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BRAND EQUITY FOR NBA STARS: FOCUSING ON PLAYERS IN THE BRAND EQUITY PROCESS

Valor de Marca de las Estrellas de la NBA: Enfoque en los Jugadores dentro del Proceso de Valor de Marca

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Abstract

Sports teams are in a favorable position to build brand equity due to the strong psychological connections experienced by their supporters. However, more context-specific consideration of this process is needed for the role of player brands. To fill this void, this study conceptualizes a player brand equity model which introduces three new constructs to the sport management literature. The results provide strong support for the five proposed dimensions of player brand equity. Trust in player was found to be a strong predictor of player brand equity, which in turn had a significant effect on player-related purchase intentions. The findings provide support for the conceptual model of the player brand equity process. This study extends previous research by conceptualizing a brand equity process which is specifically focused on professional athletes. It does so with the first known inclusions a context-relevant emotion factor and a consumer trust in player construct.

Keywords: Brand equity; brand trust; NBA; purchase intention; sport management.

Resumen

Los equipos deportivos se encuentran en una posición favorable para desarrollar el valor de marca debido a las fuertes conexiones psicológicas que experimentan sus seguidores. Sin embargo, es necesario un análisis más específico en relación con el papel de las marcas personales de los jugadores en este proceso. Para abordar esta brecha, el presente estudio propone un modelo de valor de marca del jugador, introduciendo tres nuevos conceptos en la literatura de gestión deportiva. Los resultados respaldan sólidamente las cinco dimensiones propuestas del valor de marca del jugador. Se identificó que la confianza en el jugador es un fuerte predictor del valor de marca del jugador, el cual, a su vez, tiene un impacto significativo en la intención de compra relacionada con el jugador. Asimismo, los hallazgos validan el modelo conceptual propuesto sobre la creación de valor de marca del jugador.

Este estudio amplía investigaciones previas al conceptualizar un proceso de valor de marca específicamente enfocado en atletas profesionales. Además, introduce por primera vez en este contexto un factor emocional relevante y una dimensión de confianza del consumidor en el jugador.

Palabras clave: Valor de marca; confianza en la marca; NBA; intención de compra; gestión deportiva.

Introduction

The importance of team brand equity for developing long-term value in professional sports has gained increased intention in the sport management literature (Biscaia et al., 2016; Ross, 2006). Due to the elevated levels of consumer engagement and emotion which are often present in this environment, sports teams are in a favorable position to build brand equity by tapping into the psychological relationships that exist with their supporters (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). However, as teams are continually seeking competitive advantages through their marketing initiatives, more context-specific consideration of the brand equity process is needed in the professional sport environment. More

specifically, as one of the fundamental aspects of fandom is the attention given to individual players, there is a need to consider the value that consumer perceptions of players might provide within the brand equity domain. A testament to the potential in this area is demonstrated by the number of social media followers that individual players have in relation to their relevant teams. Moreover, the tally all of the individual player followers of a top professional sports team will generally far exceed that of the club itself (Rodríguez et al., 2024; López-García et al., 2025).

In addition to team brands, individual athletes can also have their own distinctive brands to which fans can become psychologically attached (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Park et al., 2019). While consumer perceptions of organizational brand equity have previously been linked to positive behavioral intentions both inside (e.g., Yoshida & Gordon, 2012) and outside of sport (e.g., Vogel, Evanschitzky, & Ramaseshan, 2008), the concept of player brand equity has yet to be specifically addressed in the literature. The current research addresses this gap by empirically assessing the role of player brand equity in bolstering consumer purchase intentions. In addition, this study assesses the impact of player brand trust as a primary antecedent to this process. The current research on player-specific constructs, situated in the broader sport brand equity area of study, provides the foundation for more targeted approaches to accessing value-adding components within the sport environment. This study highlights the potential of this approach for enhancing the purchase intentions of sports fans throughout the word.

Theoretical Background

Overview of Conceptual Model

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework outlining the influence of player brand equity. The general premise of the model is based on previous brand equity bibliography which identifies brand trust (e.g., Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005) as an antecedent of brand equity, and purchase intention as an outcome (e.g., Keller, 1993). Player brand equity refers to fans' subjective and intangible assessment of a player's brand value (Gladden et al., 1998; Lin, 2015), and is conceptualized as consisting of the following five components in relation to a player's brand: awareness, associations, quality, loyalty, and emotion. In turn, increased levels of perceived player brand equity then lead to a higher likelihood for fans to purchase products the player is associated with (player-related purchase intention). In addition, the concept of trust was also included in the model as an antecedent to player brand equity. Trust in player refers to fans' willingness to rely on the ability and intentions of a specific player to perform their main function (Chauduri & Holbrook, 2001). From this perspective, our conceptual model specifies that trust in player fosters player brand equity as a result of the significant psychological bond that trust embodies (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005).
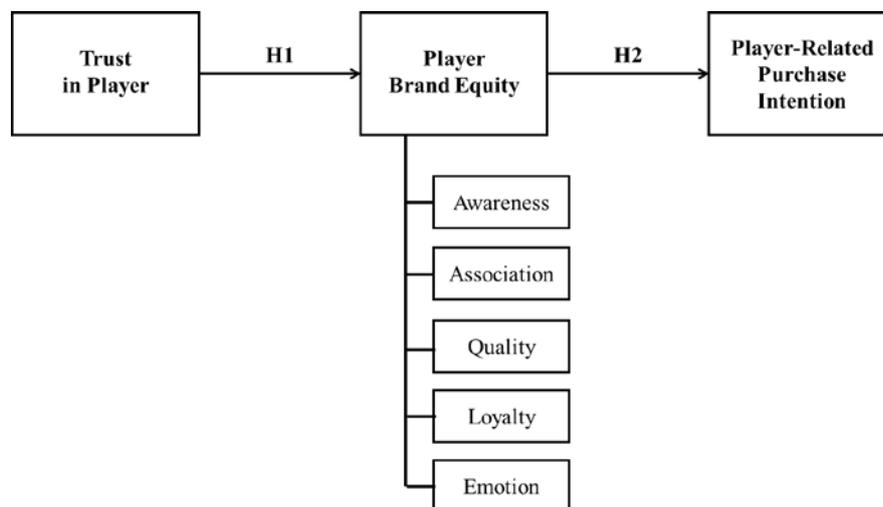

Figure 1. Conceptual model of player brand equity process (Own elaboration).

Brand Equity

Although multiple definitions can be found in the literature, brand equity is commonly described as the extra worth or benefit that a brand name adds to a product (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). Over time, brand equity has emerged as a fundamental concept in branding research, with studies in this field largely drawing from the theoretical foundations established by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). According to Aaker (1992), brand equity consists of a set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand's name and symbol, which can enhance or diminish the value of a product or service for both the organization and its customers. Although this definition considers both the firm and consumers, the main thrust of research has ultimately been developed by considering value from the perspective of consumers. Building on Aaker's work, Keller (1993) specifically focused on consumer perceptions and developed a model of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) which proposed that brand equity most likely occurs "when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory" (p. 2). This approach highlights consumer knowledge as a foundation for brand equity development, which can be utilized in the sports setting for shaping fan perceptions of teams and organizations (Biscaia et al., 2016).

From its earliest conceptualizations, brand equity has been considered a multidimensional construct (Bańbuła et al., 2024). Aaker (1991) considered there to be five dimensions of brand equity: brand association, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand assets. Brand awareness refers to the strength of the brand's presence in the mind of consumers (e.g., the ability to recognize or recall) and is an essential factor for brand equity to exist (Aaker, 1991). Brand associations represent the attributes that consumers mentally connect with a brand, collectively forming what is commonly known as brand image (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Perceived quality, on the other hand, reflects an individual's subjective evaluation of a product's overall standard of excellence (Li et al., 2012). Lastly, brand assets encompass exclusive elements such as patents, trademarks, and distribution agreements. Unlike other brand equity dimensions, this component is objective in nature and can be examined independently from perceptual attributes (Aaker, 1996). Consequently, when a brand is regarded as having high equity, consumers tend to exhibit high recognition of the brand name, maintain positive associations with it, consider it to be of superior quality, and demonstrate consistent brand loyalty. These perspectives have been empirically tested in numerous studies (Stahl et al., 2012).

This research considers the frameworks developed by Aaker and Keller, which have been extensively referenced and confirmed through various empirical studies (Yoo et al., 2000; Faircloth et al., 2001; Atilgan et al., 2005). These models identify four fundamental attitudinal dimensions from the consumer's standpoint: brand associations, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The direct method for measuring brand equity seeks to assess the concept by focusing on consumer preferences and perceived value (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2019). This study focuses on how consumers perceive brand equity, using a consumer-centered perspective. It also incorporates traditional models that evaluate important aspects of consumer perception, such as brand recognition, perceived quality, brand identity, brand personality, and emotional connection with the brand.

Player Brand Equity

The notion that people can be considered as brands has also been established in the literature. As a prime example of human brands, Thomson (2006) notes that the success of the massive entertainment industry has long hinged on the successful positioning of its primary asset – the celebrity status of high-profile individuals. This idea also translates easily to the sport industry, where star athletes are some of the most celebrated individuals in society. Beyond managing strong brands for teams and leagues, the sport industry also consists of practitioners whose primary responsibility is to manage the individual brands of star athletes (Ross, 2006). The sport management literature has also acknowledged the significance of sport stars as individual brands, in relation to several related concepts such as athlete brand personality (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Silva, 2021), athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2013; Shibin et al., 2024), athlete brand credibility (Zhou & Tainsky, 2017), and celebrity star power of professional

athletes (Lewis & Yoon, 2018). Drawing from these perspectives, player brand equity incorporates the set of characteristics that are linked to a professional player's name and image, which increase (or decrease) the overall value of the player.

While the concept of brand equity has been studied in relation to professional sports teams (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2016), the empirical investigation of athlete/player brand equity has not been specifically addressed. Some sport scholars have attempted to consider the importance of individual brand equity by quantifying it using objective measures. Yang, Shi, and Goldfarb (2009) considered the concept of athlete brands in relation to professional players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) by using All-Star status as a proxy. Lewis and Yoon (2018) developed a measure of star power of Major League baseball players, using Most Valuable Voting results for player awards, including those for hitters and Cy Young recipients among pitchers, serve as key performance indicators. Apart from quantitative metrics, recent academic discussions have focused on framing athlete brand equity through the lens of consumer perceptions (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Na et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). Expanding upon established models of sport brand equity (e.g., Gladden et al., 1998). Williams, Walsh, and Rhenwrick (2015) have proposed an athlete brand equity model, which posits that this type of equity is largely created by publicity and the marketing communication efforts of the organization and athlete.

According to Bourke (2006), sports marketing possesses distinctive traits that set it apart from other marketing fields. One key aspect is the strong consumer dedication and deep emotional engagement associated with sports, which provide an advantageous environment for brand equity development (Berraquero Rodríguez et al., 2024; Sutton et al.,1997). In relation to human brand equity more specifically, beyond team success, spectators often attend or watch games because of their attraction to the superstar players (Hausman & Leonard, 1997; Wann, 2006). In addition to Aaker's (1991) perceptual dimensions, the current research therefore incorporates an emotional component of player brands. With sport and emotion being inextricably linked (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Vallerand & Blanchard, 2000), and consumers in general having both cognitive and emotional connections with brands (Whan Park et al., 2010), it appears necessary to also consider an emotional component for player brand equity.

Investigations in the sport fandom space have long incorporated the emotional attachment to individual players (Wann, 2006), and accounting for emotion has also been encouraged for sport brand equity research (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2020; Walsh & Williams, 2017). Sports consumers frequently perceive the products associated with their favorite teams or athletes as a reflection of their own identity (Mishra et al., 2024; Sotiriadou et al., 2024). Additionally, sports evoke intense emotions and deep, sometimes irrational, connections with related goods and services (Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Watkins, 2014). Indeed, some of the most successful brands can induce strong positive emotions (Nowak et al., 2006), and scholars have recently highlighted the need to consider emotion for a better assessment of brand equity in the sport environment (Biscaia et al., 2016). It is from these perspectives that our conceptualization of player brand equity goes beyond the perceptual dimensions noted previously (Aaker, 1991) and also incorporates an emotional factor. Player brand emotion refers to the extent to which consumers instinctively appreciate and emotionally connect with a player (e.g., Tsai et al., 2015; Wann, 2006).

Hypothesis Development

The influence of trust on player brand equity

Fans of professional sports consider themselves extremely knowledgeable about the teams they support (Funk, 2008). Strong interests and the transparency of sport often result in fans experiencing a close psychological connection with their respective sports teams and the individual players who compete for those clubs (Wann, 2006). As the relationship-based marketing literature suggests that trust is one of the primary factors on which relationships are based (Blackston, 1992), and with companies strategically focusing on this concept because of its association

with personal relationships (MacLeod, 2000; Moorman et al., 1992), it appears sports fans may be in a favourable position to evaluate their trust in high profile athletes.

When trust is present with regard to a brand and its associated products, there is generally a stronger likelihood for the brand to be positively evaluated (Chen, 2010). The current research proposes that when sports fans believe a professional athlete is dedicated, reliable, and generally trustworthy, this will have a positive impact on the value these consumers place on the player's brand. From these perspectives, and in concert with literature viewing trust as an antecedent of brand equity (e.g., Chen, 2010; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005), we propose that our new construct of trust in player will enhance player brand equity as an expression of the perceived personal relationship between the consumer and the player. The perceived personal relationship between the consumer and the player refers to a parasocial interaction,a one-sided psychological connection in which fans feel emotionally invested in the athlete as if they knew them personally (Dibble et al., 2016). This perceived closeness can foster trust and positively influence the consumer's evaluation of the player's brand equity, even in the absence of any real interaction.

H1. Trust in player will be positively related to player brand equity.

The influence of player brand equity on player-related purchase intentions

Purchase intention is a critical predictor of actual buying behavior, and has generally been referred to as the likelihood that a customer will purchase a particular product or service (Dodds et al., 1991). This concept is well-established and has been empirically investigated across a multitude of sectors (Bai et al., 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011, Papadimitriou et al., 2016). The literature indicates that a consumer's intention to purchase a product or service is based on a few primary influences. The first is a positive attitude toward the brand itself, where purchase intention will begin to rise when the attitude towards the brand surpasses a neutral evaluation (Laroche & Brisoux, 1989). However, it is also to be noted that this attitude can be negatively impacted when consumers simultaneously consider other brands believed to be in the same choice set (Laroche et al., 1996). In addition, two other main influencers of purchase intentions are knowledge confidence and brand familiarity. Knowledge confidence refers to consumer's subjective assessment that they have the correct knowledge about the brand attributes (Pillai & Kumar, 2012). Brand familiarity refers to the level of knowledge that consumers have about the brand in relation to other competitor brands (Celedon et al., 2013).

We introduce a new conceptualization of player brand equity that effectively integrates key elements historically linked to predicting purchase intentions. In particular, a strong evaluation of player brand equity reflects a generally positive perception of the brand itself (e.g., Laroche & Brisoux, 1989), while the perceived quality component represents an appraisal of the brand's excellence level (e.g., Li et al., 2012). Furthermore, the combined influence of all player brand equity dimensions—including awareness, associations, quality, loyalty, and proprietary assets—serves as a crucial measure of consumers' subjective assessment of brand-related knowledge and their relative perception of the brand compared to competitors.

In the current study purchase intention refers to the likelihood that a consumer will purchase products and services where there is an association with specific professional players (e.g., player jerseys, personalized applications, associated team merchandise, etc). The positive link between brand equity as an antecedent to purchase intention is well established in mainstream marketing (e.g., Chang & Liu, 2009; Chen, & Chang, 2008), with the general proposition being that positive assessments of brand value will lead to an increased consumer propensity to purchase related products. Several predictors of purchase intention have also been considered in the sport marketing context, such as sponsorship activities (Pope & Vogues, 2000), sport commitment (Casper et al., 2007), endorser attractiveness (Liu, Huang & Minghua, 2007), and the passion of the fans (Sarpong, & Zungu, 2025; Smith et al., 2008). While the role of brand equity has yet to be addressed in this manner within the sport marketing literature, we

propose that sports fans' subjective and intangible assessments of player brand value will lead to an increased willingness to purchase player-related products.

H2. Player brand equity will be positively related to player-related purchase intention.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of Spanish consumers who are familiar with and follow the National Basketball Association (NBA). As a criterion for the required NBA knowledge for inclusion in the study, all participants indicated that they were aware of all the NBA players who were listed in the questionnaires. This list consisted of ten NBA star players competing during the 2015-2016 regular season, which included Kobe Bryant, Carmelo Anthony, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Pau Gasol, Blake Griffin, James Harden, LeBron James, Derrick Rose, and Dwyane Wade. The player brand equity process was examined from the spectators' perspective because individuals weight the various factors based on personal expectations in relation to their own needs and backgrounds (Wonseok et al., 2015). The three main constructs were measured with 24 items developed from scales used previously in the literature. Each item was evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 3 contains a list of all the items along with their corresponding statistical data. The survey was conducted in person with participants attending various basketball competitions ranging from high school to the professional level, with data collection distributed across seven different Spanish cities. The survey was completed voluntarily, and the participants received no compensation for answering the questionnaire. The total sample consisted of completed surveys from 441 individuals (N = 441), which is considered an appropriate size for research using the questionnaire method.

The sample analyzed in the table is predominantly male (68.7%), with an average age of 36.2 years (SD = 13.5). Educationally, the majority have attained higher education degrees (63.3%), while only a small fraction has no formal education (2.1%). Regarding household income over the past 12 months, most participants fall within the €15,000 - €24,999 annual range (25.0%), followed closely by those earning between €25,000 - €34,999 (23.6%). When it comes to NBA viewing habits, 45.4% of respondents state that they usually do not watch games, while 22.8% report watching 2 to 3 matches per week. A smaller percentage (9.7%) are avid viewers, watching four or more games weekly. Additionally, a total of 80.1% of respondents were able to spontaneously recall at least one brand endorsed by an NBA player. This high level of unaided brand recall suggests a strong awareness of the commercial partnerships and marketing efforts linked to NBA players. In terms of favorite players, Stephen Curry (17.8%) and LeBron James (17.1%) are the most popular, followed by Pau Gasol (14.5%) and Kobe Bryant (14.3%). The most widely supported NBA teams include the Los Angeles Lakers (23.1%), Chicago Bulls (21.1%), and Golden State Warriors (13.6%). These preferences highlight the lasting impact of historically successful franchises and globally renowned players in shaping fan loyalty.

To reduce potential method bias, established procedures from prior research were followed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The survey design included clear distinctions between variables, clarification of potentially unfamiliar terminology, and avoidance of complex or ambiguous language. Participant anonymity was maintained to lessen any response pressure. In the context of PLS-SEM, potential common method bias (CMB) was examined using collinearity diagnostics (Kock, 2015), where variance inflation factor (VIF) values below 3.3 suggest no concern (Hair et al., 2017; Kock, 2015). The analysis confirmed the absence of CMB in the model.

Table 1. Sample information (Author's calculations).

Gender		Age	
Male	68.7	Mean	36.2
Female	31.3	SD	13.5
College degree		**Favorite player**	
No degree	2.1	Curry	17.8
Primary education	6.7	James	17.1
Secondary education	27.9	Gasol	14.5
Higher education	63.3	Bryant	14.3
Household income during the past 12 months		Durant	11.9
Less than €10,000	9.0	Rose	6.5
€10,000 - €14,999.	13.2	Wade	5.6
€15,000 - €24,999.	25.0	Anthony	5.5
€25,000 - €34,999.	23.6	Harden	4.0
€35,000 - €49,999.	17.4	Griffin	2.8
€50,000 or more	11.8	**Favorite NBA team**	
Behavioral data		Los Angeles Lakers	23.1
I usually do not watch NBA match on TV	45.4	Chicago Bulls	21.1
1 match per week	22.1	Golden State Warriors	13.6
2-3 matches per week	22.8	San Antonio Spurs	7.5
4 matches per week or more	9.7	Boston Celtics	6.1
Recognise any brand involving an NBA player		Oklahoma Thunder	4.1
Yes	80.1	Miami Heat	2.7
No	19.9	Cleveland Cavaliers	2.1

Data analysis and results

Aggregation of data

Participants evaluated their level of trust in the player, perceptions of player brand equity, and their intentions to make player-related purchases for ten NBA star athletes. Table 2 presents the average scores per player for these constructs, encompassing all facets of player brand equity. For consistency, the constructs are listed horizontally in order of theoretical progression (see Figure 1). The players are listed in order vertically in order of player brand equity levels. (Curry had the highest player brand equity score 4.44. Though in a slightly different order, the same collection ranked as the top five players who could be relied upon in relation to basketball performance (i.e., Trust in Player) (Curry 4.66, Bryant 4.57, Durant 4.52, James 4.43, and Gasol 4.35). Likewise, this same group of players also made of the top five in relation to player-related purchase intentions, with Durant (3.46) leading the way. To facilitate hypothesis testing using structural equation modeling, responses related to individual players were averaged to generate a mean score for each participant. This score serves as a general evaluation of these constructs concerning NBA star players.

Partial least squares

For the primary statistical analyses, this study utilized the partial least squares (PLS) method within the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework. SEM facilitates the simultaneous assessment of both the structural model (path relationships) and the measurement model (latent variable indicators) within a single analysis (Gefen, Straub, and

Boudreau, 2000). As a modeling technique focused on variance, PLS is particularly suited for predictive analysis and is often preferred over covariance-based methods in scenarios where maximizing the explained variance in the dependent variable is a priority (Zareie & Navimipour, 2016). In this type of SEM approach, each parameter carries a predictive interpretation (Esposito Vinzi, Chin, Henseler, & Wang, 2010). When the primary objective of research is to predict key target constructs or identify significant 'driver' constructs, PLS is recommended as the preferred method (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 2. Player's means scores of the constructs and dimensions (Author's calculations).

Player	Trust in player	Player brand equity	Player brand associations	Player brand awareness	Player perceived quality	Player brand loyalty	Player brand emotion	Player-related purchase intention
Curry	4.66	4.44	4.76	4.69	4.68	3.96	4.44	3.22
Durant	4.52	4.19	4.69	4.81	3.17	4.01	4.17	3.46
Gasol	4.35	4.02	4.45	4.54	3.92	3.58	3.84	3.19
James	4.43	3.98	4.4	4.57	4.4	3.32	3.73	2.97
Bryant	4.57	3.89	4.6	4.62	3.02	3.54	3.8	3.4
Rose	3.77	3.4	4.06	4.17	2.87	3.01	3.09	2.94
Anthony	3.77	3.39	4.02	4.3	2.92	2.89	3.07	2.71
Harden	3.62	3.38	4.25	4.4	3.2	2.63	2.94	2.62
Wade	3.97	3.35	3.89	4.07	2.9	2.97	3.08	2.73
Griffin	3.42	3.18	4.12	4.3	2.72	2.48	2.76	2.64

Measurement model analysis

This study adopted a two-step approach within the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). In the first stage, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the measurement model, aligning survey items with their respective first-order constructs (see Table 3). All factor loadings were statistically significant and above .7, with one exception. One item related to player brand loyalty had a slightly lower loading (.65), yet it was retained as it still met the acceptable criteria for factor analysis (Falk & Miller, 1992; Hair et al., 2006). These results provide strong support for the reliability of the reflective measures.

To assess internal consistency, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were used as measurement criteria. A threshold of .70 is generally accepted as indicative of 'moderate' reliability, while .80 is considered a 'more rigorous' standard in foundational research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In this study, all reflective measures exhibited composite reliability values above .80, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the conventional .70 threshold. As a result, the latent constructs exhibited strong reliability, and all items were retained in the analysis.

Discriminant validity was evaluated through two approaches. First, the average variance extracted (AVE) was analyzed to determine the extent to which each construct captured variance in comparison to measurement error. An AVE above .50 is recommended, and all constructs in this study met or exceeded this criterion (refer to Table 3). Additionally, the square root of each construct's AVE was compared against its correlations with other constructs to confirm that each construct exhibited stronger relationships with its own indicators than with those of different constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results aligned with these expectations, providing robust evidence for the discriminant validity of all constructs examined in the study.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis and scale reliability (Author's calculations).

	Standardized loading	t-value	AVEa	SCRb	Alphac
Player brand trust			0.70	0.92	0.89
I think this player is reliable.	0.79	13.38			
I think this player is respected.	0.87	17.42			
I think this player is prestigious.	0.83	12.92			
This player meets my expectations in relation to performance.	0.88	16.79			
I think this player is a committed.	0.82	15.52			
Player brand awareness			0.87	0.93	0.85
I am very aware of this player.	0.91	33.66			
I can recognize this player among other players.	0.93	38.10			
This player is often referred to when talking about basketball.	0.90	34.22			
Player brand associations			0.84	0.92	0.86
The characteristics of this basketball player are easily identifiable.	0.91	25.89			
I quickly recognize the name of the player when I see it.	0.93	41.10			
This player quickly comes to mind when I hear his name.	0.92	22.44			
Perceived player quality			0.71	0.80	0.77
The probability that this player is an NBA MVP is extremely high.	0.87	19.69			
The probability that a team wins a game if it has this player is very high.	0.93	44.69			
This is a high-quality player.	0.82	25.77			
Player brand loyalty			0.64	0.88	0.81
I would prefer to have this player on my favorite team more than other players because of his behavior on the court.	0.65	6.90			
I would prefer to have this player on my favorite team more than other players with similar statistics.	0.83	19.00			
I would prefer to have this player on my favorite team more than other players with better statistics.	0.87	27.93			
It is smarter to rely on this player more than other players on his team.	0.89	23.87			
Player brand emotion			0.77	0.87	0.81
I would much rather have this player on my favorite team than on another team.	0.88	22.72			
This player brings out emotions in me when he is playing.	0.88	21.52			
It is not easy to explain why this is a player of great value.	0.83	18.32			
Purchase intention			0.58	0.83	0.83
My willingness to buy products where this player is involved is high.	0.76	8.64			
I would trust in buying a product/service promoted by this player.	0.79	16.12			
The probability of me buying a product where this player is involved is high.	0.81	11.41			

To examine the proposed relationships, a direct link was established from player trust to player brand equity (H1), as well as another direct connection from player brand equity to purchase intentions related to the player (H2). In alignment with the theoretical model, player brand equity was conceptualized as a second-order construct, incorporating five reflective latent components. As depicted in Figure 2, the key indicators of player brand equity—awareness of the player's name (.66), associations with the player's brand (.68), perceived quality of the player (.71), player brand loyalty (.81), and emotional attachment to the player's brand (.80)—demonstrate that these elements collectively contribute to defining the construct. The findings revealed that trust in the player exhibited the strongest connection with player brand equity (β = .66), followed by the connection between player brand equity on player-related purchase intention (β = .46). The results also indicated that the single construct of trust in player accounted for 44% of the variance in player brand equity, which in turn accounted for 21% of the variance in player-related purchase intentions.
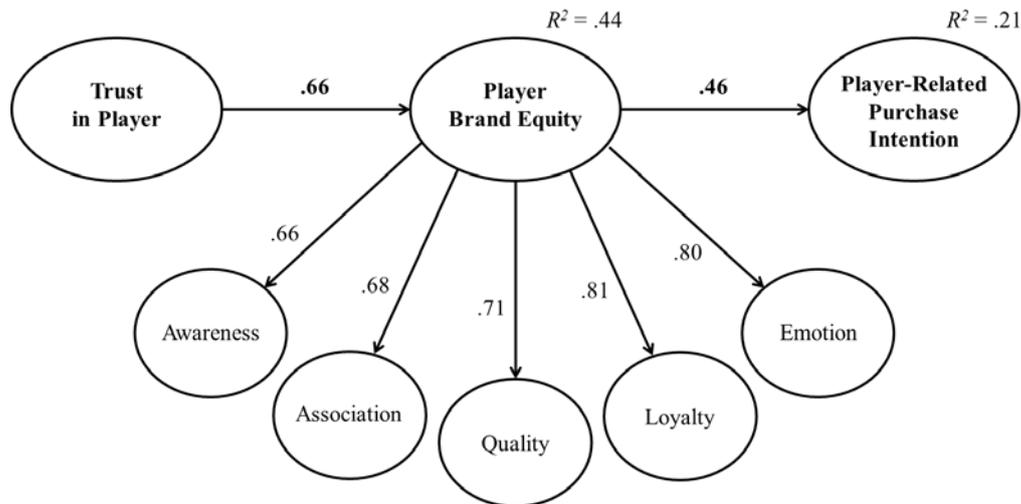
Figure 2. Structural model results (Own elaboration).

Supplementary analysis

Further analysis was conducted to provide an indication of the hypothesized relationships at the individual player level. Table 4 provides the correlations between each set of constructs for H1 and H2 with respect to all ten NBA players included in the survey. Significant positive correlations between trust in player and player brand equity (H1) were found for all ten players (listed alphabetically). The correlation ranged from .93 for Curry, representing the highest value, to .57 for Wade, which marked the lowest point. Additionally, a strong positive correlation was observed for all ten players regarding the link between player brand equity and purchase intentions associated with the player (H2). The correlation values for this relationship spanned from .48 for Gasol at the upper end to .20 for Rose at the lower end.

Table 4. Correlation analysis for hypothesized relationships at individual player level (Author's calculations).

Player	Trust in player → Player brand equity (H1)	Player brand equity → Purchase intention (H2)
Anthony	0.60	0.29
Bryant	0.68	0.33
Curry	0.93	0.36
Durant	0.83	0.34
Gasol	0.80	0.48
Griffin	0.65	0.47
Harden	0.72	0.46
Lebron	0.65	0.31
Rose	0.60	0.20
Wade	0.57	0.32

*All correlations significant at p< .01.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study offers multiple insights into the literature and enhances our comprehension of the brand equity framework. First, this study extends previous brand equity literature by conceptualizing a new construct of player brand equity which is specifically focused on professional athletes. The dimensions utilized here confirm results found in other areas of specificity such as green products (Chen, 2010), social responsibility (Vlachos et al., 2009), politics (Parker, 2012) and the internet (Jevons & Gabbott, 2010). As the current model generally indicates slightly stronger loadings than found elsewhere, this could perhaps be a result of the focus on the individual players and a perceived personal relationship with the player (e.g. Hull & Lewis, 2014).

A second important contribution is the inclusion of emotion in the conceptualization of player brand equity. The findings align with prior research, confirming that brand equity is commonly represented through the conventional dimensions of awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. However, taking an approach grounded in the sport context (Chalip, 2006), the current investigation incorporates emotion because if its inextricable connection to the sport environment (Swanson & Kent, 2017). Based on the high loading of player brand emotion onto the equity construct, future qualitative studies should explore the nature of this instinctive and emotional connection with certain star players (Tsai et al., 2015; Wann, 2006). Subsequent brand equity research in the sport sector should also look to incorporate and assess the presence of this emotive component of brand equity (Grappi et al., 2024).

In like fashion with the sport-specific approach noted above for player brand equity, this study also represents the first known investigation which considers consumer trust in professional athletes as relevant factor in the brand equity process. The findings of this study indicate that fans' perception of a professional player as dependable, committed, and capable of delivering strong performances positively impacts the perceived value of the player's brand. While the study was delimited by the inclusion of only one main antecedent, the trust in player construct alone significantly explained a large percentage of the variance in player brand equity (R^2 = .44). Future research should consider additional predictors of player brand equity in combination with trust in player to assess the supplemental prediction value with the inclusion of multiple antecedents. Factors to consider are organizational marketing and publicity, along with actual experiences of consumers (e.g., Ross, 2006). Finally, since star players are often perceived as leaders, future research may explore the concept of trust in the player in relation to key leadership constructs such as credibility and prototypicality (e.g., Swanson & Kent, 2014).

A fourth contribution of this research is that player brand equity was embedded within a conceptual process which provides an indication of the predictive validity of player brand equity. As purchase intention is one of the primary concerns of brand equity research, the current study provided initial support for this connection by demonstrating a significant influence on a context-specific form of purchase intentions. Future research should consider the impact of player brand equity on other outcomes such as brand identification and willingness to recommend (e.g., Eldegwy et al., 2018), which could also be tailored with a player-specific contextual approach.

The theoretical contributions of this study may extend beyond the sport context. The observed role of trust and emotion in shaping brand equity aligns with broader branding literature that emphasizes consumer-brand relationships based on credibility and loyalty (e.g., Mishra et al., 2024; Na et al., 2020). These insights could prove valuable when analyzing branding strategies in other domains where individual figures (e.g., influencers, politicians) serve as central brand agents. As such, the framework proposed here may offer a conceptual bridge between sport-specific brand equity and general consumer behavior research.

Future studies could explore the cross-contextual application more explicitly. Also, future qualitative studies should delve deeper and consider this potential when interviewing spectators about their player brand equity perceptions. Additionally, as a limitation of this research was that it was situated within one nation and related to only one professional sports league, future research should look to replicate this study for other sports across varying countries.

Practical implications

The current study also offers several implications for sport management practitioners. The multidimensional player brand equity framework provides a sophisticated and flexible approach for evaluation by offering five specific dimensions for consideration. The confirmed strong loadings of these five first-order factors provide player personnel directors, agents, and the players themselves with an effective roadmap for analysis, development, and management of star athletes' brand equity. Based on this information, a player's brand can be built (or perhaps rebuilt) by identifying perceived strengths and weakness in these areas. Further, factoring in these core components of player brand equity can have implications in other areas such as leveraging for bigger contracts, player valuation analyses,

and individual brand development programs. In addition, having a better understanding of a club's individual players can also impact sponsorship decisions, such as strategically connecting players who align well with sponsor messaging focused on factors like quality, loyalty, and emotion. Furthermore, sales managers can also benefit from a better understanding player brand equity in relation to dynamic pricing club for merchandise with player related components (i.e., individualized naming on the back of jerseys). Future studies should consider these factors when extending this research through study designs formulated to address these specific areas.

Another broad practical implication stemming from this study is in relation to the trust in player concept. With a major finding emerging that trust in player appears to be a strong predictor of player brand equity, this specific concept of trust should be given strong consideration by executives, agents, and the star players themselves. As defined and operationalized here, beyond being perceived as talented, embedded in the trust in player construct is also an assessment of the individual player's intentions to perform (Chauduri & Holbrook, 2001). Stated another way, while talent plays an important role, players who are also seen as reliable, respected, and committed appear to have more influence on raising their personal player brand equity levels. While this may seem intuitive, it can serve as a strong message for senior level executives and agents to consider when advising their star players and clients, respectively. Of specific interest may be how this idea appears to be in conflict with the recent trend for players to strategically sit out of certain games for health considerations (i.e., 'load management'). Until consumer expectations for player competition frequency catches up with the new league trend of asset protection (i.e., players as human resources), it is plausible that players who sit out more regularly than others could inadvertently impact their player brand equity in a negative manner. Future studies should therefore consider how fan perceptions of player competition regularity may impact the subjective assessment of a player's value. Beyond the trust from management, coaches, and teammates, the current results suggest that star players looking to develop their personal brand value should also focus on gaining trust of the fans. An important conceptual consideration concerns the inherent connection between the player and the team. While this study focuses on player-level responses, it is acknowledged that such perceptions are likely shaped by team-level dynamics. Future research would benefit from exploring this interdependence, potentially through multilevel designs or mixed-method approaches that can capture the nuanced interplay between individual and team identities.

To enhance the study practical relevance, several brand management recommendations can be derived from the findings. For example, trust and emotional connection—identified here as strong drivers of player brand equity—can guide strategic decisions by agents, marketing executives, and clubs. Strengthening a player's reliability and emotional appeal, particularly via social media (Ki et al., 2020), aligns with recent work on athlete credibility and brand engagement (Na et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2024). Organizations may also use these dimensions diagnostically to tailor personal branding strategies or optimize sponsorship pairings with athletes who exhibit high levels of perceived quality or loyalty (Banbula, 2024). Furthermore, given the growing convergence of sport branding and broader consumer-brand relationships (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), these insights offer actionable value not only within sport but across industries seeking to manage individual brand figures.

Conclusions

The benefits of leveraging strengths and available resources remain an important theme in the marketing literature. Among these capabilities, this research identifies a new concept based on the traditional construct of brand equity. This new construct, player brand equity, is viewed as a relational consumer-based asset because it lies at the intersection of the players and their individual brands, and stems from perceived personal relationships between the consumers and players. The current study investigated the brand equity process in direct relation to NBA star players. It is explicitly grounded in the context of sport, which serves as an appropriate source for theory building in sport management (Chalip, 2006). This approach led to an important context-relevant emotion factor being identified as a

dimension of player brand equity in the professional sport. The results indicate that the subjective assessment of player brand value is bolstered by perceived trust in these players and enhances the likelihood that consumers will purchase player-related products and services. The framework developed by this research provides a structured yet flexible approach for evaluation by sport management practitioners and individual players operating in the professional sports environment.

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