

# Sport Brands: Brand Relationships and Consumer Behavior

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## Abstract

One of the most valuable assets a sport entity possesses is its brand. However, existing sport branding research has largely examined brands at an individual level and not taken into account the relationships between connected brands or the actual behavioral outcomes of branding. This article provides an overview of the current state of sport branding research; proposes an extended conceptualization of sport brand architecture within a sport brand ecosystem framework to guide future examination of sport branding research; introduces the four articles published in this special issue; and presents insights from industry experts from different brand entities within the sport brand ecosystem. Thus, this article provides a foundation to further examine brand relationships and actual behavioral outcomes of sport branding to contribute to our theoretical and managerial knowledge on sport brand architecture within the sport brand ecosystem.

**Keywords:** brand, brand relationship, brand architecture, consumer behavior

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The management of sport brands has been subject to great attention by practitioners and scholars because of the value fans attach to the name, symbol, and meaning of their favorite sport organizations (Gladden & Milne, 1999). It is commonly acknowledged that the most valuable asset entities within the sport industry (e.g., athletes, teams, leagues, events, sponsors) have is their brand (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Marôco, 2013; Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014), because “strong brands increase customers’ trust of the invisible purchase” (Berry, 2000, p. 128). This has been the underlying rationale for sport entities to invest in the equity of their brands, with two approaches to measure brand equity serving as a basis: one based on consumer perceptions of the brand (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) and another based on sales or share in the marketplace (e.g., Goldfarb, Lu, & Moorthy, 2009; Sriram, Balachander, & Kalwani, 2007). These two measurement approaches are critical for brands, given that sales-based measures

of brand equity represent marketplace manifestations of consumer brand perceptions (Datta, Ailawadi, & van Heerde, 2017).

The importance of brand equity is often financially expressed in sport industry reports. For example, the top 20 European soccer teams generated €8.2bn in revenue during the 2017/2018 season (Deloitte, 2019), while the combined brand value of the Big 5 European soccer leagues (England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and France) exceeded €19.9bn in the 2018/2019 season (Brand Finance, 2019). Social media platforms have also helped sport organizations and individual athletes to increase their brand values, gauging the interest of fans, teams, sponsors, and other stakeholders worldwide (Forbes, 2019). From a scholarly perspective, researchers have analyzed sport brands’ economic success (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005) and developed an initial understanding of consumer-based perceptions of sport brands. Most of these studies



have been focused on examining components of brand equity (e.g., awareness, image) of a single entity, such as teams (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2013), leagues (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014), or athletes (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013). However, although brands can capitalize on the emotional connection shared with fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005), these brands don't operate in isolation. Consequently, the lack of academic research related to sport brand relationships, where multiple brands are directly or indirectly related to one another (Kunkel, Biscaia, Arai, & Agyemang, 2020), stands in stark contrast with the reality of the sport brand ecosystem, where brands are interconnected via their interaction with the sport environment. Given that brands interact with other brands, a closer examination of the relationships between two or more brands could aid in effectively managing the multitude of brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem.

Additionally, existing research on sport brands and their relationship with other brands has been mainly focused on consumers' perceptions, attitudes, intentions, or self-reported behaviors (e.g., Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Biscaia et al., 2016; Daniels, Kunkel, & Karg, 2019; Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017). These methods often neglect measuring actual behaviors. Nevertheless, advances in web-based technologies have provided possibilities to better understand fan reactions to sport brands. The digital environment provides opportunities to develop and manage sport brands and serves as an interaction platform for multiple brands within the sport brand ecosystem. Furthermore, it enables managers to collect behavioral data (e.g., frequency of visits, content liking, posting status updates, comments and recommendations, merchandise and ticket purchases) that allow them to enhance brand management practices and strengthen the ties between fans and brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem. Given the increased opportunities to collect behavioral data, the examination of actual behaviors toward sport brands (e.g., consumer, employee, or organization) should become a cornerstone of sport branding research.

This special issue advances the practice of brand management within the sport brand ecosystem in three main ways. First, it encourages scholars to further examine relationships between two or more brands within the sport brand ecosystem. This is paramount given that image spillover often occurs between brands in a portfolio (Cobbs, Groza, & Rich, 2015), and recent studies have suggested that brands can affect one another and trigger different fan responses (Kunkel et al., 2020). Second, given the growing importance of social media platforms on the management of

brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, Shibuya, & Fujiwara, 2018), fans' actual behaviors on these platforms offer deeper insights into successful strategies for fostering strong, long-term relationships between sport brands and their fans. Third, through publishing research focused on brand relationships and fans' actual behaviors, as well as gathering insights from industry experts, the current special issue aims to provide a theoretical and empirical basis to identify further research opportunities and guide brand managers involved in the sport brand ecosystem.

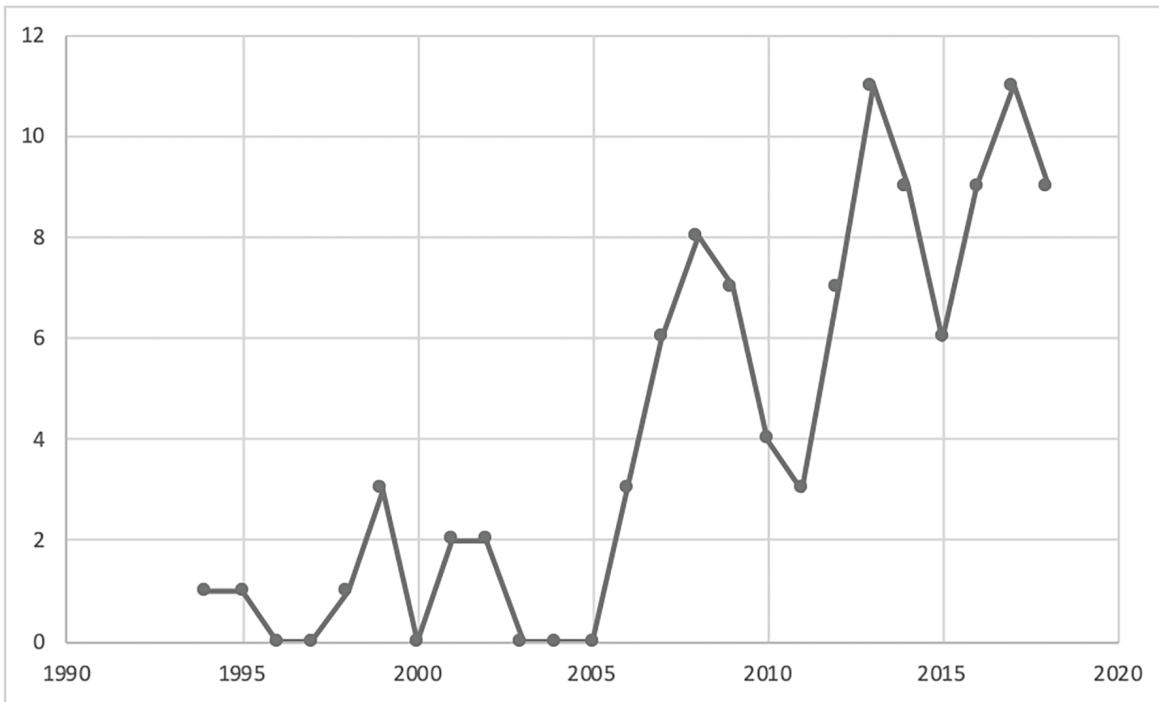
## Existing Academic Research

To provide a comprehensive overview of published sport brand-related research, we conducted a systematic search of existing academic research on sport brands. To keep the research manageable, we limited our search to journals focused on sport management and marketing that are connected to a major academic association. Thus, we selected *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, connected to the Sport Marketing Association; the *Journal of Sport Management*, connected with the North American Society for Sport Management; *European Sport Management Quarterly*, connected with the European Association for Sport Management; and *Sport Management Review*, connected with the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand. We manually searched each journal for articles on sport brands and included all articles that mentioned "brand" in the title or as a keyword. In total, 103 articles from the examined journals were included. We then examined the identified articles for publication details and content. Publication details include publication year, keywords, and the country where the authors work. Content includes the focus of the article, the focal entity, methods and data, relationships with other entities, and outcome variable.

We found that research related to brands and brand relationships is trending upwards. Figure 1 shows that most articles related to sport brands were published after 2010. The top three keywords used to describe the articles were "brand" ( $N = 79$ ), "sport" ( $N = 38$ ), and "team" ( $N = 15$ ), and the top 25 keywords are displayed in Figure 2. The top three countries housing the author's university/research institution were the US (55.97%), Australia (9.70%), and France (6.72%). We provide a full overview in Table 1.

The total number of 134 country mentions exceeds the number of articles, indicating cross-country collaboration between authors. Information on the content of the articles is presented in Table 2. Results show that most articles were focused on marketing and consumer





**Figure 1. Sport brand-related articles published per year**

behavior (78.64%), the main focal entities were professional teams (40.8%), and quantitative data were predominantly used (68.93%). Furthermore, most existing articles were focused on a single brand (64.08%), and most articles including multiple brands were focused on the relationship between a sport brand and its sponsor, highlighting the need for the current special issue. Only four articles (3.88%) reported actual behavior as the outcome variable, with most articles either examining attitudinal responses toward the brand (71.84%) or treating behavioral intentions (15.53%) or self-reported behavior (6.80%) as a proxy for actual behavior.

## Theoretical Background

Sport brands interact within their environment. Sport brand architecture, the organizing structure of a brand portfolio of sport organizations (Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013), has focused on the relationship between leagues and their teams, where the league (the master brand) provides the framework for teams (sub-brands) to compete; in this way, teams exist (i.e., provide the core product) within the league's portfolio (Kunkel et al., 2014; Kunkel et al., 2017). Leagues and teams exist within a mixed-branding brand architecture that trig-



**Figure 2. Top 25 key words in sport brand-related articles**



**Table 1. Country of the Authors' University**

Country	N = 134	Percentage
USA	75	55.97%
Australia	13	9.70%
France	9	6.72%
Canada	7	5.22%
South Korea	6	4.48%
United Kingdom	4	2.99%
Norway	4	2.99%
Portugal	3	2.24%
Germany	3	2.24%
Greece	3	2.24%
Taiwan	2	1.49%
Japan	2	1.49%
Netherlands	1	0.75%
New Zealand	1	0.75%
Singapore	1	0.75%

gers bidirectional effects and often affects consumer reactions (Kunkel et al., 2017) at both the attitudinal and behavioral levels. Similarly, athletes can also be considered brands that are integrated in the broader brand portfolio of their teams (Williams, Kim, Agyemang, & Martin, 2015). Athlete-linked brand associations influence consumer evaluations of their teams and sponsoring brands (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2018), and athletes act as core brand associations for their teams (Daniels et al., 2019).

Underlying the premise of research on sport brand architecture are spillover effects between brands in the portfolio. Drawing on the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), which indicates meaning is transferred in the mind of consumers between related brands, previous studies demonstrated that sub-brands can impact the evaluation of the master brand in either diluting or enhancing the corporate brand image (Balachander & Ghose, 2003; Sood & Keller, 2012). For example, researchers have highlighted the impact of athletes on their teams (e.g., Yang, Shi, & Goldfarb, 2009), leagues (e.g., Shapiro, DeShriver, Rascher, 2017), and sponsors (e.g., Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012). Similarly, it is reasonable to expect that the brand of a manager, coach, or owner influences the brand of their team or league, because nonplayer personnel has been suggested to be an association fans have toward their teams (Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008). For example, the brand name of Josep "Pep" Guardiola, who is considered one of the best soccer coaches in the world, should impact the brand of his team, Manchester City, as well as the English Premier League. Corre-

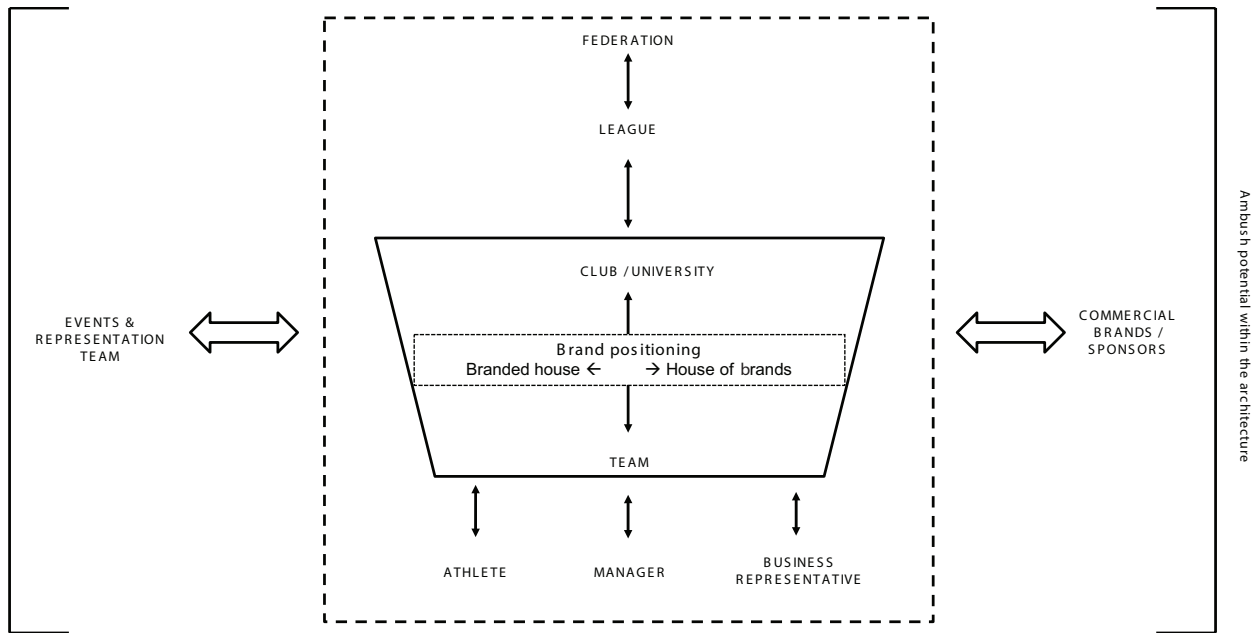
**Table 2. Content Overview**

	N = 103	Percentage
<i>Focus</i>		
Marketing/Consumer Behavior	81	78.64%
Strategic Management	13	12.62%
Psychology	7	6.80%
Market Reaction	1	0.97%
Employee Branding	1	0.97%
<i>Focal Entity</i>		
Professional Teams	42	40.8%
Sponsoring Brands	29	28.1%
Athlete	10	9.7%
College Teams	8	7.8%
Event	7	6.8%
Individuals (e.g., brand community)	3	2.9%
Video Games	2	1.9%
Conceptual	2	1.9%
<i>Method and Data</i>		
Quantitative	71	68.93%
Qualitative	27	26.21%
Mixed Methods	3	2.91%
Conceptual	2	1.94%
<i>Relationship</i>		
Single Brand	66	64.08%
Multiple Brands	35	33.98%
Conceptual	2	1.94%
<i>Outcome Variable</i>		
Attitude	74	71.84%
Intention	16	15.53%
Self-Reported Behavior	7	6.80%
Actual Behavior	4	3.88%
Conceptual	2	1.94%

spondingly, the brand of a federation, such as Football Australia (e.g., Kunkel, Doyle, & Funk, 2014), should influence the brands within its portfolio and trigger fan behavioral responses toward these brands.

Consequently, a fan's reaction to one brand should influence the associative network linked to brands within the portfolio (Uggla, 2006). However, these effects have not been outlined in the original sport brand architecture conceptualization (Kunkel et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2014). Also, it is important to note that relationships in the sport brand ecosystem are dynamic due to, for example, fluctuations in team performance, coaches being sacked and then hired by other teams, multiple transfers of athletes, or entrance of new sponsors or investors. These factors have the potential





**Figure 3. Sport brand ecosystem framework**

to reshape fans' associative networks and indicate the need for brands to constantly evolve and respond to the sport brand ecosystem dynamics and associated consumer sentiments over time.

Therefore, we extend the original conceptualization of sport brand architecture (Kunkel et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2014) and embed it in the sport brand ecosystem, which refers to brands within the sport industry that are interconnected through their interaction within the sport environment. The sport brand ecosystem, presented in Figure 3, provides a framework to examine the relationships between brands within, and connected to, the sport industry. An overview of these brands with definitions and examples is provided in Table 3.

The dotted box represents the vertical brands that are part of the same brand portfolio and are thus connected through their brand architecture. For example, Zion Williamson was connected to the Duke Blue Devils men's basketball team, Duke University, the Athletic Coast Conference, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Since the National Basketball Association (NBA) Draft in 2019, his brand is linked the New Orleans Pelicans, the NBA, and brands within his endorsement portfolio, such as the Jordan Brand, Mountain Dew, or Gatorade. The trapezoid represents the relationship between clubs (or for-profit parent organizations) and their teams, where clubs are able to select whether they position their team as a branded house connected to the club's master brand or as a house of brands not connected to the club's master brand (cf., Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). For example, the Philadelphia 76ers field an NBA2K eSport team

brand, the 76ers Gaming Club, which is visually aligned with the Philadelphia 76ers basketball brand, whereas their League of Legends eSport team brand, Dignitas, is not visually aligned with the Philadelphia 76ers basketball brand. Given the dynamic nature of the brand ecosystem, sport organizations need to understand how their brand evolves over time and how it can best adjust to external factors and consumer preferences.

Brands outside the vertical brand architecture can also enter the sport brand ecosystem. On the left side of the brand ecosystem figure, we propose that events, such as the Olympic Games, or representation teams, such as the US women's soccer national team, influence connected brands in the sport brand ecosystem. For example, the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup increased Megan Rapinoe's brand, which may have positive effects on the brand of her team, Reign FC, and the National Women's Soccer League. Simultaneously, there are potential power imbalances between brands within the portfolio. That is, despite the potential positive effects of Megan Rapinoe's brand on the National team, her influence on the United States Soccer Federation's brand or on FIFA's brand may have been negative due to raising awareness about the male-female disparity of pay in soccer.

On the right side of the brand ecosystem figure, we propose that external brands can enter the sport brand ecosystem through sponsorships and commercial partnerships. For example, Samsung enters the sport brand ecosystem through sponsoring German soccer player Mario Götze. Beyond entering the ecosystem, brands can also influence other brands within the sport brand architecture of the sponsored brand. For example, by



**Table 3. Overview of the Sport Brand Ecosystem**

Entities	Definition	Examples
Federation	Non-governmental bodies that administer a given sport at the national and/or international level, which are responsible for setting rules and regulations of that sport, promoting the sport among stakeholders, and organizing championships.	English Football Association (FA); Brazilian Volleyball Confederation (CBV); Union of European Football Associations (UEFA); International Basketball Federation (FIBA)
League	Organizing body composed by a group of professional or amateur teams that compete against each other in a given sport (e.g., handball). It is often organized at the national level but can also have an international scope.	English Premier League (England); Champions League (Europe); College conferences in the USA; Major League Baseball (MLB)
Club/University	Nonprofit or for-profit organization or university that owns and manages teams (with amateur or professional players) competing in different sports at the national and/or international level (e.g., basketball, football).	SL Benfica (teams of soccer, basketball, volleyball, cycling, swimming, track and field, etc.); FC Bayern München (teams of soccer, basketball, handball, chess, etc.); Temple University (American football, gymnastics, rowing, lacrosse, etc.)
Team	Group of individuals who compete in a given sport representing an organization/brand at the national and/or international level and that often possess a management structure. It is different from a club because it only focuses on one sport.	Philadelphia 76ers (basketball, USA); Juventus (soccer, Italy); Chicago Cubs (baseball, USA); FC Bayern München (soccer, Germany); Duke Blue Devils (men's basketball team of Duke University, USA)
Athlete	An individual who competes in a given sport and is often integrated in a club or team. Some athletes are popular figures in contemporary societies due to their on- and off-field attributes, becoming national and/or international stars.	Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer, Juventus); LeBron James (basketball, LA Lakers); Serena Williams (tennis); Tiger Woods (golf); Amobi Okugo (soccer, Austin FC)
Manager	An individual with responsibility in determining the sporting strategy of a team or club as well as hiring players, supporting the team in all aspects, representing the team externally, and connecting the team with top-tier managers. In some sports and leagues, a manager's main occupation is being the head coach.	Josep Guardiola (Manchester City FC, soccer); José Mourinho (soccer); Karl-Heinz Rummenigge (FC Bayern München, soccer); Bill Belichick (New England Patriots, American football); Steve Kerr (Golden State Warriors, basketball); Daryl Morey (Houston Rockets, basketball)
Investor/Owner	Individuals who have the legal or rightful title of owning a team or have a stake in the team due to a financial investment.	Robert Kraft (New England Patriots); Nasser Al-Khelaifi (Paris Saint Germain); Roman Abramovich (Chelsea FC); Tilman Fertitta (Houston Rockets)
Events	Sport competitive activities organized by (inter)national leagues or federations. It includes a fixed period of time and can be linked to a given sport or multi-sports.	FA Cup (soccer); FIFA World Cup (soccer); NCAA March Madness (basketball); NFL or NBA Draft (football and basketball); Olympic Games (multi-sports)
Commercial Brand/ Sponsors	Organizations that pay cash or in-kind fees to get the right to explore the commercial potential of being associated with a sport brand.	Fly Emirates (European soccer portfolio); Bud Light (NFL); Rakuten (Barcelona FC); VISA and Adidas (Olympic Games); Gatorade (MLB); Wish (LA Lakers)

sponsoring Mario Götze, Nike is not only associated with his brand but also ambushes Puma's sponsorship of his club, Borussia Dortmund, and Adidas' sponsorship of the German soccer national team. Thus, the relationships within the sport brand ecosystem allows sponsors to ambush their competitors (Biscaia & Rocha, 2018; Dickson, Naylor, & Phelps, 2015) by sponsoring an entity connected through their brand architecture.

## Industry Insights

To complement the academic approach, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with industry professionals involved with different brands within the sport brand ecosystem. We asked each interviewee six questions related to sport branding within their sector

of the industry. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and quotes edited for clarity. Alexia Rocco (operations manager, Basketball Champions League) of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) provided insights from the perspective of a federation. Pat Kraft (director of athletics, Temple University) provided insights from the perspective of a university's athletics department governing 18 sports. Rudolf Vidal (President Americas, Bayern Munich) gave the perspective of a globally renowned sport team. Amobi Okugo (professional soccer player, Austin FC) contributed as a professional athlete, while Jason Bergman (*Sales Manager*, Open Sponsorship) offered the perspective of a wide range of brands that sponsor athletes and sport entities.



**Table 4. The Role of Branding**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	“Branding is a unique way to develop awareness and make your sport/federation known. Sometimes people know your branding or appreciate it, without even knowing the event. I am thinking for example of tourists in a city where an event takes place. They may not be aware of one event happening but if the branding is attractive enough, they could become attendees and paying customers.”
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	“I think marketing has turned into more branding now. Everyone has their own unique perspective on branding. It’s a combination here—physically in our buildings and how we do social media, that it’s a recruiting piece. Then it’s also the impact on current staff. You look good, you feel good, you play good. I think that is what we emphasize. Branding is a really, really important piece to constantly how much they educate, but have that vision in front of you every single day. You can have really nice things and still not have a lot of money. Paint and graphics go a long way. That allows us to compete with our peers.”
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	“As a professional sports team with a global following, branding plays a huge role at FC Bayern Munich. Our club unites our family of fans, players, staff, and partners. The FC Bayern brand creates a memorable impression on people letting them know what to expect from us. When people see FC Bayern, they immediately relate us to family, success, and tradition.”
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	“Branding is an important factor both on and off the field or court, how you represent yourself, how people identify you is very important. For example, I’m a California kid. When I first played in Philadelphia, it was a little bit different. I had to adjust my brand to what the people in Philadelphia identified with. I had to think what they look for in an athlete or what they liked, compared to me being a California Boy.”
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	“There’s no brand out there that doesn’t compete with other brands, so being able to separate yourself from the competition is incredibly important. Being able to build trust with consumers who have never heard about your product is really important and then being able to make sure individuals understand the value of your product are all challenges for brands and challenges for marketers. Our brands and sponsors have really used athletes to build that trust.”

We first asked, “What roles does branding play for [entity]?” Responses show that industry professionals recognize the importance of branding (Okugo) as it creates awareness (Rocco) and acts as a quality promise of what to expect from the organization (Vidal). Branding impacts the whole organization from an employee and external communication perspective (Kraft) and helps differentiate them from their competitors (Bergman). Direct quotes are presented in Table 4.

For the second question, we asked, “How do other brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem affect your brand’s image?” Interviewee responses indicate that they recognize the influence of closely connected brands, such as the league/conference (Kraft, Vidal) for teams or the team for individual athletes (Bergman, Okugo). Commercial brands that act as sponsors were also consistently mentioned, yet they can also create conflict between different entities when they use ambush marketing tactics to associate with league-wide competitions by sponsoring individual athletes (Rocco). Direct quotes are presented in Table 5.

The third question was “What are the challenges to branding for [entity]?” Responses highlight that industry professionals are challenged with a complex, cluttered market that makes it difficult to reach the target audience (Rocco, Vidal) or select the right commercial partner for athletes (Okugo). Consumers’ fickle attention spans (Kraft), and being exposed to criticism online (Kraft, Vidal) are challenges that organizations face when they foster consumer engagement. The changing

market of social media also challenges the status quo on valuing sponsorships and partnerships (Bergman). In Table 6, the direct quotes are presented.

For the fourth question, we asked, “What are the challenges and opportunities of branding on online platforms for [entity]?” The industry professionals note challenges related to multiple platforms (Rocco) and ensuring the right platform for different messages (Okugo). Generally, they see social media enabling athletes and teams to tell their own story (Bergman, Vidal), as it provides a cost-effective channel to promote the values and brand of the organization (Kraft, Vidal). Table 7 presents the direct quotes.

Responses to the fifth question (“How does the future of sport branding look for [entity]?”) show that industry professionals see the future of sport branding being driven by technology innovation (Vidal) through leveraging virtual reality (Rocco, Kraft). Digital and social media is also seen as the foundation for athletes continuing to build their own brands and companies (Bergman, Okugo). Direct quotes are presented in Table 8.

Sixth, we asked, “What is the most relevant research question that sport marketing academics should address to help [entity]?” Industry professionals’ responses show they are interested in driving return of investment from sponsorship (Bergman) and social media (Kraft; Okugo), look at effectively using digital technology (Kraft; Rocco), and the effect of events on multiple stakeholders (Vidal). Direct quotes are presented in Table 9.



**Table 5. The Influence of Other Brands**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	“Michael Jordan’s brand has become a must, not only for basketball fans but also for basketball players themselves, which could create some conflict with the clubs’ or the national teams’ sponsors. Obviously, during the competition/tournament, the players know exactly what they have to wear but if they have been advertising another brand (their new pair of sneakers) shortly before (e.g., on social media), this may create confusion in the fans’ mind.”
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	<p>“I do believe the American, our conference, play a big role. It’s a young brand, it’s been around for only five years. Basketball, both men’s and women’s, is important, and football programs throughout the American have done really well, so that helps the conference and also all programs within the conference. For us it’s about establishing our brand but establishing it within the Greater American Athletic Conference.”</p> <p>“Obviously, we play in the sandbox with what the University does, so the University’s brand is important. We’ve got to recruit, 16, 17, 18-year-old young men and women, so the Temple brand helps us; but we also need to ensure that we are good stewards of the university brand.”</p> <p>“Your alumni, they’re your anchor. They’re the ones that you hope continue to push the brand. We actively promote them and their successes, whether they are professional athletes now or successful business students, their stories and brands help us recruit and be successful in the future.”</p>
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	“Over almost 120 years we have built the FC Bayern brand to be bigger than any one player or partner. There is no doubt that leagues, sponsors and individual athletes can have an impact. For instance, when Brazilian playmaker Phillippe Coutinho joined the club, more than 100 million fans were reached across our Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram platforms, resulting in record-breaking social media engagement for the club.”
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	<p>“The team is important. How’s the team perceived in their respective community? How is their fan engagement? How do they promote you?”</p> <p>“The same goes for sponsors. It’s very important as an athlete to have your brand identify with other brands or companies that promote similar interests, similar wants, similar goals to drive home the message of what you are intentional about.”</p>
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	“Even the most intense sports fans aren’t going to know every player in the NFL or every player on the NBA or every player on Team USA. They’ll know the A-list athletes, they’ll know the Alex Morgan on Team USA, they’ll know LeBron James in the NBA, but they may not know other teammates, so the team brand is really important. For example, a mom who lives in Seattle but has never watched football on a Sunday, she knows who the Seahawks are because everyone is so passionate about their local team.”

**Table 6. Challenges to Branding**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	<p>“(…) branding (…) makes the competition tougher because you have to be more creative every time.”</p> <p>“In the complex landscape of European club basketball, the challenges do exist with four European club competitions (Euroleague, Europe Cup, Basketball Champions League [BCL], and FIBA Europe Cup). It can be hard sometimes to stand out as a federation in front of other federations. It is (…) complex in the case of BCL where you have to exist among other events which are also basketball.”</p> <p>“Coming to a more general point of view, another challenge is to find the right balance between renewing your brand occasionally—and at the same time ensuring that people can still recognize it and associate themselves to that brand. Another challenge (…) is to ensure consistency of all events under one umbrella while giving each event its own identity.”</p>
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	“I think social media. It’s so fast. Nothing sticks. There’s this great moment and it happens, and then it’s gone and it’s what have you done for me lately? Also, you’re opening yourself up to anyone and anyone to criticize, complain. You’ve got to take the good with the bad. What I tell our staff is, ‘Hey, this is who we are. This is what we’re about. We’re going to continue to put those things out and show and have a real impact from just two cubes right here.’”
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	“One of the challenges we face in the United States is that soccer is still a growing sport, especially when compared to American football and basketball. Getting cut through for FC Bayern can be challenging at times in such a cluttered market. However, one example of how we counteract this challenge is building solid working relationships with the likes of the NBA and NFL, resulting in us activating together in a bid to crossover to connect with each other’s fanbase.”
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	“One of the biggest challenges is making sure that you’re authentic. A lot of brands and companies and organizations want to use you as an ambassador or throw a lot of money towards you to have you represent a brand or a company or product. If it doesn’t identify or doesn’t latch on to who you are as a person, what you promote organically, naturally, authentically, then it doesn’t make sense. People say the riches are in the niches, and every niche has their own community. If you can really identify with a certain niche, that can go a lot farther than trying to touch everybody without being authentic.”
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	“The changing market is challenging to some sponsors. A lot of brands and sponsors are used to things like digital ads or pay-per-click. Where you put a price on X and what you’re going to get out of it, you know what Y is. With athletes, it’s a lot different. There’s things like impressions, like content. Things that weren’t as easy to track that help your brand awareness but may not help your bottom line instantly. Quantifying these aspects is very challenging.”



**Table 7. Challenges and Opportunities of Online Branding**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	<p>“One way to ensure consistency of brand usage is to develop one single platform (...) accessible to all employees, partners, and sponsors. The main challenges would be: Developing a user-friendly platform that gathers all necessary brand elements and guidelines and enable the users to validate their usage of the brand (...) Ensure all relevant partners are also using it. The opportunities (...) do exist: Ensuring your brand is used by everyone in a consistent and appropriate manner and to have an overview of any usage of your brand elements.”</p> <p>“If we think about social media as an online platform, then it is another topic—which is more related to ‘how do I use all the modern tools such as social media to make my brand stronger?’ (...) Social media offers endless possibilities that did not exist before because you can expose yourself more easily. But everyone can use it and your profile may be ‘lost’ among many others.”</p> <p>“(...) people can like your page, but it does not mean they will visit it every day. What is most important to sponsors nowadays is the reach—how many people consult your page on a daily basis, and how much content do they consume?”</p>
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	<p>“I think the social media thing has completely changed the game. It doesn’t take a monster staff. What it takes is creative minds. We have creative meetings all the time. Like, hey, how do we do this? How do we have fun with this? How do we take our social media and really go at our alumni? The metrics and the analytics really can help you (...) we can really measure where our brand is seen and how far our brand’s hitting. You can get your message, your brand, and your vision across. The analytics is more than the click throughs, we are starting to get into measuring who’s looking at our ads. Who came back to the ticket site three times. Why are they not buying? Let’s go and engage that crowd. It’s very big brother like.”</p>
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	<p>“There is always a risk with online platforms that followers can create their own moments and stories which brands can’t control. At FC Bayern, we have worked hard over the past five years in the US to really cultivate and build strong relationships with our fans, which sees them act as brand ambassadors representing the club and promoting our values. This makes for a really powerful and organic voice for the club. One of the stand-out opportunities we currently have is how quickly and efficiently we can scale our messaging and branding on online platforms to match popular trends as well as our own score lines.”</p>
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	<p>“Making sure you’re choosing the right message on the right platform. For example, how I promote a brand or how I engage on Snapchat is going to be different from how I engage on Instagram, or my website, or on LinkedIn. That’s important, but also making sure that I have all these different platforms to engage on. Putting all your eggs on one platform is a big issue. As an athlete, you have to be able to contact different people or engage with different people in a number of different ways, whether it’s a website, audio, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, whether it’s through the team, through the community. Making sure that your message is being able to be transmitted in a number of different ways, that’s very important.”</p>
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	<p>“Social media is incredible, where athletes can create their own brands on social media. They are their own brands. They don’t need to depend on the league as much as let’s say they used to. They can create their own Instagram where they have direct access to their fans. They have direct access to really the entire world in a matter of seconds. It’s something where they can partner with whoever they want to partner, share with the world and with the masses, and really change industries.”</p>

**Table 8. The Future of Sport Branding**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	<p>“Many federations are exploring new possibilities with VR, AI, but I believe we are still at very early stages where we need to see what is possible, but more importantly, what do we do with this new data? What added value does it bring? As it looks like now, the main usage would be on social media, for example with VR. Get an insight of what happens in the backstage of an event. I think the main development is how can we include users more to make them feel as they are part of this VR.”</p>
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	<p>“I think VR is coming, obviously, it’s out. I think VR, from a recruiting standpoint, is going to be critical. I think we’ll be able to do visits with glasses and be able to show our facilities. I think it will add to the game experience a lot. I think that’s going to be a big part of it, from a sponsorship side.”</p>
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	<p>“There are some exciting brand developments from sports teams, especially in the digital space. One that comes to mind is the NBA, who broadcast one live game per week in virtual reality using the latest technology. Traditionally, FC Bayern has been at the forefront of digital innovation, and to maintain our position, we launched the FC Bayern Digital &amp; Media Lab in May 2018. The aim of the media lab is to keep that competitive edge in the digital space and create new revenue streams from media.”</p>
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	<p>“We’ve seen many athletes start their own media companies, many athletes engage and having social media teams. That just goes to show you how important online media is going to be moving forward. Everyone’s on their phone, whether they’re following their favorite athletes, teams, or streaming a game. The more you can provide quick content, the more engaged the customer will be.”</p>
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	<p>“Players are going to continue to make their own brands. For example, Lonzo Ball creating the Big Baller Brand and making his own shoe company. They don’t depend on sponsors now and can be their own brands. This will impact where athletes want to play. I mean, you have LeBron James moving to LA to start Uninterrupted.”</p>



**Table 9. Research Guidance**

Expert & Brand	Quote
<b>Alexia Rocco</b> Federation	“How can sport brands leverage TV broadcast in the future while consumption patterns change and new technology provides different experiences?”
<b>Pat Kraft</b> University	“What is the most effective vehicle or platform on social media to grow your brand, and how can you financially quantify the impact of social media?”
<b>Rudolf Vidal</b> Team	“Looking at MLS, US Soccer, College Soccer, and US grassroots clubs, what will be the effect of the 2026 World Cup on the sports landscape in the US?”
<b>Amobi Okugo</b> Athlete	“How can you quantify fan engagement on social media and show how impressions turn into purchases?”
<b>Jason Bergman</b> Sponsor	“I would ask them to simplify what ROI of sport sponsorship is and how it can be measured.”

## Special Issue Articles

In this special issue, four articles are presented that collectively expand our understanding of the role of actual behaviors in sport brand management and the dynamics between different brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem, as explained in Figure 3. The first article, by James Du, Christopher M. McLeod, and Jeffrey D. James, is titled “Brand Environments and the Emergence and Change of Awareness for New Sport Teams: A Two-Wave Examination.” The authors examine how various sources of brand information influence the emergence and change in awareness for a new sport team and subsequent associated consumption behaviors. This ecological psychology study offers insights on the relationship between individuals’ pre-existing attachments to sport, marketing-driven information within the sport brand environment, and levels of awareness among a new sports team. Furthermore, individuals with pre-existing attachments who are exposed to physical and online touchpoints of brand information consume more team-related products. This study has important implications for sport brand architecture portfolios and is particularly relevant to new brands introduced in the sport brand ecosystem.

The second article, “The Rise of an Athlete Brand: Factors Influencing the Social Media Following of Athletes,” is authored by Yiran Su, Bradley J. Baker, Jason P. Doyle, and Thilo Kunkel<sup>1</sup>. Building on schema theory and brand architecture, the authors analyze the growth of athlete brands on social media by considering the joint influences of related brands in the sport brand ecosystem. This article contributes to the understanding of athlete branding and how brand relationship networks influence each other by examining differential effects of league-, team-, athlete-, and platform-related

factors on the growth of athletes’ social media following. Thus, the authors examine the interaction of three entities within the sport brand ecosystem—the league brand, the team brand, and the athlete brand. The article further contributes to a better understanding of the spillover effect on fans’ social media behavior within entities involved in the sport brand architecture and identifies new research opportunities linked to the emerging literature of athlete branding and social media.

In the third article, “Self-Branding through NFL Team Fanship: Fans’ Desired Self-Image and Its Implications for Branding Practices” by Jerred Junqi Wang, Jessica Braunstein-Minkove, Thomas A. Baker, Bo Li, and James J. Zhang, examines the self-images desired by National Football League (NFL) fans and their impact on subsequent behaviors. This study builds upon self-concept research and the model of motivation process, and data were collected through three distinct phases. The findings indicate that fans’ desired self-image is composed of athletic image and social attractiveness and that these two dimensions positively influence fan identity. Yet, these two dimensions affect team-related consumption differently, with athletic image stimulating positive fan consumption behavior but social attractiveness holding back team-related consumptions. These results are discussed, considering individuals’ stored schemas and their importance for branding practices of sport teams, corporate sponsors, and professional athletes, which are part of sport brand architecture portfolios due to the intricate relationships between these actors in the sport brand ecosystem, as presented in Figure 3.

In the fourth article, titled “Host Country Brand Image and Political Consumerism: The Case of Russia 2018 FIFA World Cup,” Cláudio Rocha and Fiona Wyse draw on the cognitive dissonance theory to investigate whether 2018 FIFA World Cup (FWC) consumers would engage in political consumerism (boycott) to reduce a perceived dissonance between host country (Russia) brand image and FWC brand attributes. Data

<sup>1</sup> This article was peer reviewed by an independent panel due to the coauthorship of one of the guest editors. The process was entirely managed by the editor of *Sport Marketing Quarterly* without any involvement of the two guest editors.



were collected before and after the event. Findings indicate that intentions did not differ from behaviors of political consumerism toward the 2018 FWC. They also observed that brand attributes of Russia influenced political consumerism of the FWC products. These results are discussed in light of the human rights controversies practices reported in the host country, leading the authors to suggest that spillover effects might be less likely to happen in the dyad sport mega-event and host brands than in other dyads associated with sport brand architecture, such as athlete-team, athlete-league, and sponsor-team. This research provides new opportunities to extend the understanding of the impact that brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem have on one another.

## **Discussion and Recommendations for Future Work**

This special issue was intended to develop a more complete understanding of the relationships between two or more brands within the sport brand ecosystem as well as the importance of actual behaviors (i.e., consumers, employees, or organizations) toward sport brands in management practices. We complement the articles with a set of interviews with industry professionals to provide readers with the latest views of those who work daily with sport brands. This approach includes both academic and industry knowledge for the purpose of providing new insights into the challenges facing sport brands, offering guidance for managers, and identifying new research opportunities.

The results of the first two articles reinforce the idea of the existence of spillover effects among sport brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem presented in Figure 3. The importance of the sport brand environment (e.g., physical and online touchpoints) and pre-existing attachments to sport were highlighted in the first study as critical to driving consumer reactions, while the second study showed evidence that league, team, and athlete brands affect one another and that their management strategies should be closely aligned to promote benefits for all parties. These findings are important to aid in managing the life cycle of sport brands (Hasaan, Biscaia, & Ross, 2019; Kunkel, Walker, & Hodge, 2019) and extend previous research on sport brand architecture suggesting that “leagues and teams mutually depend on each other’s brand building and management strategies” (Kunkel et al., 2014, p. 50). They acknowledge the importance of athletes and the digital environment as a platform for brand building by sport entities. These conclusions are aligned with the views of the industry insiders who consider that “there is no doubt that leagues, sponsors, and individual ath-

letes can have an impact on the team’s brand” (Vidal) and that social media is a game changer.

It is important to note that social media creates many challenges for sport brands for a variety of reasons, such as the highly emotional context surrounding sports (Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011) or the ups and downs in team and athlete performance throughout a season (Biscaia et al., 2013). Regarding social media, Kraft noted, “you’ve got to take the good with the bad.” The lack of control was echoed by Vidal, who stated, “there is always a risk with online platforms that followers can create their own moments and stories which brands can’t control.” Furthermore, the ability to choose the “right message on the right platform” (Okugo) is a challenge for brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem, because constant updates on social media platforms are important for fan engagement (Santos, Correia, Biscaia, & Pegoraro, 2019) and the type of content posted online can affect the valence of consumer reactions (Önder, Gunter, & Gindl, 2019).

The discussion of spillover effects is further strengthened in the third and fourth articles. The third article identifies athletic image and social attractiveness as two dimensions of fans’ desired self-image that contribute to the development of fan identity. Also, it highlights the differential effects of these two dimensions on fan behaviors toward the teams. These findings are important for sport brand managers, because fans are arguably the most important stakeholders in professional sport (García & Welford, 2015; Senaux, 2008), guiding the brand strategies involved in the sport brand ecosystem. The fourth article further emphasizes the role of the context of a sport mega-event to understand whether spillover effects may be positive or negative for brands. Considering the importance of developing authentic brand-to-brand relationships (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019), the role of event consumers’ experiences on the success of brand alliances (Su & Kunkel, 2019), and the increasing need to include human rights in the agenda of international sport events (McGillivray, Edwards, Brittain, Bocarro, & Koenigstorfer, 2019), further examinations of how brands involved in these events affect one another in the eyes of different actors may represent an important research endeavor.

The importance of understanding actual behaviors toward sport brands is highlighted across the four articles of this special issue and in the interviews because of the interest paid by industry experts to investigating measurable return of investment of branding strategies. The articles in this special issue focus on actual behaviors as an endpoint for understanding brand success and its implications on fans’ continued support of sport entities. These studies extend previous



research examining fans' behavioral intentions as the ultimate measure of sport brand success (e.g., Bauer et al. 2008; Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012). That is, although a fan's behavioral intentions have often been described as indicators of an individual's motivation to adopt a specific behavior (e.g., Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Zaharia, Biscaia, Gray, & Stotlar, 2016), a fan's intention may not necessarily translate into actual behavior toward the target sport brand (e.g., Yoshida, Gordon, & Heere, 2015) for a variety of reasons that may occur at different stages of the relationship with the sport brand (Biscaia, Trail, Ross, & Yoshida, 2017; Kim & Trail, 2010). Thus, the empirical evidence provided across the four articles that fans' relationships with sport brands lead to actual behaviors that benefit these brands represents a step further towards a deeper understanding of how to increase the health of brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem.

In addition, the second article provides evidence on how actual behaviors via social media platforms lead to the development and/or enhancement of a sport brand. As noted by Na, Kunkel, and Doyle (2019), the digital environment is paramount for the development of the brand image of sport entities, and study two provides empirical support to this notion. Nevertheless, despite how digital consumers are now commonly acknowledged as being vital for sport brands (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016, Na et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019), the industry is challenged with identifying "the most effective vehicle or platform on social media to grow your brand and how can you financially quantify the impact of social media" (Kraft). Also, while previous studies suggest that the accuracy of actual behaviors can be forecasted through the digital footprint of internet users (e.g., Gunter, Önder, & Gindl, 2019), the ability to monitor how user behavior on social media turns into actual purchases related to sport brands (e.g., tickets, merchandise) is still a critical concern, highlighted by the industry insiders, that requires further attention from academics. For example, Kraft referred to the need to examine how to financially quantify the impact of social media on a brand, while Okugo highlighted the necessity to quantify how fan "impressions [on social media] turn into purchases." Collectively, the four articles of this special issue and the interviews contribute to a better understanding of some brand architecture relationships within the sport brand ecosystem.

Extending the findings of the four articles and the insights from the industry experts, sport branding research can benefit from advanced research methods. While existing research has mainly investigated psychometric outcomes, the increased availability of

actual behavioral data opens opportunities to employ advanced quantitative econometric methods (Erevelles, Fukawa, & Swayne, 2016). Researchers should examine actual behavioral data through panel methods, time series, or data mining, such as regression-based models, decision tree models, dependency models, or neural network models (Cortez, 2010; Fayyad, Piatstsky-Shapiro, & Smyth, 1996). For example, the use of predictive analytics to develop benchmarks of which type of post drives consumer engagement on social media profiles, field experiments, or A/B testing to examine the effect of different branding campaigns against these benchmarks may represent fruitful research lines. These methods will help quantify sponsorship and social media return on investment, as highlighted by the interviewed industry experts. Another direction would be to examine the market-to-book ratios of sport organizations to examine how that measure of brand value is affected by the introduction of new brand partnerships like sponsorships, licensing agreements, or athlete transfers. Additionally, the longitudinal examination of how sales-based measures of brand equity are affected by consumer-based brand equity measures (Datta et al., 2017) would be critical to aid brand managers involved in the sport brand ecosystem.

Future sport branding research may also benefit from examining the growing sport industry. Sport organizations are employing different brand development strategies (Kunkel, Doyle et al., 2014), leveraging their existing resources to integrate new brands in their portfolios. Recent industry trends show the introduction of startup accelerators (e.g., German soccer club FC Köln launched a sports innovation startup accelerator), eSport teams (e.g., Philadelphia 76ers Gaming Club and Dignitas), and female sport teams (e.g., the Australian Football League's introduction of a professional women's league), which provides opportunities to examine the spillover effects between brands in the sport brand ecosystem the best brand position strategies for different levels of brand fit. Similarly, it would be interesting to empirically examine the effects of brand portfolio switching, such as the effect on both brands when athletes or coaches transfer teams.

The analysis of how brands involved in the sport brand ecosystem can create shared value (i.e., focus on generating not only economic value but also contributing to address societal challenges; Porter & Kramer, 2011) could also be an important subject for future research. Social media platforms have provided individuals with an amplified voice, and athletes are increasingly utilizing these vehicles to launch their own companies. Thus, researchers could investigate the brand impact of athletes launching their own product



lines (e.g., Lonzo Ball's 'Big Baller Brand'), investing in start-ups (e.g., Ryan Howard's investment in 'Nerd Street Gamers'), or getting involved with social causes and charities (e.g., LeBron James' 'I Promise School'). Similarly, future research could examine how athlete activism (e.g., athletes kneeling during the national anthem to protest against police brutality and for racial equality) or social responsibility at different levels within brand architecture (e.g., athletes supporting causes of their team foundations vs. their own foundation; teams supporting league-wide charities) may affect the dynamics of the sport brand ecosystem. Conversely, it would also be interesting to investigate how sport brands recover from scandals (Doyle, Pentecost, & Funk, 2014), such as the Australian cricket team's ball-tampering (BBC, 2018), or are used by corporations to repair public opinion, such as BP's partnership with the International Olympic Committee in 2012 after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (*The Guardian*, 2012).

## Conclusion

Research and understanding on sport brands have increased over the last few years, as evidenced by the increasing number of academic articles published in top sport management journals. This special issue provides an overview of the current state of sport branding research and introduces an extended conceptualization of sport brand architecture within the sport brand ecosystem. We compile insights from industry experts involved with different brand entities within the sport brand ecosystem alongside four high-quality articles that provide insight into the different relationships within the sport brand ecosystem and consumers' actual behaviors. Notwithstanding, additional research is required to further examine brand relationships and actual behavior and contribute to the theoretical and managerial knowledge on sport brand architecture within the sport brand ecosystem.

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