Establishing Athlete Brand in Cricket: Fan’s Perception about Foreign Cricketers in Pakistan Super League (PSL)

Ali Hasaan

1 Estonian Business School, Tallinn, Estonia.
aili_hasaan@hotmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Pakistani fans in the context of athlete branding regarding foreign cricketers in the country’s first ever cricket league. Athlete brand attributes and athlete brand implication discussed with 15 fans of foreign cricketers via semi-structured interview. The components of athlete brand are related with on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). In turn, implication of athlete branding contributed in the domain of athlete loyalty (media following, creating their own narratives, positive word-of-mouth, resistance to change and commitment), athlete’s team loyalty (team substitution, supporting multiple teams and revenue generation) and athlete’s sponsors loyalty. The implications of these findings for building and managing an athlete’s brand are also discussed.

Keywords: Athlete brand, sport marketing, loyalty, foreign fans
INTRODUCTION

The current era belongs to the celebratess where culture, customs, gender and racial issues, national image, and political changes all are viewed through our celebrities (Cashmore, 2006). In this celebrity driven world many athletes recognized as celebrities along with showbiz stars (actor/actress, singers, models), politicians and military personals (Koernig et al., 2009). Some athletes exceeded the popularity of teams and sports and abled to establish themselves as an international brand (Chadwick et al., 2008). Muhammad Ali and Lance Armstrong are prime examples of this global star scenario as they both able to win loyalties in the countries where boxing and cycling were less known sports. However, athlete branding was more successful among the athletes of highly commercialized fields of sport (i.e., tennis, football, basketball, baseball). Cricketer are not beneficiaries in this case and there is rare case of cricketer found as an international star though they enjoyed a status of national hero in their home countries.

Cricket often considered as one of the complicated sport (Scalmer, 2007), is among most popular sport around the world. Cricket is until now, renowned for its at international level competitions unlike most European sports (i.e., Football, basketball) where clubs and domestic leagues are more prominent. This type of competition often been caused the result of cricket match cited as a war of national sovereignty and independence (Malcolm, 2001). This situation naturally inherited lots of interest from local fans for their countrymen representing their team (country) against the other nations but also closed the door for other nation’s cricketers to get popularity and loyalty in opponent countries. This situation was complete opposite of European sport model where nationality of an athlete is almost non-existent to become a popular as the French footballer Zidane is a hero of Spanish football club Real Madrid or the Swedish footballer Ibrahimovic is hero of a French football club PSG. In contrast, many cricketers have considered as villain in specific countries. For instance, an Australian cricketer, Greg Chappell in New Zealand or an English player, Mike Gatting in Pakistan.

The cricket matches started with a five-day competition (called test), then introduced the one-day competition. In 2003 most recent form of cricket, known as Twenty20 (or T20 cricket) introduced and since then five world cup and many leagues have been contested (Davis et al., 2015). The IPL (Indian premier league) and the Australian T20 Big Bash League are considered successful among them and first time ever in the cricket, the fans of one country
cheered for the cricketer of another country. This was the starting point for the cricketers to establish their fandom in the countries where it was not possible before (i.e., English cricketers in Australia or vice versa). They have now ground to compete with other international athletes and opportunity to become an international celebrity from a national hero has created.

Pakistan is a sport loving country known for its Cricket, Field Hockey and Squash players. With the population of more than 190 million Pakistan Super League (PSL) first edition was golden opportunity for foreigner cricketers to won loyalty in a country that is usually known for supporting only their own race members (Fletcher, 2011). Thus the purpose of this research was to study foreign cricketer’s loyalty in PSL among Pakistani fans through an in-depth qualitative examination based on a set of interviews. In our best knowledge, there is no study till today conducted about cricketer’s name branding or discussed the constructs about establishing cricketers as a brand in foreign countries so this study is first of its own kind that will aid athlete branding literature through focusing foreign cricketer’s image branding. This is one step forward as this study investigated causes and motive of loyalty for Pakistani fan’s favorite foreigner player and discussed athlete branding pathways for foreigner participants of Pakistan super league in Pakistan. This research seeks to fill the gap in the literature of athlete branding through discussing cricket fans and foreign fans of an athlete. Furthermore, the study also discussed important attributes of athlete branding in case of Pakistani fans, its implication and its limitation of the study as well.

Branding is considered as a strategy for establishing a trademark of an entity among public (Storie, 2008). In line with this view, branding in a sport is a name recognition, perceived quality and loyalty among its fans (Hardy et al., 2012). However, from the academic point of view branding discussed as of the prospect of developing, building, managing, and measuring brand equity (Aaker, 1996), though current focus of sport branding is about customer base brand equity. Customer based brand equity is defined as “The differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993:1). In this regard customer base brand equity occur when a customer is aware of brand and hold loyalty for that brand. Following this rational for sport marketers, sport brand should be well known (brand awareness) and have positive fans loyalties (brand image) (Gladden et al., 2002).

A brand is based on people perceptions (Wood, 2000) so a human brand can explained as a brand based on people perception about an individual (Carter, 2010). In this sense athlete
brand is a brand based on people perception about the particular athlete (Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014). Carlson et al. (2008, 2013) explained that athlete brand basically depend on public perception about that particular athlete. In this regard, athletes themselves have a robust role in the efforts of pursuing to build their personal brands (Cortsen, 2013). So fans have to play an important role in the process of establishing an athlete because athlete brand occurs through a strong fan attachments to that athlete (Montoya, 2002). Moreover, this strong attachment can achieved through the athlete’s successful sport career and their positive public image (Yu, 2010).

The establishment of athlete brands is important in the sense that athletes have become cultural, personal and social idols of their fans (Ilicic et al., 2015) and those who have achieved this status successfully, they benefited it even after their retirement (Rein et al., 2006). Recent studies have focused to point out the factors and the motives while establishing an athlete brand. Parmentier et al., (2012) described athlete branding occurred through athlete’s professional image and athlete’s media image. Carlson et al. (2013) explained athlete brand process is based on athletes’ personal appeal and athlete’s achievements. In contrast, Cortsen (2013) introduced hybrid athlete branding that explained that any positive or negative event with the athlete cast the same effect on athlete’s brand. Arai et al. (2013) and Arai et al. (2014) introduced and tested a model ‘model of athlete brand image (MABI)’ that focused on athlete’s performance, its attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. In line with this view, Hasaan et al., (2016) developed a framework of an athlete brand implication and pointed out that athlete branding is not only beneficial for athlete themselves but also vital for athlete’s teams and athlete’s sponsors. In another study, Hasaan et al. (2015) introduced athlete brand framework that discussed possible attributes of athlete brand (on-field and off-field characteristics). This research will focus attributes and implication of athlete brand to study it among Pakistani cricket fans to investigate about their foreign favorite cricketer in Pakistan super league. Therefore, our research questions are

RQ1: What on-field and off-field aspect of foreign cricketers are important to become a brand in the context of Pakistani fans?

RQ2: What are implications of athlete branding among Pakistani fans?
METHODS

Subjects: The subject of current study are Pakistani Cricket fans. To further classify, participants of this study are Pakistan super league’s fan who have a foreign favorite player that represent a team in PSL.

Sample: This study employed an inductive qualitative approach to investigate its research questions. As a pioneer study in cricket athletes, this method was most appropriate to gain in-depth knowledge. As the criteria base sampling is considered as purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), a purposeful, convenience sampling technique was employed to select this study’s participants. The maiden stage of sampling need contacts with stakeholders of the study (Okumus et al., 2007), this study achieved that through the researcher’s established relationship with study’s stakeholders (i.e., fans, cricket researchers and experts). For this study criteria have developed and all participants had to meet the pre-defined criteria. Participants of the study fulfil these conditions: 1) they must consider themselves a cricket fan, 2) they have at least one favorite foreign cricketer, 3) they have watched at least one game of PSL (live or through television) of their favorite athlete during the current edition, and 4) they still follow their favorite foreign cricketer on various media channels (i.e. mass media, social media). The purpose of defining these criteria was to choose a foreign cricketer fan as Crawford (2004) explained that fan is a person who consider himself/herself obsessed with a sport entity. Through setting this criteria, the study able to select only enthusiastic and intense fans. Furthermore, convenience sampling adopted given that easy access to participants and this type of strategy is advantageous when conducting new studies (Berg et al., 2011).

All interviews were conducted in settings preferred by the interviewees (e.g. the interviewee’s office). The final sample comprised of 15 participants. The participants included both males and females and came from a diverse range of professions. Furthermore, the final sample included participants that were fans, as well as amateur and former players, sport researchers and sport analysts which offered interesting viewpoint to our study (see table 1).
Table 1. Participants profile information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gander</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Favorite Cricketer</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Chris Gayle</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
<td>Player/Fan</td>
<td>Kumar Sangakkara</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Darren Sammy</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Shane Watson</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Kevin Pietersen</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Bank Manager</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Grant Elliott</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Shakib Al Hasan</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>IT-Specialist</td>
<td>Player/Fan</td>
<td>Kevin Pietersen</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Player/Fan</td>
<td>Kumar Sangakkara</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>IT-Specialist</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Chris Gayle</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sport Journalist</td>
<td>Expert/Fan</td>
<td>Kevin Pietersen</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Andre Russell</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>House Wife</td>
<td>Player/Fan</td>
<td>Darren Sammy</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>Dwayne Bravo</td>
<td>West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Cricket Expert</td>
<td>Expert/Player/Fan</td>
<td>Kevin Pietersen</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and Instrument: A semi-structured interview guide was created in accordance with the interview guidelines proposed by Patton (2002) and Lincoln et al. (1985). Interviews were conducted in order to obtain a deeper understanding on fans’ thoughts about their favorite athletes. Data were collected through a set of 15 interviews. All interviews were conducted during a period of two months and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study and their acceptance to participate in the study. Each interview consisted of two sections: The first section of the interview based on questions focused on the components of athlete brand, while the second section discussed implications of athlete brand among fans of athletes. For example, we asked: (1) Do you remember how you became aware of your favorite player? (2) Is the on-field performance important for player popularity? Why? (3) What are the on-field characteristics of your favorite player? (4) Do you feel a connection with your favorite player? (5) Do you like the team in which your player is currently playing?

To get more detailed knowledge researcher served as instrument to elicit the data. To do so, follow up questions were asked as the probing question is source of achieving in depth knowledge from interviewees (Kvale, 1996; Mason, 2002). The interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes.
**Data Analysis:** The process of data analysis for the current commenced right after conducting first interview as this type of strategy allowed to become more familiar with study participant’s responses (Marshall et al., 1995). The processed of data analysis started with the compiling the data or arranging the data (Yin, 2011). After converting the interview into written form, the author noted the first impressions of the interview. Next, the initial impressions of the interviews were revised after each interview. Through this process, the researcher was able to identify how to improve the subsequent interviews. Two level coding system adopted for the analysis of this study that are: (1) the open coding level and (2) the axial level. Open coding was employed for initial level. Open coding can explained as “breaking data apart and defining concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin et al., 2008: 195). To do so, Interview responses were read until the data were completely understood. Through this process researcher was able to understand the determine emergent patterns. Once initial themes were recognized, the study able to establish more defined, concrete themes. This process of axial coding, selective coding, and process coding is also known as reassembling (Yin, 2011). The process of axial coding can explain as the process of combining or relating the initial themes to one another (Corbin et al., 2008). Axial coding helped to elaborate the result of this study from the initial themes. Trustworthiness of the study achieved through guideline of Lincoln et al. (1985) via credibility and dependability/conformability.

**RESULTS**

The research focused on two dimensions of athlete brand: athlete brand construction and athlete brand implication, so the responses of the participants can describe in these terms. Overall finding of the study helped to enlighten fan’s perception about their favorite cricketers, what they like in their favorite overseas cricketers those are representing Pakistani fans local teams for the first time.

**Athlete brand attributes:** Athlete brand construction based on two major aspects of athlete (on-field activities and off-field activities). To become a star cricketers in Pakistan, it was observed that a cricketer should concentrate on both types of attributes as one of our participant mentioned that

In the complex situation of cricket, if someone wants to be a top star and a brand he has to perform on the ground and has to build a positive image outside the ground as well because you should know that
we (Pakistani) are very emotional nation. We do not like anything against our culture, tradition and religion [Fahim].

All of our participants, except one, agreed that on-field attributes are important for any cricketers to become a top brand. Participants agreed that through their performance any cricketer can win loyalties because cricket considers as sport not a war. For example,

If you score fifty or hundred or bowled very good, then there is a bright chance that you will get popularity along the country. The league cricket is not like international cricket, where you score a fifty and whole opponent nation started to dislike you. In contrast, in league cricket peoples are less committed to their teams [Huma].

Hasaan et al. (2015) mentioned five on-field attributes that we discussed with our study participants: behavior, teams, achievements, skills and style of play. Our participants positively recognized these attributes in the context of cricket and Pakistani cricket fans.

Behavior (14 participant acknowledged): Sangakara’s behavior is exemplary. He always steps forward in unfavorable conditions. Even his presence in the dressing room made a positive effect on the entire team [Kamran].

Team (six participant acknowledged): Although it is first edition and teams do not represent whole country but I still feel that if Grant Elliott represented Karachi Kings instead of Peshawar Zalmi, I might like him little bit less [Saleem].

Achievements (five participant acknowledged): If cricketer of Chris Gayle’s caliber is playing you cannot ignore him. Look at his record and achievements. He is simply a record breaker [Imran].

Skills (nine participants acknowledged): When a player have special skills to show he have a huge advantage. Jonty Rhodes of South Africa is a prime example here. After many years of retirement, he still remembered for his special fielding skills [Aslam].

Style of play (14 acknowledged): Why Chris Gayle is famous? He has style of batting no one else have. Against all text books of cricket, he moved his feet merely while batting and still able to score plenty of runs. If you play aggressive like Gayle there are more chances to become popular [Karim].

Nine of 15 participants of the study acknowledged the role of off-field attributes in the context of athlete brand establishment in Pakistan among cricket fans. Among them one participant thinks that on-field performance is a secondary thing comparing to off-field attributes of athlete branding in the context of Pakistani fans. He mentioned that:

Why West Indian players are popular here? Consider the cases of South African cricketer Hashim Amla or British cricketer Moen Ali? They are popular in Pakistan because of their religion, ethnicity, positive words about Pakistan and their modest lifestyle. Apart from cricket field, Pakistani liked boxer Muhammad Ali because he converted to Islam, they like another boxer Amir Khan because he publically called himself a Pakistani British. Pakistani started to like Ronaldo when he refused to change his jersey.
with opponent Israeli players and Zidane become popular because of his religion and Arabic ethnicity. Roger Federer had to apologize after wearing the Indian cricket team jersey during the cricket world cup after receiving thousands of messages sent on social media by his Pakistani fans. So in Pakistan, positive off-field activity is a short cut to gain popularity [Hakim].

Complementary, five off-field attributes discussed among fans in this study as per previous studies: physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity, and entertainment.

Physical Attraction (two participants acknowledged): One of the reason to like Shane Watson is his looks. He is a cute when comparing with others [Salma].
Lifestyle (six participants acknowledged): If a player lives very luxurious lifestyle or have a playboy kind image people will not like him in Pakistan [Kamran].
Personal appeal: (seven participants acknowledged): Personality of Kevin Pietersen helped him to become more popular. A popular and handsome guy with modest attitude is always a hit [Fahim].
Ethnicity (four participants acknowledged): Kumar Sangakkara is a South Asian, just like us, so I prefer him [Naeem].
Entertainment (eight fans acknowledged): In the ground or out of the ground, Gayle always provides us entertainment. He is a pure star [Farman].

**Athlete brand implication:** The implication of athlete brand investigated in the field of cricketer’s loyalty, cricketer’s team loyalty and cricketer’s sponsors loyalty. Overall findings are in line with the view of previous studies conducted about athletes of other sports.

Cricketer’s team loyalty: Being a part of the team, top cricketers are source of benefits for their representative teams. Either financially or morally they are vital cause of strength in team image according to our participants. Although team is itself is an important attribute of athlete branding but once brand has established, loyalties have won, athletes tend to pay back. We can summaries that athletes and team have two-way relation as they both help each other.

All participants of this study agreed that their loyalty about certain team have some connection with their favorite cricketer as well.

Team Substitution (five participants acknowledged): Next time if Kevin Pietersen will represent some other team instead of Quetta Gladiators I will support that team instead of Gladiator [Fahim].
Support for Multiple team (nine participants acknowledged): You cannot say I will always stick to Lahore Qalandar, if my favorite cricketer will move to another club naturally I will take interest in that team as well [Anjum].
Revenue Generation (13 participants acknowledged): I have bought the Shirt of Peshawar Zalmi already and if I get a chance to watch the match of Peshawar or of West Indies in a stadium I will go for sure to watch Darren Sammy live [Hakim].
Cricketer’s Sponsor loyalty: Like other fans, Pakistani cricket fans also expressed the positive intention towards their favorite cricketer’s sponsors. Nine out of 15 acknowledged the importance of a star player attached with some brand.

The trend of foreign celebrity in Pakistani aids is nonexistent. However, with the introduction of PSL we have watched some of this kind commercials (for example South African cricketer Shaun Pollock in a soft drink commercial). If other big names will endorse Pakistani products it will huge boost for that brands as celebrity always spread positive image about the brand which they endorse [Fahim].

Cricketer’s loyalty: The essential base of constructing an athlete brand is about constructing solid and long lasting athlete loyalty among its fans. All of this study’s participant showed their loyalties towards their favorite foreign cricketer.

Media following (13 participants acknowledged): I follow Kevin Pietersen on different channel of media [Fahim].
Own narratives (3 participants acknowledged): I heard that Shakib Al Hasan respected Pakistani flag and anthem very much. This is unusual in terms of Pakistan and Bangladesh relations [Huma].
Positive word-of-mouth (14 participant acknowledged): I often try to convey my friends that Darren Sammy was best foreign cricketer in PSL as he was more committed to his team comparing to his local team mates [Hakim].
Creation of links (five participants acknowledged): I am as enthusiastic as Andre Russell and we have one more thing in common, we both are all-rounders, he is on the cricket field I am in my job [Imam].
Resistance to change (three participants acknowledged): Either he scores or not, Kevin Pietersen will remain my favorite foreign cricketer [Fahim]
Commitment (10 participants acknowledged): I am a devoted fan of Kumar Sangakara. I started to like him when he uses to score against Pakistan (vs. Sri Lanka). I will now defend him publically after his participation in PSL. Although he has retired from International Cricket but if he ever plays against Pakistan I wish he score runs even against Pakistan[Naeem].

**DISCUSSION**

The current study focused on examining the athlete brand framework on Pakistani cricket fans. As athlete is a global entity so it is necessary to focus on different sports and different parts of the world to provide deeper understanding of athlete branding. This study contributes to the literature by examining cricketers as brand because previously cricketers were never subject to the study of athlete branding. In the literature of athlete brand cricket is ignored sport as it is normally considered as British colonial sports. Therefore, this study is not only having practical conversation of theory but also provide the link about cricket dominant and socially conservative markets.
The first dimension of the study was construction of athlete brand. For that purpose, two domain discussed among fans (i.e., on-field attributes and off-field attributes). In relation to the on-field, attributes were divided into five sub-dimensions according to participants’ responses: behavior, team, achievements, skills and style of play. The result of the study was in line with previous literature. As Kerr et al. (2011) explained that behavior on the ground in an important aspect from fan’s point of view as they always cheer for fair play. In cricket, before leagues team was most essential aspect of athlete branding as representing certain country automatically higher your rank of loyalty among fans of the countries. However, in leagues, teams are still part of athlete brand construction but not that powerful. We have to keep in mind that in Cricket league teams are not as local as in European football league structure so team loyalty is less effective attributes but it is still active. As Martin (2013) suggested that positive perception about the certain team helps its athletes to develop positive perception among fans of team. Our fans recognized importance of achievements to become a top athlete as we found in literature that sports celebrities, admired for their outstanding on-field achievements (Dix et al., 2010). Furthermore, according to our participants, skills of an athlete is another important aspect while establishing the brand is in consistent with the view of Vincent et al. (2009) who while summering David Beckham mentioned that Beckham’s impressive athletic skills are among one of tools that made him a successful athlete brand. Style of play is last on-field attributes that our participants positively acknowledged. Importance of style of play is discussed in past literate as well. For instance, Chiweshe (2011) mentioned that style of play is an important factor in winning loyalties.

The second aspect of establishing athlete brand is off-field activates of an athlete. This study participant positively acknowledged the role of all five off-field attributes discussed in the interviews (i.e., physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment). In the backward and conservative culture of Pakistan, physical attraction still matters. However, one form two female participants and one from 13 male participant (total two participants) acknowledged the role of physical attraction while choosing their favorite cricketer. Physical attraction of an athlete is its asset as Liu et al. (2011) mentioned that attractive athletes gather more audience. Regarding lifestyle, Andrews et al. (2001) mentioned that we all are charmed by sport stars’ lifestyles. Regarding personal appeal, we found in the literature that athletes who display extraordinary personal characteristics were found to be a popular (Dix et al., 2010). Our study participants also expressed same kind of reviews. Ethnicity is very popular topic among sociological and psychological researchers. In our study we found that ethnicity
can play a role to enhance an athlete’s image among its fans that is in line with previous studies. For instance, Jewell et al. (2005) found that there is a tendency for fans to follow athletes of their own race. Lastly, as most sports turned into an entertainment shows, our participants and previous studies found that entertainment in athlete life is an important aspect of branding. As Cortsen (2013) described that Muhammad Ali and Joe DiMaggio, two athletes of past become idols because of capable of providing entertainment.

Implication of athlete brand discussed with study participant in the context of athlete’s loyalty, athlete’s team loyalty and athlete’s sponsors loyalty. As literature mentioned that fans have a long-lasting interest (loyalty) in the sport, teams and/or players Koenigstorfer et al. (2010). The dimension of athlete loyalty was further categorized through six sub-dimensions: media following, own narratives, positive word-of-mouth, creation of links, resistance to change and commitment. The first dimension described that once fan become loyal to the athlete they tend to follow him/her on different media channels (i.e., social media, mass media). This in line with the past studies as fans use to follow their favorite athlete on various media channels (Witkemper et al., 2012). The second sub-dimension specified that fans tend to create their own narratives around their favorite athlete according to their cultures and norms to present better image of their favorite athlete. This in consistent with past literature as Dubois et al. (2011) mentioned that people highlighted positive image of their favorite brand. In this study fans also mentioned about spreading positive words-of-mouth in favor of their foreign favorite cricketer. Grohmann et al. (2013) mentioned that devoted fans spread positive WOM regarding their favorite athlete. We also found that fans started to create links between them and their favorite player. They use to find common ground and they connect themselves with their favorite athlete. This is consistent with the conclusions from Fink et al. (2009) mentioning that highly identified fans see them as a reflection of their favorite. The another sub-dimension emerged in this study was resistance to change. This is in line with the idea of loyal fans resist to change their favorite athlete in any condition (Neale et al., 2006). This study also found a new sub-dimension of athlete loyalty section of athlete brand implication. Study participants mention their commitment to their favorite cricketer. Commitment suggested as devoted fans expected to continue their support under any circumstance (Pimentel et al., 2004) and the finding of the study are in consistent with the views of Dionísio et al. (2008) mentioning that devoted fans have cult like following that make their commitment more strong.
The role of the athlete brand on team loyalty brought us to classify three sub-dimensions: team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation. Team substitution means that when a fan likes an athlete, he/she follows the team in which the athlete plays. Yu (2005) mentioned that star athletes have power to influence their fans about their liking/disliking of certain teams. Supporting multiple teams reinforced the idea of McDonald et al. (2010) that fans support multiple teams and they have tendency to follow more than one team at a time. Athlete as source of revenue generation for their respective team is in line with the view of Callejo et al. (2006) who mentioned that star athletes are able to generate plenty of revenue for their respective team and in support of their argument they presented an example of Real Madrid FC.

![Figure1. The final model as per fans’ suggestion](image)

The third and final dimension of athlete brand implication was about athlete’s impact on athlete’s sponsors. This is in consistent with the view of Biscaia et al. (2013) that fans have favorable opinions about sponsors of their favorite athlete. However, it is important to mention that it was first year of league cricketer in Pakistan and the first experience for the Pakistani cricket fans to see the foreign cricketers in their local teams. As this experience will repeat in upcoming years more loyalties towards cricketer’s sponsors will emerge. In the first edition of Pakistan Super League, Pakistan cricket board have earned around $50 million that even did not organized in Pakistan home soil (Zahra-Malik, 2016). So in future, the cricketers will be focused-target of the brands.

In summary, the current study is aimed to provide the practical implication of theory of athlete branding. In doing so we conducted this study among the fans in the sport of cricket. Foreign cricketer’s fans targeted for this study as cricket leagues open the door for cricketers to establish their fandom abroad as well. We examined the constructs of athlete brand among fans and accordance with fan’s responses on-field attributes (behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills) and off-field attributes (physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal,
ethnicity and entertainment) emerged. Furthermore, we found that implication of athlete brand has a positive role at increasing athlete loyalty through media following, positive narratives, positive WOM, creation of link, resistance to change and commitment. Moreover, team loyalty via athlete loyalty (team substitution, support for multiple teams and revenue generation) and positive intention towards athlete’s sponsors were also identified. This study is source of wider understanding of athlete branding academically while practically this study also provide guideline for the cricketers of other countries who will participate in future editions of Pakistan super league to understand constructs that can lead them towards a brand status.

References


