EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STAR PLAYER CHARACTERISTICS AND BRAND EQUITY IN PROFESSIONAL SPORT TEAMS

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The overarching purpose of this study was to examine the impact of star athletes on the consumer-based brand equity of professional sport teams. Through a comprehensive review of literature and a test of content validity by an expert panel, preliminary scales were developed to measure the characteristic attributes of star athletes and the areas of brand equity that were affected by these traits. Research participants (N = 195) were professional sport fans that responded to a survey questionnaire in a classroom setting. After conducting factor analyses on the results, two factors (On-Field and Off-Field) for the star characteristic variables and six factors (Brand Loyalty, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Brand Value, Perceived Quality, and Brand Reputation) for the areas of brand equity emerged. Multiple regression analyses revealed that the On-Field and Off-Field factors combined to exert the greatest, significant effects on the Brand Awareness and Brand Image components.

INTRODUCTION

In the professional sport realm where existing franchises face steep competition for the consumer dollar from rival teams and opposing forms of entertainment (Ross, 2007), being able to gain distinction amongst firms in a crowded marketplace can be of immense value. Branding, which exists to create differences, has therefore become an important topic of study across the broad spectrum of marketing. In particular, the concept of brand equity, which represents the value added to a product by its brand (Aaker, 1991, 2013; Keller 1993), has received considerable attention in both the sport and corporate realms.

Sport marketing scholars and team managers alike have long focused on the driving factors of brand equity in professional sport as they seek to better understand the market demand for sporting event products and the brand-related strategies that teams can employ to exert an effect on consumer actions. Such attention is warranted as customer participation and loyalty are vital at nearly every level of professional

sport, from the league-wide broadcast deals that fund teams' roster-building projects to the home-field advantages that transform team stadiums into formidable environments for visiting opponents. Numerous factors including stadium attractiveness, strength of schedule, star players, location, logo design, head coaches, and success have all been examined in an effort to better explain what it is that creates brand equity and attracts and retains consuming fans who are capable of investing in teams through actual game attendance, merchandise purchases, media consumption, and other areas (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2007; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003).

Nevertheless, one of the factors playing a key role in the generation of brand equity, star players, has remained surprisingly unexplored in its specific impact on the development of brand equity in professional sport teams. While numerous studies have depicted a positive relationship between star players and brand equity, the in-depth connections between these two areas remain rather vague and uncharted. Such vagueness is perplexing given that star players are a fundamental element of any professional sport team and command a

massive chunk of the revenues that franchises strive so hard to attain. In Europe's top professional soccer leagues, for example, somewhere between 50-70% of team revenues are consumed by player wages (Deloitte, 2013). This does not even include the exorbitant transfer fees, now ranging into the hundreds of millions (Deloitte, 2013), that are often required to sign a top player away from another team. In American leagues like the NBA, MLB, and NFL, close to 50% of league revenues are also shared with the athletes, and each year vital draft picks are expended with the expectation that selected players will contribute to a team's performance (Leeds & Von Allmen, 2013). With so many resources invested in the top athletes, an analysis into their specific effects on a team's brand becomes warranted because, like brands, players exist to create differences by using their unique abilities to distinguish teams from one another on and off the field of play.

By possessing some combination of star power qualities, athletes are in many ways brands of their own that are capable of imputing value from their personal identities to the identities of their teams. It is therefore surprising that many of the assessments on the antecedents of brand equity in professional sport teams have shallowly touched upon star players and ignored their unique superstar characteristics. While common sense dictates that a star player possesses qualities unique from those of a standard player, these qualities may vary from one star athlete to another and pose differing effects on a team's brand development. In addition, while certain studies have attempted to connect star players to general areas of brand equity such as brand associations and brand awareness (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006), none have attempted to simultaneously assess athletes' unique and specific effects on the numerous components that are known to play a part in the establishment of brand equity.

In an effort to better understand the seemingly fundamental and important relationship between star players and teams' brand equities, the investigators of this study drew from the extant star power and branding literature to develop a survey questionnaire assessing star player characteristics and their effects on the areas of brand equity development that are important to professional teams. The investigators administered the survey to fans of professional sport teams as they sought the answer to the following research questions:
1. What characteristics constitute a true star player?
2. Which components of a team's brand equity are directly affected by star player characteristics?

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Kotler (1991) defines a brand as a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or some combination of them, which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of competitors. Professional sport organizations are certainly no exception to this definition as they seek to build and differentiate their team brands amidst crowded sport and entertainment environments. Faced with stiff competition in a saturated marketplace, sport franchises have been forced to develop advantageous marketing and branding strategies in their efforts to reach consumers (Ross, 2007; Zhang et al., 2003). Through this process teams seek to develop what Keller (1993) termed as brand equity—the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand.

Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) developed the initial concept of brand equity in general marketing literature and laid the foundation for future studies on the topic. In the athletic realm, the concepts of team branding and brand equity have been thoroughly examined by Gladden and Milne (1999), the duo responsible for developing a framework used to assess the antecedents and consequences of brand equity in professional sport. Their model, seen in Figure 1, was based on Aaker's seminal concepts and categorized star players as team-related antecedents to brand equity, thereby visualizing the very relationship that the current study seeks to expound upon. The framework also subdivided brand equity into the additional dimensions of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty that are key to its development (Aaker, 1991, 2013). The consequences and marketplace perceptions conceptualized as the culmination of the product-equity relationship display the

resultant value that can be obtained from a healthy brand equity and consumer following. This seminal model has since been adapted to additional studies that have sought to explain various aspects of branding in professional team sports. However, while the conceptualizations and focuses of this framework and its successors have typically included a wide array of antecedents, they have been somewhat shallow and inadequate in their descriptions of certain precursory attributes. As such, star players have been generically defined and grouped alongside a host of other variables associated with the development of brand equity in professional sport teams.

In the current study, the intention was not to comparatively explain the importance of

various product and organizational-related antecedents of professional sport teams, such as coaches, stadiums, and logos, but to zero in on what is perhaps the most fundamental attribute to a team, the players. As such, the authors sought to provide a more detailed explanation of how players are differentiated as superstars and how this differentiation can lend itself to a team's brand. To accomplish this, a more in-depth understanding of the star power characteristics that compose marquee athletes must be obtained because such intricacies are notably absent from extant team-branding literature. Advantageously, studies of star power have been conducted in the sponsorship and endorsement tracks of sport marketing literature (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Henseler, Wilson, Götz, & Hautvast, 2007; Shuart, 2007)

FIGURE 1:
Gladden and Milne's Framework for Assessing Brand Equity in Professional Sport. Adapted from "Examining the Importance of Brand Equity in Professional Sports," by J. Gladden and G. Milne, 1999, *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 8,* pp. 21-29.
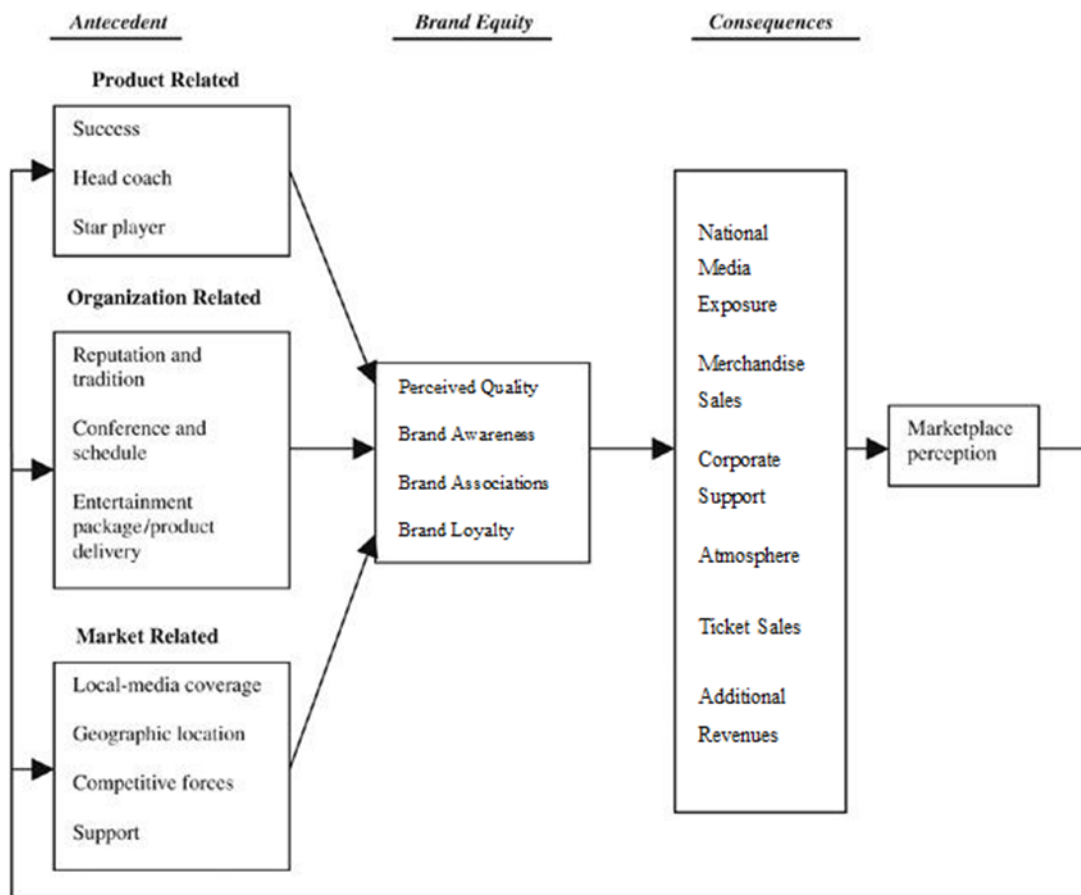
and in theoretical constructs such as the source credibility model, meaning transfer model, and product match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990; McCracken, 1989; McGuire, 1968). With careful articulation, these models could be applicable to a player within the context of a team's brand.

The Development of Brand Equity

The general concept of branding is often discussed in terms of how to develop, manage, and measure brand equity. Brand equity represents the positive or negative associations with a brand name that adds to, or subtracts from, the value provided by the product. Essentially, it is the value of having a well-known brand name as those firms experiencing high levels of brand equity realize outcomes unattainable by identical products and services with different brand names (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Aaker (1991) initially theorized brand equity to encompass four major components: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Brand awareness is the familiarity of the consumer with a particular brand. Perceived quality consists of consumer judgments of a product's overall excellence relative to its intended purpose. Brand associations are mental connections, often experiential, that consumers make with a particular brand. Brand loyalty is the ability to attract and retain customers. Though Aaker did not propose a specific measure of brand equity, he believed these four components were inherent to its generation. More recently, Aaker (2013) sought to combine some of these constructs into a more parsimonious model. Labelling perceived quality as a type of brand association, this subsequent framework varies slightly from its predecessor, but nonetheless conveys the same message that a well-developed brand is valuable to marketers, management, and value-seeking consumers.

In another early examination, Keller (1993) defined brand equity as the marketing effects uniquely attributable to a brand. In developing a *customer-based* measure of brand equity that focused on consumer response to the marketing of a brand, Keller asserted that equity occurs

when customers are aware of a brand and hold favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in their memories. Together, these aggregated brand associations form the brand's image which, along with brand awareness, serves as a key generator of brand equity amongst consumers.

These various dimensions such as brand awareness and brand image that are nested within the overall concept of brand equity are therefore seen as elements fundamental to its development. In order to create and sustain a valuable brand, proper attention and analysis should be paid to these areas and how consumers respond to them. To begin, it should be noted that consumers develop familiarity with a brand through the process of *brand awareness*. This phase involves the consumer's recognition and remembrance of a brand name, particularly as it relates to the likelihood that a brand name will come to one's mind and the ease with which it does so (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Shank, 2009). After an awareness of the brand has been established, a *brand image* can then be developed through marketing efforts. Brand image can be thought of as a consumer's beliefs about a brand, which in turn shape attitudes toward it (Shank, 2009). In essence, it is a collection of *brand associations* that shape the consumer's perceptions of a brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). These perceptions are important as judgments of a product's overall excellence relative to its intended purpose denote the brand's *perceived quality*. A progressive brand image and good perceptions of brand quality would lead to high levels of *brand equity*, the value that the brand contributes to the product in the marketplace. With this equity established, customers will likely become consistent, repeat purchasers of the brand over other products in the market, creating a *brand loyalty* that further enhances the organization's distinct value (Aaker, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Shank, 2009).

The numerous areas that compose brand equity are therefore important to organizations across many disciplines, as distinguished, equitable brands help attract and retain the customers that are essential to firm survival (Aaker, 1991; Shank, 2009). Professional sport organizations are no exception to this phenomenon as the attraction and retention of consuming spectators

and fans is critical to the financial and subsequent on-field performances of teams. The marketplace consequences of national media exposure, merchandise sales, corporate support, atmosphere, ticket sales, and additional revenues that result from an established brand equity are depicted in Gladden and Milne's (1999) model and play a pivotal role in granting teams value on and off the field of play. If brand equity can be obtained for a sport franchise, the resulting consequences can be rather lucrative to profit-maximizing and win-maximizing owners alike.

It therefore makes sense as to why team marketers and managers are seen emphasizing factors such as game attractiveness, marketing promotions, and economic incentives in an effort to generate a market demand for their product (Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995), and why significant research efforts have been devoted to examining the antecedents of brand equity in professional sport teams. Although the intention of the current study was to examine just one of those antecedents, star players, numerous other factors are understood to potentially influence brand equity in professional sport teams. On-field success, traditions, geographic locations, coaches, schedules, facilities, and an abundance of additional variables have all been presented as driving forces of brand equity in professional sport teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Shank, 2009; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995) and as antecedents affecting the brand awareness and brand associations between fans and teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2006).

Gladden and Milne's (1999) framework takes into account several of these antecedent conditions and segments them into product-related, organization-related, and market-related factors. Product and organization-related antecedents, which are the components necessary for performing the product or service function sought by consumers, are of particular importance because team managers can often control and manipulate these factors (Keller, 1993; Shank, 2009). Star players, being labeled as product-related antecedents, are therefore

manageable aspects of an organization as general managers decide who to sign, trade, and release, and team marketers decide whether or not to use certain players as the focus of promotional efforts. However, due to the generic phrasing used to denote these marquee athletes in extant studies, their true value-add continues to go unappreciated and unidentified in its ability to connect with consumers at various stages of brand development. Given that the importance and impact of star players is quite evident, more insightful analyses could prove beneficial to team officials as they look to manage their teams' brands.

Star Power in Professional Athletes

Endowed with the abilities to boost team performance, attendance numbers, television ratings, and merchandise sales, star players are at the core of providing the benefits that differentiate one team's brand from another (Foster, Greyser, & Walsh, 2005; Shank, 2009; Zhang et al., 2003). The movement of LeBron James between teams in the NBA, for instance, serves as a prime example of the effects that one player can have on a franchise. After being drafted first overall in the 2003 NBA Draft, James became a member of a Cleveland Cavaliers organization that was coming off a 17-win season, possessed a below-average league attendance of 11,497 fans per home game, and held a team value of $258 million (Matuszewski, 2010). James quickly helped turn the organization around, nearly doubling attendance figures to 20,562 fans per game, leading the Cavaliers to multiple 60-win seasons and propelling the team to an overall franchise value of $476 million that ranked fifth in the league (Matuszewski, 2010). Unsurprisingly, when James announced his departure for the Miami Heat in 2010, Cleveland's overall value dropped nearly 26% while Miami's rose by 17% (Matuszewski, 2010). The Heat's ticket sales had been declining for four years, yet sold-out once James joined (Ozanian, 2011).

Almost singlehandedly, LeBron James had accounted for one of the greatest shifts in franchise value just by switching teams. However, not every player is capable of exerting such an influence. Indeed, spectators often attend live matches or watch televised

games because they are attracted to *star* players, those athletes whose unique attributes and elevated statuses make them capable of providing benefits unrealized by the average player. Ambiguity often surrounds the practitioner's use of the term "star players," and although it is generally accepted that they are athletes possessing special attributes that positively differentiate them from their compatriots, such a generalization offers little insight to those desiring more specific characterizations.

In light of this vagueness, various studies have sought to distinguish the general concept of superstardom by revealing traits and concepts that serve as prerequisites to its attainment. The origins of these studies lie outside the sporting realm and can be traced back several decades, beginning with McGuire's (1968) study on the nature of attitudes and attitude change. Developing what came to be coined as the *source credibility model*, McGuire theorized that *perceived expertise* and *trustworthiness* are necessary attributes for a person looking to exercise persuasiveness over others. McGuire (1985) further discussed that one's acceptance of a message relies on the *similarity*, *familiarity*, and *liking* of the message deliverer, forming what came to be known as the *source attractiveness model*. McCracken (1989) then extended McGuire's research with the *meaning transfer model*, which showed how meanings pass from celebrity to product and from product to consumer via *celebrity image*. This naturally led to the *product match-up hypothesis* and other similar constructs that assessed the *fit* between promotional messages and their celebrity endorsers' *images* or *attractiveness* (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1989, 1990; Ohanian, 1991). Taking the initiative to apply these generic frameworks to an athletic setting, Braunstein and Zhang (2005) contended that these preliminary models are highly applicable to sports because star athletes have the ability to influence others as a result of their *physique, knowledge, attitude, exemplary skills,* and *ability to invoke pride*. Through factor analyses, the researchers ultimately identified five star power factors of *professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness,* and *characteristic style*, and found that these

constructs were positively predictive of sport consumption.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations that hamper previous studies (Brooks & Harris, 1998; Charbonneau & Garland, 2006) from being directly applicable to this examination. A majority of studies, for instance, sought to define superstardom within the context of *external* product endorsements by focusing on attributes that made athletes effective endorsers of products outside the scope of the teams they played for. Knowing what makes LeBron James a good endorser for Nike shoes sheds some light on his overall marketability but neglects certain linkages his star characteristics might have on team-specific functions that contribute to the development of a franchise's brand equity. Furthermore, drawing relationships between stars and endorsements often overstates factors that lie beyond the field of play. Many fans and members of management place importance on in-game performance and team achievement (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Kuper & Szymanski, 2012; Pan, Gabert, McGaugh, & Branvoid, 1997), so knowing which traits make an athlete effective at selling an unrelated product sheds limited light on the characteristics that delineate star players from mere celebrities. Braunstein and Zhang's (2005) findings, for example, appear to put an overemphasis on attributes such as social attractiveness, likeable personality, characteristic style, and professional trustworthiness that have a closer resemblance to a generic celebrity endorser than a star athlete. While such imbalance seems appropriate given their study's reliance on models that highlighted the more celebrity-related aspects of stardom, later studies seem to suggest that concepts like winning and in-game performance are necessary to delineate a true star player from a mere celebrity athlete (Chalip, 1997; Shuart, 2007; Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003). Given that most of the aforementioned studies tended to focus on the general concept of celebrity, making a distinction between the *celebrity* and the *star player* is necessary because literature shows celebrity as being just one part of a star player's composition. In other studies, athletic stardom is described as *a synthesis of sport hero and celebrity athlete* (Chalip, 1997; Shuart, 2007; Stevens et al., 2003), revealing a convergence

that is helpful because it provides researchers with two identifiable backgrounds from which an athlete's impact on a variety of areas can be assessed.

In a general sense, a celebrity is an individual whose name garners people's attention and interest and has the ability to generate a profit (Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997). In the context of sport, *celebrity athletes* often gain recognition and fame through additional media coverage. This coverage is typically thought to arise from elements outside of the athlete's on-field ability, such as charisma, attractiveness, or a likeable personality (Foster et al., 2005; Shank, 2009). Jason Collins, for instance, achieved a high-level of recognition as the first NBA athlete to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality, yet few would consider him a true sport star because his on-field abilities had long faded (Stein, 2013). In a similar fashion, NBA forward Kris Humphries achieved celebrity athlete status because of his brief marriage to Kim Kardashian; however, as evidenced by his inability to remain on any one team for a significant length of time, he has never been viewed as one of the elite players at his position (Mazzeo, 2011).

On the other hand, a *sports hero* is an athlete who becomes recognized for exceptional skills and accomplishments in high-level competitions (Shuart, 2007; Stevens et al., 2003). This concept speaks more towards the on-field attributes of players who achieve star status by showcasing their unique abilities on the big stage. Such a status is often denoted by all-star appearances, trophies won, and other performance-related metrics (Moskowitz & Wertheim, 2011; Yang & Shi, 2011; Yang, Shi, & Goldfarb, 2009). In this sense, many players have achieved prominence within their respective sport but have not been able to translate their athletic skills into marketable personalities or lifestyles. These are the types of athletes who often avoid off-field publicity while describing themselves as "all-business." They are well-known for their exploits on the field but might never realize their full potential off of it. In essence, they are athletic stars, but not necessarily celebrity athletes.

The basic premise of this prior research seems to suggest that both celebrity athlete status and sports heroism are capable of granting a player some form of star power, although some combination of the two may be required for players and their constituents to realize the maximum benefits of superstardom (Chalip, 1997; Shuart, 2007; Stevens et al., 2003). Athletes like David Beckham, a player who combined his unique athletic skills with a marketable personality, look, and lifestyle, serve as vivid examples of this phenomenon. And while one aspect is often more visible than the other, both could serve as prerequisites to attaining the prestigious rank of star player. The extant literature therefore seems to suggest that marketers, managers, and practitioners should take into account both the in-game and out-of-game characteristics of athletes when assessing their potential for star power. In lieu of this evidence, the current study's investigators included both on-field and off-field elements of star power in their research. Doing this allowed for a more accurate and all-encompassing assessment of the relationship between athletic star power and team brand equity.

METHOD

Participants

Research participants (N = 195) were graduate and undergraduate students in a public university located in the Mideast region of the United States. The use of a student sample was deemed appropriate in this situation given that students are accessible, commonly involved in product and brand choice research (Biswas & Sherrell, 1993), and representative of a significant portion of sport consumers (Ross et al., 2006). Of the sample, 127 (65%) of the 195 respondents were males, while the remaining 68 (35%) were females. Nearly all of the participants were single (90.2%), and the most common age range was 18-20 (45.3%). The predominant ethnicity was White (80.9%), with African Americans (11.9%) and Asians (3.1%) accounting for the second and third largest racial contingents. Among the respondents, 89.7% followed professional football, 60% basketball, 55.9% baseball, 16.9% hockey, and 16.4% soccer. Such a distribution seemed representative of the study's setting in Mideast America given that North America's "big four" sports were represented in the top slots. Furthermore, 40% of the fans studied claimed

to have been supporters of their favorite team for over 15-plus years, with another 24.6% indicating they had been fans for 10-14 years. In fact, 91.8% of the participants were *at least somewhat involved* as supporters of their favorite teams, and a majority (66.2%) stated that they owned a replica jersey or other piece of team merchandise specifically associated with a past or present player from their favorite team. This data indicated that the sample was a reliable source for obtaining the necessary information given the respondents' high levels of involvement with the professional teams and players. Table 1 reveals the full demographics of the respondents.

Survey Instrument

Based on a review of relevant literature, a survey questionnaire containing four sections was developed. No extant scales were directly adopted in this study due to the fact that prior models neglected the dual nature of star players and focused vaguely on the relationships between star players and team brand equity. In order to assess the specific linkages between star player characteristics and the acute areas of a team's brand equity, a new scale was developed to adhere to the current study's objectives.

TABLE 1:
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 195)

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	127	65.1
Female	68	34.9
Marital Status		
Single	174	90.2
Married	12	6.2
Engaged	4	2.1
Divorced	3	1.5
Missing	2	--
Class Standing		
Freshman	16	8.3
Sophomore	42	21.8
Junior	57	29.5
Senior	42	21.8
Masters	32	16.6
Doctoral	2	1.0
Other	2	1.0
Missing	2	--
Age		
18-20	87	*45.3*
21-23	61	*31.8*
24-26	26	*13.5*
27-29	9	*4.7*
30-63	9	*4.7*
Missing	3	--
Ethnicity		
African American	23	*11.9*
Asian	6	*3.1*
Hispanic	2	*1.0*
White	157	*80.9*
Native American	4	*2.1*
Other	2	*1.0*
Missing	1	--

The first section inquired about the respondents' general background information. The second section examined consumer preferences and behaviors and used questions to screen the eligibility of the research participants. This section also asked respondents to write the names of their favorite professional teams and players in an effort to stimulate thoughts and responses on the topical concepts (Ross et al., 2006). The third section of the questionnaire presented 10 items pertaining to the assessment of star player characteristics and asked respondents to rate on a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) which traits were more or less relevant in defining an athlete as a star. Each trait reflected characteristics that had been presented in previous literature and real-life scenarios. The final section of the survey assessed star players' effects on professional teams' brands using the same six-point Likert-type scale that was deployed in section three. This area of the instrument contained 40 items asking the participants to rate these relational effects to the extent by which they agreed or disagreed with the proposed relationship. After its development, the preliminary questionnaire was submitted to a panel of three experts in sport management for a test of content validity in regards to item relevance, clarity, and representativeness. Following the input of the panel members, minor revisions were made to improve the wording of the items.

Procedure

The institutional review board on the use of human subjects approved the conduct of this study. Along with a form of consent, the survey questionnaire was distributed to a total of 250 graduate and undergraduate students in the kinesiology department at the aforementioned university. A total of 209 agreed to participate in the study and completed the survey; however, only 195 were actually included in the study, representing a retention rate of 78%. The responses of the 14 excluded individuals were discarded due to their indications that they were *not* fans of professional sport and did not follow professional sport at all. Based on Koll and Wallpach's (2009) assertion that frequent consumers experience a more intense relationship with a brand than occasional or non

-buyers, the elimination of these responses from the study was justified.

Data Analyses

Given the exploratory nature of this study and initial development of scales for measuring the characteristics of star players and a professional team's brand equity, exploratory factor analyses (EFA) with orthogonal rotation techniques were conducted to examine the dimensionality of the items. EFA is a scaling procedure that examines a set of observed variables, reduces them, and then summarizes them until sets of hypothetical, underlying dimensions called *factors* emerge (Smith & Albaum, 2005). In this instance, EFA was a helpful tool for narrowing down a variety of star power traits and branding relationships into more simple, identifiable constructs. Similar analytical protocols have been successfully deployed in other studies examining star power and sport-branding (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Ross et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2003). Within the results of the survey, two distinct EFAs were carried out. The first EFA was conducted on the 10 items assessing star player characteristics in an effort to aggregate them into definable attributes. The second EFA was applied to the 40 items assessing the impact of star players on specific functions and aspects of a professional team's brand. All of these subgroups were then analyzed, tested for validity, and classified appropriately. Lastly, multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the star player attributes and the brand equity components.

RESULTS

Procedures were followed on SPSS 21.0 software to conduct the factor analyses. Operating under Kaiser's (1970) criterion that eigenvalues greater than one suggest relevant factors, 1.0 was selected as the standard for factor retention. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .80 for the star player characteristic items and .90 for the brand equity items, indicating that the sample size was adequate for conducting the EFA. Both values of the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were significant ($p < .001$), indicating that high inter-item relationships

existed and EFA was appropriate (Coughlin & Knight, 2007; Field, 2009).

For the items related to star player characteristics, two factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0 were extracted and deemed relevant based on Kaiser's rule. These factors accounted for just over 50.0% of the total variance among items. Two items that were either double loaded on two factors or not relevant to a factor's domain were discarded, meaning 8 items were retained amongst the two discovered factors. As seen in Table 2, these factors were labeled as On-Field and Off-Field characteristics and were loaded with four items each. The On-Field factor was heavily weighted with items showing that a player's ability to contribute to team success, perform well as an individual, display leadership qualities, and exhibit exceptional skill all made him or her capable of exuding star power. The Off-Field factor loaded items pertaining to the more celebrity-like attributes of charisma, attractiveness, status, and culture.

Following a similar factor analysis on the results of the 40-item branding section, eight factors with appropriate eigenvalues were initially extracted and deemed relevant. These factors accounted for 62.881% of the overall variance among items. Examining the rotated factor structure, a total of 30 items under six factors had sufficient values at or above .40

without double loading. These factors were appropriately retained. However, two factors had items with loading values below .40, removing them from the final factor solution and excluding them from further analyses. Modifications to both sets of results were supported by Thurstone's rules, which state that selected values should be .40 and above, double loaded values should be dropped, and values loading high on inappropriate factors should be deleted (Coughlin & Knight, 2007). The resolved factors, viewable in Table 3, were labeled as Brand Loyalty, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Brand Value, Perceived Quality, and Brand Reputation. Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient ranged from .66 to .74, respectively, for the Off-Field and On-Field factors. For the team-branding constructs, the alpha coefficients ranged from .63 to .89. All alpha coefficients can be seen beneath their related factors in Table 2 and Table 3.

Following the EFAs, multiple regression analyses were run to analyze the relationship between star players and each of the six brand equity components. Incorporating both the On-Field and Off-Field elements as forced predictors in the multiple regression models, it was seen that the areas of Brand Awareness and Brand Image appeared to be the most affected by the "true" star athletes that exhibited both of these superstar traits. Indeed, the overall star

TABLE 2:
Classified Star Player Factors with Loaded Items, Loading Weights, and Alphas

Construct (Factor)	Loading	Item
On-Field Stardom α = .737	.699	*Exceptional skills* (possesses skill and athletic ability that few others can replicate)
	.756	*Leadership* (able to make teammates better)
	.727	*Performs well as an individual* (wins personal awards, has good stats, all-star appearances)
	.796	*Contributes to team success* (helps the team win games and championships)
Off-Field Stardom α = .660	.570	*Charisma* (personality, sharpness, speaking ability, swagger)
	.838	*Attractiveness* (good looks, sex appeal)
	.791	*Celebrity status* (the athlete captures society's attention on and off the field/court)
	.566	*Cultural significance* (Asians in the NBA, Americans in Europe)

TABLE 3:
Classified Brand Equity Factors with Loaded Items, Loading Weights, and Alphas

Factor Name	Loading	Item
Brand Loyalty	.742	I would not renew season tickets if the team lost its star players
α = .889	.793	I will not support a team if its star players leave
	.822	I decide to support one team over another because of the star players on that team
	.594	I will recommend a team to others because of its star players
	.491	Star players give me an emotional connection to a team
	.691	I am more likely to support a team that has star players on its roster
	.740	I support a team because of the star athletes on the team
	.757	I will stop supporting a team if new star players are not brought it
Brand Awareness	.527	I first become aware of a team because of its star players
α = .786	.451	Star players are good promotional spokesmen for their teams
	.567	Star players of a specific nationality raise awareness for their teams in those countries
	.714	I recognize a team's brand when I see its star players
	.635	I become more aware of a team when it signs a star player
	.565	The skills and performances of a star player generate exposure for a team
	.549	Star players spread the team's brand (logo, name, colors) to new audiences
Brand Image	.819	Star players with good reputations impose a positive image on their team
α = .774	.591	Star players with bad reputations impose a negative image on their team
	.695	Star athletes who give back to the community are beneficial to team image
	.460	Star players shape the team's image
	.769	Star players' actions can affect team image in a positive or negative way
Brand Value	.675	Having star players on a team adds value to the organization's brand
α = .793	.600	A newly signed star athlete will improve the value of the team
	.855	High-profile athletes bring further revenue to a team
	.549	Star athletes can raise the performance levels of their teammates
Perceived Quality	.563	I have greater trust in teams that have star players
α = .639	.592	I am more impressed by teams with star players
	.643	I am aware of a team because I purchase player merchandise
Brand Reputation	.642	I support a team because of the traditions established by the star players
α = .634	.646	I will continue following a losing team if it has star players on its roster
	.679	A past or present star player will keep me supporting the team for a long period of time

player that consisted of both the On-Field and Off-Field characteristics explained 12.5% of the variance in Brand Awareness, $F(2, 170) = 13.23$, $p < .01$, adj. $R^2 = .125$, and 17.6% of the variance in Brand Image, $F(2, 178) = 20.26$, $p < .01$, adj. $R^2 = .176$. In the Brand Awareness model, both On-Field stardom, $\beta = .302$, $t(170) = 4.21$, $p < .01$, and Off-Field Stardom, $\beta = .175$, $t(170) = 2.43$, $p < .05$, were significantly and positively predictive of Brand Awareness amongst consumers. The same was

true for the Brand Image model as On-Field stardom, $\beta = .402$, $t(178) = 5.90$, $p < .01$, was a highly significant and positive predictor of Brand Image and Off-Field stardom was a moderately significant and positive predictor, $\beta = .114$, $t(178) = 1.67$, $p < .10$.

In terms of effect sizes on the remaining brand equity factors, the combined superstar trait models held adjusted R^2 values of .106, .057, .074, and .043 for the Brand Value, Brand

Reputation, Perceived Quality, and Brand Loyalty constructs, respectively. Each of these models also had significant F-values ($p < .01$). However, only Perceived Quality was significantly predicted by both the On-Field ($p < .10$) and Off-Field ($p < .01$) factors. For each of the remaining three constructs, only one of the two star power traits was a significant predictor of its brand equity component. As seen in Table 4, only the Off-Field characteristic was significantly predictive of Brand Loyalty ($p < .01$), while On-Field stardom was the lone, significant predictor in the Brand Value ($p < .01$) and Brand Reputation ($p < .01$) models.

DISCUSSION

This study performed exploratory factor analyses on the items of a survey questionnaire in order to extract factors consistent with star player characteristics and components of brand equity. What emerged were two factors that characterized a player as a star and six factors that fell within the brand equity domain. Multiple regression results showed that both stardom factors were significantly predictive of brand awareness, a component that plays a vital role in the initial generation of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Shank, 2009). In addition, the two factors combined to explain a significant percentage (12.5%) of the variance in the relationship. Brand image was also significantly affected by the combination of both forms of star power, with 17.6% of the variance explained. Both of these discoveries provide initial evidence that star players showcasing both on-field and off-field attributes could exert a positive effect on the brands of professional sport teams as they help teams develop consumer-based brand equity.

Overall, a player's on-field stardom appeared to be predictive of a greater number of brand equity measures as it was found to be significantly predictive of five brand equity relationships compared to off-field stardom's four. The on-field characteristic also appeared to exert a greater effect on its related constructs as evidenced by standardized regression weights (β) that exceeded those of the off-field trait in four of the six models (see Table 4). Nevertheless, between the two factors, every phase was accounted for as no component of

brand equity failed to show a significant relationship to at least one of the superstar characteristics. Therefore, Gladden and Milne's (1999) framework depicting star players as key antecedents to the generation of brand equity remains verified in its assertion, with this study's results helping clarify and quantify the relationship. Figure 2 visualizes the discovered relationships and establishes a foundational model upon which future studies can expand. Overall, the results hold relevant implications at both the theoretical and practical levels.

Theoretical Implications

The results obtained from the exploratory factor and regression analyses were consistent with numerous theoretical concepts discussed in previous star power and branding literature. These insights not only provided a specific, more detailed assessment of a relationship that has been broadly discussed in extant frameworks and models (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Kaynak et al., 2007), but also helped model a player-team relationship that is prevalent across all professional sport organizations.

Collectively, the two superstar characteristics were predictive of increased awareness amongst consumers, highlighting the importance of building a brand awareness attribute that has consistently been shown to initiate brand equity in previous frameworks and studies (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Shank, 2009). Of additional importance was brand image, which appeared to be the area of brand equity most affected by players showcasing both traits. This component stood as on-field stardom's most affected measure ($\beta = .402$), revealing the influence this relationship could have on the generation of teams' brand equities. Interpreting brand image as a collection of brand associations that shape consumer perceptions of a brand (Keller, 1993), it would appear that star players do function as team-related antecedents capable of influencing the development of consumer-based brand equity in this area. Gladden and Funk's (2002) TAM scale and Kaynak, Salman, and Tatoglu's conceptual model (2007) were two such studies identifying consumer brand associations as key drivers of brand equity and loyalty. This finding therefore augments the focuses of these prior examinations by reinforcing the notion that the

TABLE 4:
Descriptive Statistics and Results from the Multiple Regression Analyses

| Factors	Mean	SD	F	df	adj. R^2	t	b	SE	β
Brand Loyalty	23.3	7.74	4.913**	2, 174	.043				
Constant						2.52	14.2*	5.62	
On-Field Stardom	21.7	2.40			-.010	.154	.037	.239	.011
Off-Field Stardom	16.8	3.58			.042	3.10	.496	.160	.230**
Brand Awareness	31.9	5.30	13.23**	2, 170	.125				
Constant						3.77	13.6**	3.61	
On-Field Stardom	21.7	2.46			.094	4.21	.652	.155	.302**
Off-Field Stardom	16.6	3.70			.034	2.43	.251	.103	.175*
Brand Image	26.0	3.20	20.26**	2, 178	.176				
Constant						6.03	12.7**	2.11	
On-Field Stardom	21.7	2.41			.163	5.90	.534	.090	.402**
Off-Field Stardom	16.6	3.65			.015	1.67	.100	.060	.114+
Brand Value	19.2	3.00	11.60**	2, 176	.106				
Constant						4.64	9.79**	2.11	
On-Field Stardom	21.8	2.40			.106	4.79	.426	.089	.341**
Off-Field Stardom	16.8	3.57			-.010	.096	.006	.060	.007
Brand Reputation	12.3	2.90	6.454**	2, 180	.057				
Constant						2.36	4.90*	2.08	
On-Field Stardom	21.8	2.38			.046	3.13	.276	.088	.227**
Off-Field Stardom	16.7	3.60			.005	1.44	.084	.058	.104
Perceived Quality	10.7	3.06	8.163**	2, 177	.074				
Constant						1.73	3.70+	2.14	
On-Field Stardom	21.7	2.42			.015	1.84	.168	.092	.133+
Off-Field Stardom	16.6	3.66			.057	3.37	.204	.060	.244**

fostering of a solid brand image is vital to brand success, and that star players can lend a hand in shaping consumer attitudes toward a team.

It is also important to note that the EFA's extraction of two factors—one representing the on-field characteristic of a player and the other representative of an off-field trait—aligned with previous studies portraying star athletes as being some combination of sports hero and/or celebrity athlete (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Chalip, 1997; Shuart, 2007; Stevens et al., 2003). Of these characteristics, on-field stardom appeared to harness greater potential in its ability to exert an effect on the development

of teams' brand equities and predict positive responses from consumers at the awareness, image, value, and reputation stages of brand equity. The off-field, celebrity athlete characteristic appeared to be slightly more limited in its capacity to affect brand development, though it was still predictive of consumer-based brand equity in the areas of brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality.

Perceived quality therefore stood as the third construct outside of brand awareness and brand image that was significantly predicted by both

FIGURE 2:
Conceptual Model Depicting the Relationships between Star Player
Characteristics and Affected Components of Professional Sport Teams' Brand Equities.
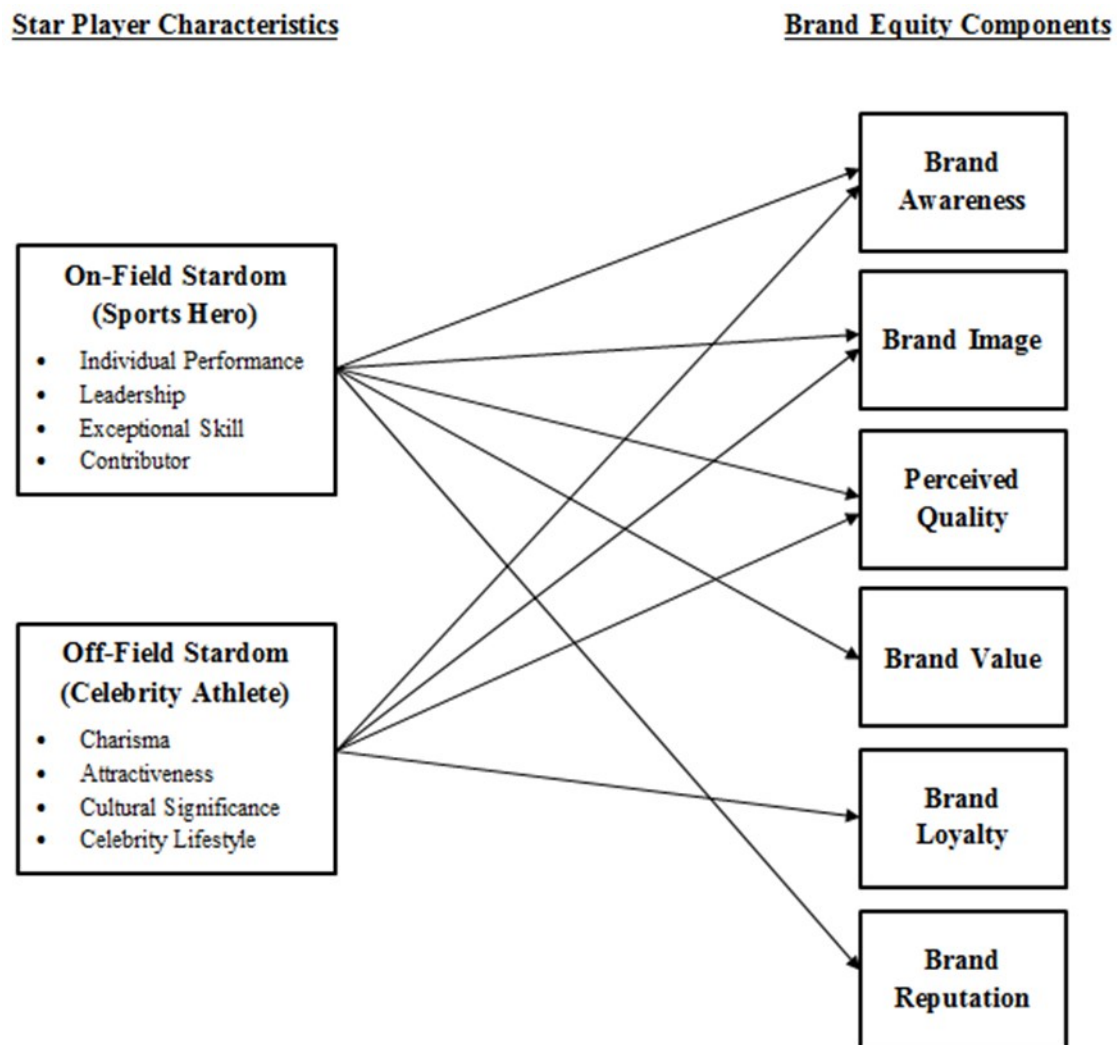
on-field and off-field stardom. Though some researchers have begun to merge this area of brand equity into other dimensions (Aaker, 2013), its continued use in academic circles, combined with the fact that the EFA extracted a factor consistent to its definition, made it worthy of inclusion. In regards to perceived quality's significant relationship with the off-field trait, it would appear as though consumers also form judgments of team quality based on players' off-field characteristics. While it may seem counterintuitive for the off-field attributes to exert such an influence on perceptions of team quality, such an occurrence coincides with the theoretical frameworks presented by

McGuire (1985), McCracken (1989), and others (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1989, 1990; Ohanian, 1991) that showed such attributes as likability, image, and attractiveness to play a key role in the influencing of consumer opinions. Such a finding also supports the *image heuristic* theory presented in prior literature which argues that players are biasedly evaluated on the basis of physical appearance rather than actual performance (Kuper & Szymanski, 2012; Lewis, 2004).

In general, the results of this study appear to consistently align with the theories presented in previous sport branding literature by portraying

brand awareness and brand image as vital elements in the brand equities of professional sport teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2006). Future studies on the brand equity of professional sport franchises would be wise to take into consideration these seemingly important areas in their own theoretical assessments, as star players' significant relationships to these dimensions only add additional relevance to their usage. For now, the links uncovered between the star player characteristics and brand equity components lend additional, quantified insights to the relationship presented in earlier theoretical models of brand equity in professional teams.

Practical Implications

Beyond the theoretical realm, the findings of this study hold pragmatic value to managers on teams in possession of star athletes that are capable of differentiating their franchises' brands from competitors. In particular, managers with the ability to deploy athletes possessing strong on-field characteristics appear to stand the greater chance of converting a star player's attributes into a realized equity for a team's brand. However, the most powerful effects appeared to be harnessed by true star players that are able to combine both the on and off-field traits. This was first witnessed at the brand awareness stage, where both on and off-field stardom proved significant in their ability to predict raised recognition for a team amongst consumers. Taking this into consideration, marketers should include star players in their promotional activities from the start. Such actions might involve the use of a star athlete on team advertisements and season ticket campaigns, or the appearance of a marquee player's name, number, or likeness on a variety of team-branded or co-branded merchandise. Seeing as brand awareness is the first step in the development of brand equity, knowing that star players are capable of generating awareness for a team can help persuade marketers to base initial efforts around the performances and personalities of these superstars. It also sheds light on the role a newly acquired star player can have in drawing attention to a brand and helping it reach new markets.

It is also important to consider brand image and the role it plays in shaping consumer attitudes toward a brand. The findings showed superstars to be more capable of affecting brand image than any other area, which could potentially be a double-edged sword since the effect can be positive or negative. However, for managers looking to carry a team's image from one of losing and trouble to winning and glory, a high character, high performing star player may serve as the perfect antidote. In addition, marketers hoping to boost a team's brand image would be wise to look for an appropriate "fit" between a player and the message they are trying to portray, so as to form the proper associations in consumer minds.

Shifting to perceived quality, it was interesting to observe that in addition to on-field stardom, off-field stardom was a significant predictor of consumer perceptions in this area. Therefore, realizing consumer judgments of the product will also be based around athletes' off-field traits, marketers hoping to improve the perceived notions of their team should make the star athletes more accessible and relatable to the public. By providing opportunities for player cameos in public forums, marketers are able to unite fans with the players they support, boosting consumer perceptions of the brand's quality as they become more familiar with the athletes off the field (Jowdy & McDonald, 2002).

Once these first few phases have been recognized and reinforced, team officials should be on the lookout for a rise in brand value. On-field stardom, in particular, was predictive of this value-rise in professional sport franchises, a notion that makes sense considering the wide array of performance-based incentives that exist for teams across leagues. In order to win and realize the associated rewards, they must attract and retain the best players, a phenomenon witnessed in the value shifts associated with LeBron's move from Cleveland to Miami. In the consumer-based context of this study, the discovery of players' effects on the brand value measure technically states that consumers believe star players are capable of affecting the overall value of a brand. While financial figures might be more appropriate in proving such a relationship, the brand value construct

nevertheless reflects consumers' tendencies to associate on-field ability with increased financial and winning performances. Marketers can therefore play to this value-add by glamorizing and promoting the arrival of superstar athletes to a team, while managers are well aware at this point of the positive financial benefits that result from a successful signing.

In regards to the latter stages of brand equity development, this study's research findings showed that off-field stardom was predictive of consumer loyalties to a team's brand while on-field stardom had almost no relationship with the brand loyalty construct. The latter relationship perhaps indicates that fans who attach themselves to players of great on-field ability will tend to concentrate more on those athletes and their unique skills than the teams they actually play for. In essence, they sacrifice loyalty to the team's brand for loyalty to the player's brand. On the other hand, fans drawn to players' celebrity-like attributes might be members of a broader audience who become enthralled with these unique personalities and thereby make decisions to invest in the team. However, because brand loyalty is the culmination of prior marketing efforts (Aaker, 1991; Shank, 2009), marketers should not take these results verbatim and deduce that the promotion of sports heroes will have limited effect on consumers' repeat purchases. Instead, they should look at on-field stardom's significant relationship with brand reputation— the symbol of a team's enduring tradition. Because on-field stardom is predictive of a solid team reputation, marketers should take action to recognize esteemed alumni in promotional videos and recaps of past achievements. This way, older generations will not be forsaken, and consuming fans can continue to bask in the glory of their past heroes.

In closing, it is important to note that the types of star athletes discussed in this study must often be acquired and compensated at high prices, meaning misjudgments in their potential value-add could prove costly. Therefore, the findings of this study hold additional implications for general managers, who will be delighted to hear that team performance does not necessarily have to be sacrificed in the name of brand development. In fact, the results

suggest that by recruiting players who perform on the field, general managers might be doing themselves, the marketing department, and the team's brand a huge favor. As a result, general managers and scouts should continue to attract, retain, and develop the top talent for their teams.

Current Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this research plays a preliminary role in generally explaining which areas of brand equity are affected by star players and their characteristics, it follows that this study could be tested under more specialized circumstances and amongst varying demographics. Doing so would require items that are directly aimed to a specific professional sport, team, player, or league. This would reduce much of the generality associated with the terms *star players* and *professional teams*. In addition, spreading the survey to a broader group of participants might reveal different, emerging trends as participants in other countries or regions of the United States may hold varying opinions on the relationships between star player characteristics and teams.

Future research could also explore the causal relations between the various stages of the brand development process in order to procure more accurate results. Because the latter stages of brand equity development such as brand loyalty and reputation are influenced and driven by earlier phases like brand awareness and brand image (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2006; Shank, 2009), implementing additional interfactor analyses through confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, hierarchical linear modeling, or additional methods could lend strength to the study's overall reliability and ability to convey a true process model. Such methods might also help recategorize or reduce the amount of brand equity components that were unearthed by the EFA in this study, thereby tightening the nomological net that surrounds many of these terms. To this extent, it is important to remind readers that this study was limited by its exploratory nature and was not designed to mirror any one model of brand equity. As such, the numerous dimensions of brand equity that

are presented reflect the responses of the consumer sample and simply highlight dimensions that may exist in a sport setting influenced by star athletes.

In addition, future studies could take a more longitudinal approach and incorporate the element of time to see whether or not these effects vary over the long and short-term. While this study did not differentiate between star players who have just signed and those who have been with a team for longer periods of time, future research could examine the immediate and lagged effects of superstars on brand development over the course of months or years. Expanding the sample size might also yield more significant relationships between star player characteristics and the branding constructs. Additional studies could also examine the negative effects of consumer loyalties to specific players rather than specific teams.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the findings of this study, although preliminary in scope, can help direct future studies toward the creation of a more complete model depicting the unique and important relationship between star players, their characteristics, and the components of a team's brand equity. Gladden and Milne's (1999) model and other previous frameworks provided conceptual foundations upon which the star player's interaction with the brand could be visualized. This study took it a step further by helping define the term "star player" and by revealing specific avenues, namely brand awareness and brand image, through which these marquee athletes can use their characteristics to exert an effect on a team's brand development. It is therefore recommended that future research continues to examine the nature of star players and the potential impacts they might have on team brands.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to provide clarity on a star player's characteristics and the relationships that exist between these characteristics and the brand equity of a professional sport team, the authors of this study performed exploratory factor (EFA) and multiple regression analyses on the results of a 50 item survey that assessed

the relationships between star players, their attributes, and team brands. Although the examination was preliminary in nature, its results serve as an initial step toward the development of a framework depicting the overall, vital relationship between star athletes and the components of a team's brand equity. The end result of such a framework could stand as a supplement to the more broad-based frameworks already in existence (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Kaynak et al., 2007) while also serving as a useful tool to team managers and marketers as they assess the possible value added by star players to team brands. From this study it was seen that brand awareness and brand image appear to be the areas of brand equity most influenced by true star players that exhibit both on-field and off-field traits. However, it is recommended that future studies drawing from these initial discoveries perform more specialized, confirmatory analyses and obtain data from larger, more diverse samples.

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