourselves after some of the things he [LeBron James] believes in.

Throughout the data collection, I observed the profound influence the focal athlete brand has on brand community members and how he inspires the collective toward meaningful actions and what Arai et al. (2014) referred to as conformance to societal norms. These results are in line with Parmentier and Fischer (2012) who cogently explained that staying active in charitable causes or engaging in social responsibility could ultimately enhance awareness among key stakeholders. The scholars strongly suggested that "becoming active in charitable causes or social movements, a strategy that is increasingly common among athletes, can expose them to a

general audience that is markedly different from their sports fans” (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012, p. 116). In other words, these initiatives outside of the athletes’ professional field can result in enhanced exposure and stronger personal brand. Recall the opinion shared by Emma: “We wanted to do something to let him [LeBron James] know that we feel the same way. That is why we have our mentoring program.” Indeed, the leadership exhibited by the athlete brand and his community-based programs carry a consistent message to all members of the fan club. This implies that the athlete’s commitment to work collaboratively with the local community and its youth provides support for Hasaan et al.’s (2016) suppositions with respect to an athlete’s reputation and image in host communities. To distinguish between the existing framework concerning the athlete brand construct (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018) and the current participant perspectives, my data illuminates further how previously conceptualized facets of an athlete’s image (e.g., role model or community responsibility) influence the brand community’s identity, vision, and long-term values. Restated, the focal athlete brand’s community outreach and responsible behavior establishes a clear vision and strategic direction for the studied fan club as perceived by its members. This finding adds another layer of complexity to previous conceptualizations regarding the athlete brand phenomenon and multi-purpose brand communities, essentially tying these two formulations. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, Clara echoed the athlete brand’s values:

Mentoring does mean a lot to me. As a mother of one child, my daughter had asthma attack and she died at 48. And I always tried to see her and somebody else, and it brings joy... We have participated and still do in the coat giveaway, we bring coats and hats and make sure kids have them, and that is joy and it is always a blessing when you give back. It is always a blessing that you are able to give back, and sometimes it makes you feel a

little ashamed when you complain about what you do not have or what you have lost.

When you see people who have less and who you can help, when you see the perspective, it puts everything in perspective for you.

The above response is a good example of how the athlete brand's good citizenship and generativity (i.e., concern for the future generations and contributions to society) discussed by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) shape the communities that surround an athlete brand. The profound relationship between the athlete's brand image and communities with shared ideologies has significant implications for the evolving construct (i.e., athlete brand equity), given the absolute dearth of empirical evidence on the impact of athlete brands in fan communities.

Drawing on the existing conceptual premise concerning athletes as brands and salient consumer associations, I suggest that other attributes of an athlete brand could serve as a significant source of guidance for brand communities' actions and bond with other members. It only seems possible that the emotional brand experiences, as construed by the members of the studied fan club, contribute to the social norms (i.e., shared expectations in a collective) and result in member satisfaction and group cohesiveness (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001).

Athlete Brand Centrality

The enduring bond and interactions with the focal athlete brand (i.e., LeBron James) had a profound impact on club members' impressions and favorable attitudes towards his persona. It was clear that the athlete brand resonated with many participants, inducing an abundance of associations (Evans & Berman, 1992; Keller, 1993) linked in their memory to the athlete brand, clarifying his meaning for the present participants. Given the multifaceted nature of consumer associations as expressed by the club members, it is apparent that the current contributions are encouraging for the future work regarding athlete brands and interdependent consumers. My

findings are particularly important due to the fact that we can discern among various types of unique athlete brand associations and related consumers' reactions to athlete-centered brand community, augmenting previous conceptualizations concerning athlete brands' intricate image and his or her exemplary conduct on and off the field (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Feezell, 2005; Fleming et al., 2005; Guest & Cox, 2009; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Mullin et al., 2014; Rojek, 2006).

The participant responses reported in this study point to several dimensions of athlete brand associations. As mentioned in the previous chapter, despite the athlete brand's current geographical affiliation, the fan club members still pair his persona with one specific location. Considering that superstar athletes have leverage to move teams and relocate to new cities, this notable finding provides evidence that strong athlete brands should be well-embedded in local communities. Members felt a deep sense of pride in perceiving the athlete brand as a member of the same community, which corroborates earlier work concerning geographic identification. Specifically, Heere and James (2007) pointed to geographic identity and its ability to influence team identity among consumers. From the current participants, it is clear that geographic identity translates into respect and affection for the athlete brand among members of the brand community. Recall Rebecca saying "It is not that he made a bunch of money and forgot about Akron...he still remembered Akron...he has not forgotten his roots...it is a big thing, little Akron, but he still remembers where he came from." The athlete brand raised the profile of the local community in the eyes of the current participants, solidifying his legacy and setting an example for younger generations. In relation, the current study produced results that validated the athlete brands' ability to adopt values and identities characteristic of cities, regions, and

nations proposed by Rojek (2006). More importantly, however, the findings at hand enhance our understanding of “pride in place, or people’s affiliation with a hometown team due to its ability to represent that city” (Gladden & Funk, 2002, p. 60). We now know how solidarity with the local community coupled with the focal athlete brand’s personality elevates his status in the eyes of the members of the studied fan club. Additionally, and as hypothesized by Gladden and Funk (2002) regarding team brand perceptions, the athlete brand encourages the sense of togetherness among the members, the benefit considered to be of high significance given the context of the present study.

Role Modelling and Athlete Social Responsibility

As seen in the findings discussed in Chapter Four, the athlete brand evoked positive emotions and excitement in the mind of the fan club members. Consistent with Kahle et al. (1988), these participants derived emotional satisfaction from association with the athlete brand. In particular, the responses elicited from my participants revealed feelings of sentimentality, warmth, affection, and pride (Kahle et al., 1988). It is evident, therefore, that the consumer responses emerged from my findings add further detail to the implications of strong consumer-human brand relationships discussed in Thomson (2006). The scholar confirmed that consumer attachment has a positive impact on satisfaction, trust, and commitment among consumers (Thomson, 2006). My findings mirror those of Thomson (2006) with respect to the outcome of meaningful interactions with human brands. The author stated specifically that “with direct interaction, consumers are more likely to view the human brand as accessible, increasing the opportunity for feelings of autonomy and relatedness to be promoted” (Thomson, 2006, p. 116).

However, my findings reinforce Thomson’s (2006) affirmation regarding the importance of systematic interactions with human brands. This aspect is particularly important given the

impact of direct interactions on consumer satisfaction and overall experience with a brand (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Moreover, the conclusions drawn from my findings add substantially to our interpretation of the relationship effort (i.e., an athlete's interactions with fans) sub-dimension of athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014). As previously mentioned, there is no available research regarding consumer perceptions that lead to affection and consumption of athlete brands; therefore, the current findings pertaining to nuanced consumer-athlete brand interactions resolve this limitation. It was apparent across present participants that perceived meaningful interactions with the athlete brand can portray the athlete in a positive light and reinforce his image as authentic and relatable. My findings underscore meaningful athlete brand consumer perceptions, given consumer-athlete brand identification has been evidenced to impact consumer purchasing patterns and perception of a respective team (Carlson & Donovan, 2013).

The findings at hand point to a sentimental bond between the athlete brand and a group of like-minded consumers, building on the previous athlete brand image and brand community conceptualizations. The existing theoretical framework concerning athletes as brands (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018) overlooks a wealth of consumer associations and neglects to analyze how different facets of the athlete's image reach the target demographic. Furthermore, we have yet to gain a complete understanding of personal qualities and actions that constitute athletes as role models. While some scholars laid the groundwork for the role model construct in the context of athletes (Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Feezell, 2005; Fleming et al., 2005; Giuliano et al., 2007; Guest & Cox, 2009; Rojek, 2006), this research remains largely fragmented. Therefore, it is apparent that the contributions of my study lie in furthering the aforementioned constructs (i.e., athlete brand image and role modelling).

Specifically, the proclivity to commit to societal issues, children's causes, and community support generated favorable perceptions among the members of the fan club. Although past literature (Arai et al., 2014) proposed the role model construct (i.e., an athlete's contributions to society), the literature on how consumers perceive and relate to athlete brands' responsible behavior is rather scarce. For many participants, the athlete brand has built trustworthy qualities by being a true family man, responsible community member, and charitable donor. Recall my conversation with Kelsey wherein she reflected on the athlete brand's support of young people: "The things that he [LeBron James] does for the children. That is what makes him a role model." Likewise, Maria shared with me that "He [LeBron James] is a good family man. Children come first. What he does for the children in Akron to make sure they all have a better life, I mean it is just incredible" and Heather said "He [LeBron James] wants the kids to get an education and I admire that out of him." Given the perspectives and experiences expressed by the present participants, it is clear that the athlete brand's values and beliefs align with those of their own. Put differently, these findings suggest that the participants see the athlete brand through the lens of their own core values, deemed ideal. These findings broaden our understanding of the role model construct (Feezell, 2005). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the scholar contends that role models contribute to our sense of meaning, the aspect instrumental in optimal development (Feezell, 2005). In fact, the current findings revealed that the focal athlete brand inspires the members of the fan club and encourages them to emulate his behavior. Another significant contribution of this finding lies in a more complete explanation of how athlete brands influence consumers' daily lives outside of the sport realm, the contention introduced in the previous literature (Feezell, 2005).

Indeed, the athlete brand has role model qualities such as commitment, determination, and courage as perceived by the fan club members, complementing our interpretation of internalization of these characteristics by his followers (Fleming et al., 2005). While the on-field aspect is essential in development of an athlete's brand image, my findings advance the existing framework by detailing how the athlete brand's personal qualities pervade other areas of daily lives among his admirers. More importantly, the most striking finding revealed from my data collection sheds light on how the athlete brand provides inspiration for at-risk children and encourages his followers to do likewise. In the same vein, many participants' reactions to the athlete brand's initiatives that benefit the local community and provide comprehensive educational opportunities for children and their families, further solidify the case for action for his fans and fellow athletes. Community-based programs and youth-oriented actions initiated by the athlete brand have significant implications for athlete brand phenomenon, advancing existing brand development tactics highlighted in the literature (Arai et al., 2014; Fleming et al., 2005). As acknowledged by my sample in the previous chapter, the athlete brand's contributions to children's higher education are worthy of emulation. Consistent community contributions and resources to support at-risk children could have a profound impact on athletes' positive brand image beyond the playing field.

My findings suggest that the athlete brand feels a strong calling towards community support inspired by his upbringing. Mentoring relationships and opportunities allowed the athlete brand to develop into an iconic figure, invested in family values and ideals. Honesty, trustworthiness, and high moral standards characteristic of the athlete brand resonated with my participants on a deep level. Recall Brooke commenting "I think what makes him [LeBron James] a good role model is his reputation...he is a family man. He takes care of his family."

Likewise, Evelyn said, “he [LeBron James] is honest...his caring for people and his honesty of wanting the world to be right is much higher than the game.” The comments related to the athlete brand’s personal qualities were consistent across all members of the fan club. This finding demonstrates consumers’ inclination to connect with brands with authentic personalities (Mowen & Minor, 1998). It is clear, therefore, that my findings refine what has been previously stated with regard to moral standards and model citizenship (Sailes, 2001).

From the standpoint of brand differentiation and consumer persuasion, the aspects such as dependability and trustworthiness, as indicated by my participants, expand on the work of Ohanian (1990). Furthermore, the participant responses emerged from this study further solidify the fact that athlete brands should personify civic mindedness, discipline, and high moral standards, the traits underlined by the existing literature (Guest & Cox, 2009). The findings demonstrated in the previous chapter move beyond the conceptual model proposed by Guest and Cox (2009). Specifically, family values coupled with responsible citizenship as perceived by the fan club members add a new layer of meaning to Guest and Cox’s (2009) conceptualizations of athletes as role models. In contrast to past scholars, my findings show how the thematic categories related to an athlete’s image manifest themselves in athlete brand communities, the element that escaped scholarly attention. While my findings cannot be generalized to the athlete branding realm broadly, it is still evident that the contributions for the two constructs (i.e., athlete brand image and brand communities) reported in this study are promising. As previously stated, most studies to date regarding athletes as brands and brand communities focus on these constructs independently; therefore, the novelty of my findings lies in bridging the gap between these two paramount sport marketing realms. More significantly, the current data concerning the athlete’s image and relationships with fellow consumers details key mechanisms that ultimately

influence consumer satisfaction and build attitudinally loyal customer base, the two principal components in establishing market permanence.

Simply because the athlete represents a competing team brand does not diminish his impact among the members of the fan club. The responses illustrating the fan club members' unwavering loyalty to the focal athlete brand add substantially to our interpretation of engagement with a brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Keller, 2008; Mullin et al., 2014) and the evolving literature on athletes as brands (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2018). Increasing consumer loyalty should be a top priority for any sport entity (e.g., team or athlete). In relation to the current study, Keller (1993, p. 8) posited that "high levels of brand awareness and positive brand image should increase the probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater consumer (and retailer) loyalty." With respect to team brands, other scholars (Gladden & Funk, 2001) expanded on Keller's (1993) framework to analyze the relationship between brand image and associations (e.g., product delivery) and loyalty. As it pertains to the findings at hand, the responses elicited from my participants underscore the importance of benefits provided by the athlete brand, previously highlighted in Gladden and Funk (2001). Taking into consideration that desirable beliefs and attitudes for the brand may trigger consumer loyalty (Keller, 1993), my initial findings concerning the phenomenon are certainly intriguing. From my participants' perspective, the focal athlete brand evokes positive emotions consistently, which makes these consumers favor him regardless of where he plays. "I feel like he [LeBron James] did what he had to do...we all stuck by him regardless...whatever he does, we are going to be here for him" Lucie said of her reaction to the athlete brand switching team brands. Likewise, Karen commented, "I was not upset with him at all...I was upset with the people that were upset with him...We followed him, we still followed him, as he played down there [in

Miami].” It is clear that my findings deepen our understanding of what Hasaan et al. (2018, p. 186) termed as “a psychological commitment to the athlete and intention to consume goods attached to him/her.” Taking into consideration the positive experience with the athlete brand, as demonstrated by my participants, these findings further substantiate the significance of a desired athlete brand image in customer retention and attitudinal loyalty (i.e., favorable attitudes toward an athlete brand).

This attitudinal loyalty manifests itself in positive associations members attach to the athlete brand. Many discussed an emotional attachment to the athlete brand placed in their own maternal identity. The present findings serve as evidence for how a long-term perceived relationship with an athlete brand gives meaning to the lives of the present participants (Fournier, 1998). Nearly all members of the fan club experienced affective devotion to the focal athlete brand, alluding to what Fournier (1998) termed as an unwavering pursuit of relationship longevity. Most importantly, this unmatched commitment to the athlete remains intact, regardless of his team affiliation as evidenced by participants’ responses. Restated, my findings suggest that the members are insulated from competing team brands associated with the athlete due to their dedication and commitment to the focal athlete brand.

While some scholars hypothesize that it is possible for some fans to switch loyalty towards an athlete’s new team, my findings tell a different story. Most participants in my sample rationalized that the commitment to the athlete brand will remain untouched, mainly due to numerous emotional benefits attached to his image and, more importantly, his personal qualities. Some participants detailed how they see the athlete brand through the lens of affinity, truly reinforcing the aspiration for a special kinship. Illustrative of this, recall Heather’s response regarding an indelible affection for the athlete brand: “because that [move to Lakers] happened,

it does not mean you stop loving.” Similar to this, Rebecca shared that her involvement with the fan club will remain consistent. In contrast to previous work (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009), which suggests that fans tend to transfer loyalty to an athlete’s new team, my findings cast a new light on how loyalty manifests itself in athlete brand communities. While my findings cannot be generalized, the fan club members’ sole focus on the athlete brand and his aura is rather promising. Given the context of this study, the established connection with fellow fan club members and related cognitive benefits ultimately distinguish the fan club and positively influence the nuanced brand experience. As reported in the previous chapter, the participants’ shared identities create an indelible bond and contribute to the overall satisfaction in member interactions and club-led activities.

Ideological Uniformity

It was evident from members’ responses that the fan club prides itself on the shared identities members recognize amongst themselves. While an indelible bond with the focal athlete brand vitalizes the fan club, it is the ideological uniformity of the members that influences the athlete brand community’s performance and overall well-being. Fan club members reinforce social connectedness and in-group interactions, actively internalizing the meaning of the athlete brand community. Recall Jenny detailing these commonalities as “A lot of them, their spouses are gone, most have children who live in the area, but these are people of their own age that they can relate to.” Describing the characteristics shared by the fan club members, Clara articulated, “[Fan club] is great for us, because we all seem to fit in the same category...I can be with women and they understand what I am going through and how I feel about certain things, like-minded individuals I would say.” Lucie alluding to the fan club as “It is like sisterhood” provides a good summation of the interpersonal bond among the collective. Such comments regarding the

horizontal relationships and commonality of views were consistent among the participants. My findings offer some insight into how the perception of oneness within human collectives manifests itself in athlete brand communities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

It was clear that the participants recognized themselves as members of a distinct group with shared identities, assisting in our understanding of how social identity invokes the community around an athlete brand (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Interestingly, in terms of in-group interactions, the current results tell a different story. Previous literature concerning social identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000) and brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) points to the interactions' secondary role in recognition of consciousness of kind. In contrast, many of my participants voiced their opinion on being drawn to like-minded people, and more importantly recognizing the need to engage in meaningful interactions with fellow members. Sandy described this process as "We go out to, you know, games or...watch parties, we get together, some of us belong to the same church, so we are fellowshipping together and we just talk, and really, a lot of us show up." Put differently, these responses detail how an affiliation with a particular group (e.g., fan club) fosters value-laden aspects and members' quest for positive self-concept, conceptualizations highlighted in past literature (Burke & Stets, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In fact, pervasive throughout the interviews, my participants alluded to how the association with the studied fan club results in multi-faceted psychological benefits. Specifically, in my conversations with the participants, it became clear that the fan club engagement activities have the power to be a source of pleasure and substantial, positive psychological effects.

As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, brand communities constitute collectives of consumers with "a shared enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity, whose

members engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or express mutual sentiments and commitments” (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, p. 45). The findings of my study deepen our understanding of how these group activities and various processes contribute to enhanced self-concept and member satisfaction, the aspect neglected by past academic work regarding athletes as brands. Recall Kelsey commenting on the excitement of being a part of the fan club: “It is just exciting to be in the club, because you get to meet new people and everything. Everybody is so friendly, loving, and kind...that is the type of individual I like to be around.” The emotional satisfaction derived from events initiated by the fan club was articulated by Lynn as follows: “A lot of them love the things that we do in the [fan club]...they see the excitement on our faces, the excitement of being able to do things and commit to the community.” The relationships with fellow members complement the sense of meaning and connection with like-minded consumers, which results in positive associations among the club members and an enhanced perception of the focal athlete brand. The participants voicing the connection toward each other and the athlete brand is the testimony to the fact that members seek benefits from both sources.

Some participants said that the love for the athlete brand transcends into enhanced social life among the collective, which corroborates the work of Stokburger-Sauer (2010). Whether it is celebrating the championship or hosting regular season watch parties, shared brand experiences manifest themselves in meaningful interactions and celebration of the fan club’s identity. While previous scholarly work discusses shared consumption (Keller, 2008) and brand storytelling (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), my findings shed light on how these processes function in athlete brand communities. Specifically, the existing literature on brand community refers to a customer-centric approach to enhanced brand consumption (Algesheimer et al., 2005;

McAlexander et al., 2002). The perspectives of athlete brand community members presented in the current study corroborate these conceptualizations. Consider Valerie saying “The one that means a lot to me is my father, he died unfortunately in a nursing home. We went to visit that nursing home and it means a lot...LeBron and our club, we are on the same page.” In Heather’s view, “they will be just happy, they know when the basket is made...it is fun. And then we have our picnic, and then Christmas, we do the banquet, you know gather together and show love to everybody.”

The significance of the athlete brand community and related member experiences as perceived by my participants refines the existing literature regarding brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Comments such as “we all enjoy each other’s company...we are all happy to see each other, we all hug” provided by Shelbi add a new layer of consumer experience to past conceptualizations regarding brand communities. My findings will help explain how an internalization of the sense of community manifests itself in the context of communities surrounding an athlete brand. What Sarason (1977) referred to as interdependence with others and a sense of belonging to a larger structure was not only supported by the findings at hand, but deepened the understanding of how consumers incorporate the sense of collective into their own identities.

Furthermore, my findings are instrumental in enhancing existing marketing initiatives focused on creating the sense of community and belonging (Stokburger & Sauer, 2010). More importantly, however, the bond between athlete brand consumers leads to increased overall satisfaction and brand loyalty, the components sought by brand managers (Stokburger & Sauer, 2010). In particular, my findings cast a new light on how group experiences in athlete brand communities and social identification (Grant et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001) could further

enhance the bond with the focal athlete brand and his image. The role of moral responsibility in enhanced brand consumption has been highlighted in previous literature (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001); however, no studies explored how collective experiences and member interactions impact the relationship with athlete brands. Additionally, my findings corroborate Algesheimer et al.'s (2005) contentions regarding consumer-brand relationship and its implications for community identification. We now know that member interactions characteristic of athlete brand communities go beyond mere satisfaction of community norms as mentioned in Brodie et al. (2011). Megan's comments regarding gatherings at social events and benefits associated with sharing like-minded interests serve as an example of significance of mutual appreciation among the athlete brand community.

As previously stated by Burke and Stets (2009, p. 118), "Individuals do not have to interact with other group members in order to think and act like the group." It is evident that my study produced contrasting results. The fan club members' satisfaction is dependent on repeated, reciprocal interactions. Sofia emphasized, "If I was not in the club, I would be sitting at home doing nothing. It keeps you from sitting at home being lonely and thinking negative, so I enjoy it." The comment offered by Chloe is particularly significant: "It is like this happiness being around them... We are together and sharing love with each other, laughing and talking, looking forward to the next function that we are going to do." The significance of meaningful interactions and gatherings goes well beyond the boundaries of brand communities specified in Brodie et al. (2011). A possible explanation for the significance of face-to-face interactions and activity derived fulfillment lies in emulation of the programs instituted by the athlete brand. The athlete brand is known for his desire to enhance the vitality of the local community and its youth.

Likewise, the members of the athlete brand community take on the role of evangelists for the aforementioned community services.

Nearly all participants discussed the satisfaction that comes from community outreach and at-risk youth mentoring. However, little is known about how serving the needs of at-risk populations benefits athlete brand communities. Prior scholarly work revolves around the sustainability of brand communities through assisting fellow members with proper brand use (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), while members of the studied club promote the athlete brand to underserved populations outside the athlete brand community via charitable outreach. The studied fan club makes it a priority to “empower at-risk youth in our community to make positive life choices that enable them to maximize their personal potential” (Student Mentor Program, 2018, p. 2). Jackie exemplified the satisfaction that members of the athlete brand community derive from public service and mentoring: “we mentor kids, young kids and it is just an enlightening experience knowing that you are giving that community something back...the whole thing is to give back and inspire people, we are all on the same plateau.” This opinion was echoed by many participants and demonstrates the sense of fulfillment felt by fan club members from empowering the community. Rebecca conveyed, “it means a lot to me that I am able to help somebody whatever it is...like the coat drive that was something to be able to help the kids...very satisfying for me.”

It is clear that the fan club members aspire to the standards set by the athlete brand and find deep satisfaction in following the athlete brand's mission regarding community service. My findings detect the evidence for symbolic benefits associated with athlete brands. Consistent with Keller (1993), members of the athlete brand community satisfy the need for personal expression and self-fulfillment by engaging in community outreach efforts. The recognition of the

community programs orchestrated by the focal athlete brand and perceived value of collaboration result in symbolic benefits that fulfill the fan club members' mission as brand evangelists (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). Recall my conversation with Lindsey: "I think that is what LeBron represents. For us to be able to tell a child and for them to be able to see that they can do whatever they aspire to do, wherever they came from...It is just amazing." She went on to add that "it just makes me feel good inside to try to help children in our community." Likewise, Sandy shared with me that it is a fulfilling experience "volunteering in the neighborhood...it is a nice thing to be involved in, especially around the community." This profound finding solidifies the influence of the focal athlete brand on the members' self-fulfillment and social cohesion within the studied athlete brand community. This finding is of particular importance considering the relationship between group experience and community attachment in brand development (Grant et al., 2011; Yoshida et al., 2015).

Limitations and Future Research

While the present dissertation advanced our understanding of the athlete brand community phenomenon, my findings should be interpreted with caution. First, the main limitation lies in the fact that the present fan club's identity revolved around a single athlete brand with deep ties within the local community. Furthermore, this athlete brand community is unique from other sports consumer populations in terms of consumer demographics (e.g., age, gender, and occupation). Considering that the current sample is not completely representative of the common type of sports marketing target audience, these results may not be transferrable to larger markets of sports consumers. Additionally, the current dissertation has only explored the community surrounding an athlete brand who represents one of the four major North American professional sports leagues, which may have influenced my participants' opinions.

Another arguable weakness of this study was related to the data collection techniques (i.e., in-depth interviews and document analysis). Although there were multiple benefits associated with the present data collection methods, an ethnographic analysis of this culture-sharing athlete brand community could have produced different results. For instance, future scholars should consider employing an ethnographic approach in studying various club-organized functions and community programs. In addition, future studies can benefit from participant observations during the season portion of the year. Observing member interactions at game outings and watch parties would have contributed significantly to the overall understanding of the culture present within the athlete brand community.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, there are several directions for future academic work concerning athlete brand communities. In moving forward with this budding construct, future scholars should consider a more diverse pool of athletes and their followers, team brands, and geographical references to gain a clearer understanding of the influence athlete brands have on groups of like-minded consumers. It was apparent from the current data that the focal athlete brand and his charitable programs have a profound impact on the identity and actions of the present fan club. It would be intriguing for future researchers to conduct a more detailed analysis of this proposed influence. As evidenced by the participants in the present sample, the athlete brand differentiates himself and stands out from the competition due to his substantial charitable ventures. Future researchers may be interested in exploring further how specific community-related initiatives contribute to an athlete brand's image and perception among his or her consumer base.

It appears that member retention represents one of the main concerns for the present participants. While the present athlete brand community benefits from far-reaching effects of the

athlete brand and organic word-of-mouth member recruitment, it may be valuable to examine how other brand communities address this concern in the context of athletes as brands. Restated, given the importance of consumer retention and athlete brand sustainability, future studies should investigate in more detail specific consumer recruiting tactics utilized by athlete brand communities.

Future inquiries regarding communal brand consumption are necessary to build on the present data. The current study explored how different member-oriented functions, orchestrated by the athlete brand community, trigger meaningful social interactions. As indicated by many participants within the present sample, social interactions with like-minded athlete brand consumers could contribute to enhanced self-concept and group cohesion. An analysis of consumer interactions and engagement with an athlete brand in the online sphere will be of paramount importance for scholars moving forward.

Specifically, as perceived by my participants, the shared identity factor plays a significant role in the decision to join the collective and take part in systematic events organized by the fan club. Add to this, face-to-face interactions further solidify the value of membership among the participants. Given the nature of online interactions and consumer engagement, future scholars may be interested in analyzing how online interactions manifest themselves in athlete brand communities. In addition to this, it would be advantageous for future scholars to analyze how consumer-oriented events, initiated by athlete brand communities, influence perceived benefits and satisfaction within the online sphere.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Script for Participant Recruitment

Dear Sir or Madam:

My name is Olzhas Taniyev and I am a graduate student at the University of Kansas in the Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Sciences. I am conducting a research project about athlete brand communities and would like you to participate in an interview to obtain your views on this topic.

Your participation is expected to take about 30-45 minutes and will be recorded with an audio recording device. However, you are under no obligation to participate and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If you discontinue participation, your responses will not be utilized and the recording will be erased.

Your participation in this study would greatly help my graduate studies as well as contribute to our understanding of how athlete brand communities operate. I truly hope that you are willing to participate in the study and I look forward to hearing back from you!

Sincerely,

Olzhas Taniyev

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Ask participants some “warm-up” questions to build a rapport (e.g., name, where from, etc.)

The following are examples of possible questions:

- 1) How would you describe the fellowship aspect of [fan club]?
- 2) How would you explain your identification with other members of [fan club]?
- 3) What do all members of [fan club] have in common?
- 4) What is your overall opinion of LeBron James?
- 5) Why is it important for you to follow LeBron James?
- 6) How does thinking about LeBron James make you feel? What specific emotions do you experience?
- 7) Do you believe LeBron James is followed by people like yourself? If so, please elaborate.
- 8) Can you think of any traditions that are shared among members of [fan club]? Describe in detail these traditions.
- 9) Do you believe it is important for you to participate in these traditions? If so, please elaborate. What benefits do you derive from this participation?
- 10) Why is it important for you to remain a member of [fan club]?
- 11) Why is it important for you to congregate with other members of [fan club]?
- 12) How would you describe the benefits of joining [fan club] to a prospective member?

Appendix C

Date: May 25, 2018

TO: Olzhas Taniyev, (ot1@ku.edu)

FROM: Jocelyn Isley, MS, CIP, IRB Administrator (785-864-7385, irb@ku.edu)

RE: **Approval of Initial Study**

The IRB reviewed the submission referenced below on 5/25/2018. The IRB approved the protocol, effective 5/25/2018.

| IRB Action: APPROVED | | Effective date: 5/25/2018 | Expiration Date : NA |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| STUDY DETAILS | | | |
| Investigator: | Olzhas Taniyev | | |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00142558 | | |
| Title of Study: | Exploring athlete brand community | | |
| Funding ID: | | | |
| REVIEW INFORMATION | | | |
| Review Type: | Initial Study | | |
| Review Date: | 5/25/2018 | | |
| Documents Reviewed: | • Athlete Brand Protocol.pdf, • Interview Consent.docx, • Interview Protocol.docx, • Script for participant recruitment.docx | | |
| Exemption Determination: | • (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation | | |

KEY PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES. Consult our website for additional information.

- Approved Consent Form:** You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the “Documents” tab, “Final” column, in eCompliance. Participants must be given a copy of the form.
- Continuing Review and Study Closure:** Continuing Review is not required for this study. Please close your study at completion.
- Modifications:** Modifications to the study may affect Exempt status and must be submitted for review and approval before implementing changes. For more information on the types of modifications that require IRB review and approval, visit our website.
- Add Study Team Member:** Complete a study team modification if you need to add investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial prior to being approved to work on the project.
- Data Security:** University data security and handling requirements apply to your project.
- Submit a Report of New Information (RNI):** If a subject is injured in the course of the research procedure or there is a breach of participant information, an RNI must be submitted immediately. Potential non-compliance may also be reported through the RNI process.
- Consent Records:** When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.
- Study Records** must be kept a minimum of three years after the completion of the research. Funding agencies may have retention requirements that exceed three years.

Appendix D

Oral Consent Form

As a graduate student in the University of Kansas's Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Sciences, I am conducting a research project about group membership identity within athlete brand communities. I would like you to participate in an interview to obtain your views on this topic. Your participation is expected to take about 30-45 minutes and will be recorded with an audio recording device. Having your interview recorded is a mandatory requirement of participation. However, you are under no obligation to participate and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If you discontinue participation, your responses will not be utilized and the recording will be erased.

Your participation should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life. Although participation may not benefit you directly, the information obtained from the study will help us gain a better understanding of athlete brand communities and how this phenomenon might benefit the sport marketing field. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. It is possible, however, with internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response.

Participation in this interview indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. Should you have any questions about this project or your participation in it you may ask my faculty supervisor, Dr. Brian Gordon (bsgordon@ku.edu) in the Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Sciences or myself (Olzhas Taniyev; ot1@ku.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Office at (785) 864-7429 or email irb@ku.edu

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Originally from Kazakhstan, Olzhas Taniyev completed his Bachelor of Business Administration degree in International Business from Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. While at Harding, he earned All-Conference honors as a member of the men's tennis team. He holds a Master of Science degree in Business Administration from California University of Pennsylvania and also completed a Master of Science degree in Sport Administration from Fort Hays State University. In May of 2019, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sport Management from the University of Kansas.