

What Children Love About Athletes: An Exploratory Assessment of Athlete Brand Associations Among Youth Consumers

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Abstract

Sport marketers are continuously looking for ways to build and leverage brand equity, due to its effects on revenue generation, extension opportunities and consumer loyalty. In particular, athletes and their constituents must have knowledge of the brand associations consumers hold for them in order to build and leverage brand equity. However, limited research exists as to how brand associations may differ for athletes amongst various target segments of sport consumers. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap in the body of literature by examining the brand associations children hold for athletes and comparing those findings with those of previous sport brand association models. The results revealed eight brand associations unique to children such as style of play, attitudes, affiliations, success, brand marks, relationships, body fit and rivals.

Literature Review

The pursuit of strong brand equity is of chief importance for sport organizations in today's competitive marketplace. Brand equity is typically defined as the assets and liabilities linked to a brand that adds or subtracts from its value in minds' of its consumer base (Aaker, 1991). The increased competition inside and outside of sport has encouraged sport organizations to employ brand management strategies with the aim of creating, managing and maintaining strong brand equity. A strategy that is vastly different from solely relying on team and/or athlete performance (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2009). Sport marketing scholars have examined brand equity in sport (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, 2006; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). The aforementioned researchers have indicated that brand associations—the thoughts and beliefs a person holds in their memory for a brand (Keller, 1993)—are the primary building blocks of brand equity. Subsequently, various sport brand association scales have been developed (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006). While significantly contributing to the body of knowledge, the previous brand association scales have been limited to sport teams and adult sport consumers.

Researchers have suggested that it is myopic to assume that brand constructs, such as brand associations, are generalizable across sport brand categories and consumer segments (Ross &

Harradine, 2004). In order to capture the full spectrum of sport brand equity, brand associations must be assessed among various types of sport brands and consumer segments.

The athlete brand is a vital part of the sport marketplace and is worthy of investigation. Due to their popularity among sport consumers and their prevalence in the marketing efforts of sport organizations, it is reasonable to assume that unique differences may exist between the associations sport consumers have for an athlete contrasted with a sport organization. These differences in brand associations may yield unique findings and provide insightful information for academics and sport practitioners (Berry, 2000; Low & Lamb, 2000). Moreover, examining athlete brands may provide new insights for future research on athlete branding and aid sport organizations in marketing the athlete as a part of their organizational brand strategy to target various segments of the sport consumer base.

Research has enhanced our understanding of athletes as brands, however, much is left to query about how the perceptions of the athlete differ among various consumer segments. An examination of other consumer segments would fill a gap in sport branding literature (Ross, 2007). Moreover, an increasingly important and viable consumer segment that has not been examined in sport branding literature to date is the youth consumer. Scholars have acknowledged that youth consumers tend to be more familiar with and loyal to brands than adults (Achenreiner & John, 2003; Ji, 2002; John, 1999). Therefore, with the aim of bringing new insight about athlete brands from the youth consumer perspective and providing another base for further progression in sport branding research, we examined the brand associations youth consumers hold for athletes.

Youth consumers

While there is as dearth of research on youth sport fans as consumers, scholars from similar disciplines have discussed the importance of the youth consumers. Specifically, research has focused on the size of the youth consumer segment and their impact on family purchase decisions (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Lindstrom, 2004; Roper & Shah, 2007). Moreover, the youth consumer group accounts for 60% of their parents' spending (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Roper & Shah, 2007). What is more, children have the potential to engage in long-term brand relationships (Ji, 2008). According to Goyat (2011), the potential for brand loyalty and revenue generation constitute a valuable consumer segment worthy of pursuit.

While few studies have examined youth consumers in context of sport branding, studies based on youth cognitive development and consumer socialization provide evidence as to how and when this promising consumer segment acquires brand knowledge. Roedder-John (1999) explained that, though a developmental process, youth progress through three consumer developmental stages as they age — the *perceptual* (3-7 years old), *analytical* (7-11) and *reflective* (11-16) stages. The perceptual stage features children who can recognize brand names and are developing symbolic thought, but may only focus on a single perceptual attribute of the brand (e.g., an athlete's height or speed). Additionally, at this stage children may begin to form brand preferences. Similarly, in a sport context, James (2001) suggested that children begin to have preferences for sport team brands at the age of five. More importantly, the development of brand preference is said to be a consequence of the brand associations consumers' hold for a brand (Keller, 1993; Park & Srinivasan, 1994).

The analytical stage (ages 7 through 11) features youth consumers with a heightened sense of brand awareness and ability to consider multiple brand attributes. For example, when children in this stage think about an athletic shoe brand, they can consider not only the perceptual attributes (e.g., color), but also the functional attributes (e.g., durability) of the brand offering. Furthermore, youth in this stage also develop symbolic associations with brands (e.g., cool, expensive) and utilize them in the purchase decision making process (Roedder-John, 1999). They also consider how the image of the brand affects their own image and how it is perceived by their peers (Elliott & Leonard, 2004). More pertinent to this study, children in the analytical stage begin to regard celebrities as brands (e.g., singers, actors, athletes) and develop associations with them, which may manifest in the form of imitation and fanaticism (Roper & Shah, 2007).

Lastly, the reflective stage occurs during the ages of 11 through 16. At this time, children have developed a sophisticated understanding of brands. They gather functional, perceptual, and social information about brands and use them conjointly during their decision making (Roedder-John, 1999). However, youth consumers in this stage are primarily focused on the social meaning of brand (Ji, 2002).

As illustrated in the brand knowledge development process, as they mature, youth consumers become knowledgeable about brands. They can recognize/recall more brands (i.e., brand awareness) and hold sophisticated types of brand associations. However, they are still novice consumers, who tend to associate a brand with perceptual attributes (Cowley & Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996), which implies possible differences in brand associations between youth and adult consumers. To date, however, no studies have examined youth sport consumers in relation to the associations they hold for athlete brands.

Brand associations

Brand associations are consumption-influencing thoughts or images that consumers have in their mind for a particular brand (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993). The concept expresses what consumers think, understand and remember about brands and is considered the primary building block of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Ross, 2007). While brand associations in sport has been conceptualized by several scholars (e.g., Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden & Funk 2002; Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2007; Ross et al., 2006), the models of Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (1993) have served as the fundamental cornerstones for brand association research.

According to Aaker (1991, 1996), brand association is one of the four constructs of brand equity; brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations. In his model, brand associations were classified into four categories (i.e., product, organization, person, and symbol). In his framework, consumers associated product-related attributes (e.g., quality, usage situation, users, country of origin), organization-related attributes (e.g., innovation, culture), personality of the brand (e.g., fun, active, young, humorous, boring) and symbolic image or meaning of the brand (e.g., logo, endorser) with brands.

Alternatively, Keller (1993) conceptualized brand knowledge — defined as the cumulative impact of brand awareness and brand image — as a determinant of brand equity. Keller

proposed that brand image is the product of strong, unique and favorable brand associations, which create brand equity. He categorized brand associations as the attribute-related, benefit-related and attitude-related associations consumers' hold for a brand. The attribute association refers to the functional (e.g., utility, performance) and non-functional (e.g., price, logo, history) attributes of the brand. The benefit-related associations are the values customers realize as a result of brand consumption — and can be classified as functional, experiential, and symbolic. Lastly, attitude-related associations are consumers' overall feelings about a brand relative to its attribute-related and benefit-related associations. Although Aaker (1991; 1996) and Keller (1993) provide different conceptualizations of brand equity, both postulate that brand associations are vital to the formation of brand equity. Their conceptual frameworks have served as the foundation for brand association research in sport.

Sport brand associations

Although previous brand association research has been specific to team brands and adult consumers, it provides fundamental information for understanding how consumers perceive sport brands. Based on Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model, Gladden and Funk (2002) developed the team association model (TAM). A scale designed to measure brand associations in the context of team sport. The TAM (Gladden & Funk) included sixteen brand associations that were categorized in to three brand association dimensions proposed by Keller (i.e., attributes, benefits, and attitudes). Team success, star player, head coach, management, logo design, product delivery, and tradition were categorized as attribute associations. While nostalgia, pride in place, escape, and peer group acceptance were considered benefit associations — and importance, knowledge, and affect were identified as attitude associations. The TAM model was tested via structural equation modelling, thus serving as the first empirical examination of brand associations in sport.

Based on Berry's (2000) service based brand equity model, Ross et al. (2006) developed the team brand association scale (TBAS) for examining professional sport team brands. The TBAS included 11 associations for team brands: brand mark, rivalry, food, social interaction, team history, commitment, organizational attribute, non-player person, stadium community, team success, and team play. In an effort to examine the brand associations sport fans hold for their favorite professional team, Ross and colleagues employed a free-thought listing technique to elicit consumer associations. Based on their findings, Ross et al. (2006) suggested that future research should consider exploring additional associations from other segments of sport, because brand associations may differ across brands and consumers.

Based on the previous team brand association scales (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006) and endorser image studies (e.g., Ohanian, 1991; Choi & Rifon, 2007; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005), Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) proposed the model of athlete brand image (MABI). The MABI consisted of ten athlete brand images categorized in to three dimensions: athletic performance (i.e., athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, rivalry), attractive appearance (physical attractiveness, symbol, body fitness), and marketable lifestyle (life story, role model, relationship effort). Based on the MABI, Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) developed a scale for athlete brand image (SABI). In line with Ross et al. (2006), Arai et al. (2013) utilized the free-thought listing technique to elicit brand associations from adult respondents. However, Arai and colleagues' finding are limited to a college student sample. Despite these limitations,

the previous studies serve as a baseline for examining the athlete-related brand associations that may exist among youth consumers. Table 1 summarizes the brand association scales previously developed in sport branding literature.

Table 1. Previous Brand Association Scales in Sport Literature

TAM: Gladden & Funk (2002)	TBAS: Ross et al. (2006)	SABI: Arai et al. (2013)
ATTRIBUTE	BRAND MARK	ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE
Product related		athletic expertise
success	RIVARLY	competition style
star player		sportsmanship
head coach	FOOD	rivalry
management		
	SOCIAL INTERACTION	
Non-product related		
logo design	TEAM HISTORY	ATTRACTIVE APPEARANCE
product delivery		physical attractiveness
stadium/arena	COMMITMENT	symbol
tradition		body fitness
	ORG. ATTRIBUTE	
BNEFIT-RELATED		
Functional/Symbolic/	NONPLAYER PERSON	
Experiential		
escape	STADIUM COMMUNITY	MARKETABLE LIFE STYLE
fan identification		life story
peer group acceptance	TEAM SUCCESS	role model
nostalgia		relationship effort
pride in place	TEAM PLAY	
ATTITUDE-RELATED		
importance		
knowledge		
affective reaction		

Purpose of study

The previous sport brand association frameworks (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006) have provided a solid foundation for the conceptualization of team brand associations. However, much is left to query about the brand associations consumers have for other sport brands such as athletes. Furthermore, previous research has suggested that brand associations may differ among sport consumer groups. Specifically, youth consumers are forming brand preferences at younger ages and tend to be more loyal to brands than adults (Achenreiner & John, 2003; Ji, 2002; John, 1999). However, researchers have yet to examine the brand associations youth consumers hold for athletes. An understanding of youth brand associations will assist sport organizations with athlete image creation and enhancement and prove to be beneficial for developing marketing activities targeting youth sport consumers.

Therefore, in this study we seek to extend the sport branding literature by examining the brand associations youth sport consumers hold for athletes. As this was the first known study to address youth athlete brand associations, the following research questions were deemed appropriate for this initial examination:

- RQ1: What brand associations do youth sport consumers hold for professional athletes?
- RQ2: Are the brand associations youth consumers hold for athletes different from previous sport brand association frameworks?

In order to answer above questions, we conducted an exploratory study examining what youth most like about their favorite athlete brand and compared these results to see how those are similar or different from previous conceptualization of brand associations in sport branding literature.

Methodology

We employed a free-thought listing survey to examine youth athlete brand associations. Free-thought listing is an open-response method used to elicit and categorize mental constructs such as brand associations (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). This technique allowed us to measure respondents' brand associations as they were asked to recall and reflect on the athlete brand most familiar to them. The free-thought listing technique was deemed to be appropriate, because youth athlete brand associations have yet to be studied, and there are no predetermined ideas about the brand associations they hold for athletes (Cacioppo, von Hippel, & Ernst, 1997).

Data were collected onsite from youth sport camps (i.e., basketball and soccer) in the Midwestern United States. Guardian consent was obtained before the children were asked to complete the survey. A total of 59 children (ages 4 to 14) participated. Children were first asked to write their favorite athlete's name. By doing so, the authors assessed the brand awareness of children, the ability to recall and recognize a brand name in the product category (Keller, 1993). According to Keller (1993), brand awareness is a necessary condition for brand associations, as it reflects the brand node in consumers' memory, which provides a platform that the consumer

attaches various meanings to the brand. Further, brand awareness relates to the likelihood of being consumed (Keller, 1993), which again reflects brand preference. Thus, the question confined the responses of youth to their 'favorite athlete' in order to see what associations are salient in the creation of unique, strong and favorable brand image. After the youth wrote their favorite athlete's name, they were asked to write the first things they think of when they think about their favorite athlete. The same technique has been used in previous sport brand association research (e.g., Arai, et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2006) to increase the likelihood of responses elicited exclusively by the stimulus (i.e., a favorite athlete). The 'first things they think of' was asked to detect multiple primary associations held about the athlete (as previously employed by Ross, 2006).

After the data collection, a content analysis method was utilized to organize the youth responses into interpretable themes and category. To secure the objectivity and consistency of coding, two independent coders who were familiar with brand association research and contents analysis method identified the association categories presented in the data set. Similar to the method used by Fontayne, Sarrazin, and Famose (2001), responses were categorized based on the coherence of semantic meaning through an inductive procedure (without predetermined category) and a deductive procedure (with predetermined category). In the inductive procedure, the categories were identified based on the meaning of responses. In the deductive procedure, the identified categories fit into the three categories Keller's (1993) brand association dimensions (i.e., attribute-, benefit-, and attitude-associations). Through these procedures, the authors attempted to capture the unique associations of athlete brand of youth consumers, while applying those associations into overarching concepts of brand associations previously established. After the categorization, in order to see how youth's associations for athlete brands are similar to or different from those previous conceptualizations, youth's athlete brand associations (YABA) was compared to the adults' team brand associations (i.e., TBAS) and athlete brand associations (i.e., SABI).

Results

Data analysis

After data screening and cleaning, 12 responses were omitted from the data set due to the missing information (i.e., athlete brand name and/or associations). A total of 47 children between the age of 4 and 13 completed the survey and were included in the data analysis. Griffin and Hauser (1993) suggested that between 20 and 30 respondents are recommended to capture 90 to 95% of consumer opinion, thus, 47 responses were deemed to be sufficient. The majority of the respondents were in the analytical-stage between 6 to 11 years old (83.0%, $M = 8.5$, $SD = 2.5$). Previous research suggest that this age group is able to recall and recognize brands in the marketplace, and exhibit brand preferences (Achenreiner & John, 2003; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Roper & Shah, 2007). In terms of gender, boys represented 78.7% ($n = 37$) of the total sample. In terms of athletes, twenty-seven (57.4%) of the athletes selected by the children were football players, fourteen (29.8%) basketball players, three (6.4%) baseball players, two (4.3%) soccer players, and one (2.1%) ice hockey player. Regarding the type of sport, of the team-sport athletes, 91.5% ($n = 43$) of those recalled were professional and 8.5% amateurs (i.e., NCAA). Non-team sports athletes were not mentioned at all. Most of the children selected currently active players, but four children (8.5%) chose retired players. All mentioned athletes were male.

Content analysis

A total of 64 individual thoughts were provided regarding the favorite athletes. Through the inductive analysis, both coders identified eight themes of associations from the youth thoughts. To check the reliability of the categorization, contents in the eight themes were compared to each coders and the initial associations coded showed an acceptable simple agreement rate (89.6%) as recommended by Andrew, Pedersen, and McEvoy (2011). The differences were then resolved through the discussions and the eight categories of youth's athlete brand association (YABA) were labeled into similar words used in previous literature: competition style/skill, abstract attitudes, athlete's affiliation, success, brand mark, relationship, body fit and rivalry. Through deductive procedure, the eight categories were again specified into the three dimensions of Keller's (1993) attribute-, attitude-, and benefit-related associations.

Attribute-related associations were found most frequently, similar to John's (1999) findings that analytical-stage youth use multiple perceptual associations, mostly, attributes of product/service to form images of brands. Six attributes of athlete brands were found and the 'competition type or skills' of the athlete was the most predominant associations of YABA (39.1%). This type of association can be regarded as the first function of athletes creating their brand value and is mostly induced by the athletes themselves through on-field competition (Arai et al., 2014). Other attribute-related associations were the athlete's affiliation (12.5%), success (9.4%), brand mark (9.4%), body fit (4.7%), and rivalry (1.6%). Youth consumers described these associations with simple perceptual images (cf., Achenreiner & John, 2003; John, 1999).

Attitudes-related associations were found as the second most frequent associations (18.8%). While Arai, Ko, and Ross (2013) have regarded attitude as a consequence of brand associations, in our data it was revealed as an important association that youth consumers link to the athlete's image. Although expressed in simple terms (e.g., awesome, good, nice), these abstractions about athlete brands were prevalent among youth sport consumers. As John (1999) argued, youth in the analytical stage, which is the case of our sample, may consider several dimensions of a brand simultaneously while creating abstract, but simple images (e.g., good, bad) about the athletes. This finding suggested the necessity for further consideration of attitude associations in the youth's athlete brand associations.

Lastly, benefit associations were found from two 11 year olds and one 6 year old (6.4%). We labeled this association category as 'relationship,' as they recognized their own benefits from the relationship with the athlete brand. One 11 year old associated the image of his favorite athlete with "crowds cheering for him." This association can be viewed as an experiential benefit (Keller, 1993), as it is related with a specific image or memory that child experienced. In this regard, we categorized this experiential image as a benefit association. The other two responses included in the relationship category were 'works with and for children' (from a 6 year old and an 11 year old). According to previous sport brand association scales (i.e., TBAS, SABI), 'organizational attributes' (e.g., team giving back to the community), 'role model' (e.g., the athlete is socially responsible), and 'relationship effort' (i.e., appreciation for fans and

spectators) were regarded as team or athlete attributes (Arai et al., 2014; Ross, 2006). However, for these youth, the athletes' relationship efforts all had youth-specific contexts. Therefore, the youth may be thinking of the potential benefits that they personally may derive from the athletes. Previous research focused on cause-related marketing, and consumer behavior suggested that a significant factor influencing consumer support for a cause is the personal closeness of the beneficiaries and potential benefits for themselves (e.g., Cui, Trent, Sullivan, & Matiru, 2003; Grau & Folse, 2007). In this regard, we considered these two youth specific support images of athletes as benefit associations induced by the athletes' relationship effort.

Comparison with existing sport association scales

After the categorization, the eight associations of YABA were matched with previously developed brand association scales in sport literature (i.e., TBAS and SABI). The aim of this matching was to see whether a different youth consumer nature was found or captured from the free-thought listing responses (i.e., YABA). One thing should be noted here: YABA is not a complete scale to measure brand associations. Instead, it is a set of responses that was collected from a small group of youth consumers through free-thought listing and conceptualized based on Keller's (1993) brand associations. Therefore, it is not appropriate to see our attempt as a direct comparison to TBAS and SABI, rather it should be seen as an initial trial to provide researchers with a platform for future research.

Ross et al.'s (2006) TBAS and Arai et al.'s (2013) SABI were chosen for the matching, as those two scales included brand associations directly derived from consumers and have been proven to be sound in their constructs among existing scales. Since Ross et al.'s (2006) TBAS was developed for the team brand context, the original meanings of TBAS associations were modified into an athlete brand context (e.g., team play as athlete play, organizational attribute as athlete attribute). Among 11 association categories of TBAS, only 6 categories were comparable to YABA categories. For SABI, 7 of 10 athlete brand image categories were comparable to YABA. Table 2 summarizes the matching result of YABA with TBAS and SABI.

By matching, we found that most of the YABA dimensions were reflected in TBAS and/or SABI. While the focuses of each association category may differ slightly from each other, the focuses on the same aspect of each association category were similar across the conceptualizations. This verifies the applicability of previous models into a youth consumer segment, but modifications will be necessary. For example, some associations did not match with TBAS (i.e., abstract attitudes and body fit) or SABI (i.e., athlete affiliation, success, and brand mark). On the other hand, the association that YABA shared with TBAS and SABI (e.g. competition style/skill, relationship, and rivalry) may represent important associations across ages and types of brands (i.e., athlete vs. team).

Table 2. Matching YABA with TBAS and SABI

YABA YABA Category (No. of mentioned & %) & Sample Responses	TBAS: Ross et al. (2006) Related Category & Sample Items	SABI: Arai et al. (2013) Related Category & Sample Items
COMPETITION STYLE/SKILL (25, 39.1%) Fast/Quick Team Play Offense/Scoring Rough and Strong Sport specific skills (e.g., 3-point, touchdown, homerun, dunk) Position (e.g., quarterback)	TEAM PLAY How the team scores its points Specific team characteristics	COMPETITION STYLE Competition style is distinctive Competition style is exciting to watch Competition style is charismatic
ABSTRACT ATTITUDES (12, 18.8%) Awesome Good Cool		
ATHLETE'S AFFILIATION (8, 12.5%) Athlete's Sport (e.g., soccer) Athlete's Team (e.g., Colts) Tournament (e.g., Stanley Cup) Athlete's Country	STADIUM CUMMINITY Area surrounding the stadium/arena Community surrounding the stadium Team's home stadium/arena Location of the stadium/arena City that the team is from	
SUCCESS (6, 9.4%) Win the game Winner Star Player	TEAM SUCCESS A winning team The performance of the team Quality players/ quality of the team	
BRAND MARK (6, 9.4%) Uniform Number (e.g., #18) Helmet	BRAND MARK Symbol of the team Team's logo/color	
RELATIONSHIP (3, 4.7%) Youth Related Support (i.e., his work with children, support youth health care) People Cheering for Athlete	ORGANIZATIONAL ATTRIBUTES An organization committed to its fans A team loyal to its fans The team giving back to the community	ROLE MODEL The athlete is socially responsible The athlete is good role model for others RELATIONSHIP EFFORT Shows appreciation for fans and spectators Responsive to fans
BODY FIT (3, 4.7%) Tall Huge		BODY FIT In good shape Body fits to the sport
RIVALRY (1, 1.6%) Rivalry (e.g., faced against his brother)	RIVAL Beating the team's main rival The team's biggest opponent	RIVALRY The rivalry match of this athlete is exciting Does well against his/her major rival

Discussion and Implications

While sport branding research has been limited to team sport brands and adult consumers, those previous studies have developed a profound body of knowledge and provided the foundation for further improvement for sport branding research. As an extension of those efforts, this study explored two relatively unknown areas in sport branding (i.e., athlete brand and youth consumer), and compared youth's athlete brand associations (YABA) with previous brand association models in sport branding literature.

As revealed in our analysis, while youth consumers' brand knowledge are not fully developed as adults consumers', youth consumers demonstrate their ability to recall and recognize an athlete brand with certain preference among other alternatives. This evidence of youth awareness of athlete brands implies further needs of elaboration on marketing strategies for this young consumer segment. Further, the finding of this study assured that young children between the age of 4 and 14 showed ability of differentiating their favorite athlete by associating them with specific characteristics. Scholars have acknowledged that understanding the brand associations held by consumers is imperative for managers, as those are related to the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay premium price and the favorable responses to a brand's marketing/communication endeavors (Keller, 1993; Ross, Russell & Bang, 2008). In this regards, the findings of this study can serve as a starting point for strategic management of athlete brand for youth consumers.

In terms of brand associations, youth primarily distinguished an athlete's brand by using the athlete's attributes rather than attitude- or benefit-related associations. This result is in line with Chaplin and John's (2005) study which indicated that children age 7 to 11 develop brand knowledge by gathering information related to product attributes. Also, the results showed that youth consumers were mostly attracted by performance specific attributes of athletes rather than other attributes such as success, brand mark, and body fit. Further, this type of association was commonly shared by TBAS and SABI, which signifies the importance of developing athlete brand image with competition style and skills across different age groups and types of brands (i.e., athlete and team). More importantly, this finding suggests a baseline agent from which the athletes and their managers should start to build their brand image to attract broader consumer groups (Crowley & Mitchell, 2005).

The result also indicated that youth consumers' showed attitude associations in their brand choice. In fact, while it was in abstract form, attitude association was revealed as the second most salient way that youth consumers perceive an athlete brand. Further, it was a unique association category of athlete brands that was not included in the TBAS. While we found it from the SABI's category (i.e., symbol), as the SABI was developed only from the attribute-related associations, it could not fully covered the concepts found from the youth's attitudes associations toward athlete brands. Keller (1993) has conceptualized that attitude associations are the set of consumer's overall evaluation about a brand that is related with other brand association dimensions (i.e., attributes and benefit). Further, it plays a significant role in consumer's brand choice, as it reflects consumers' belief about the expected value while allowing them to express their self-concepts (Keller, 1993). As discussed, youth consumers

between ages 7 and 11 develop and understand the symbolic meaning of brands in the process of developing self-concepts that would be accepted by their peers (Elliot & Leonard, 2004; Roper & Shah, 2007). Therefore, understanding attitude association for youth consumers would allow us to understand how they evaluate and judge what brands to be acceptable or not. While the relationship between salient attributes and attitudes may answer this particular inquiry, it is another research question beyond the scope of this study. Thus, we lend this inquiry of what attributes have significant impact on the creation of positive attitudes in youth consumer's minds to future research.

Although it was less prevalent in our data, efforts made by brands to build relationships with their consumers revealed another association that resonates across age groups and brand categories. In fact, this type of association has been found to be more salient among adult consumers (Arai et al., 2013; Ross, Russell & Bang, 2008), which may suggest that youth consumers are not able to grasp an organization's attempts to build a brand relationship with them. Moreover, the relationship efforts mentioned by youth consumers in our sample were specifically targeted at youth (e.g., youth health). This finding does not indicate that social marketing or relationship management efforts are not suitable for youth consumers, but rather cognitive development should be considered when implementing such strategies. The impact of rivalry associations in the development of brand knowledge can be understood in the same vein.

Lastly, this study found several dimensions of previously conceptualized associations of team brands (i.e., concessions, social interaction, history, commitment, and non-player person) and athlete brands (i.e., sportsmanship and physical attractiveness) were not applicable to youth athlete brand associations. The exclusion of these from the primary associations of YABA may be due to the differences of product type and/or cognitive development. While these findings supported the notion that the brand associations can vary in different categories of products (Berry, 2000; Filo et al, 2008) and consumers (Ross, 2007), it also implies the complex nature of branding research that needs further research on various product types and consumer segments.

Limitation and future research

This study provided insights into the associations children hold for athletes. However, the limitations found when matching YABA with existing association scales suggests the need for an instrument developed specifically for youth consumers. Eight associations found in YABA can be used to develop a youth consumer-based athlete brand association scale. Also, the shared area of associations among YABA, TBAS, and SABI may suggest important associations that exist in consumer minds across knowledge development stages and types of sport brands.

YABA is conceptual and not in a stage to test validity or reliability. Further, the model only included unaided free responses from youth consumers, which could imply that the associations, which may play significant roles in the decision-making process when certain information is available, may not be included in YABA. Therefore, developing a scale based on both free associations of youth consumers and associations of sport branding literature would contribute theoretically and practically to our understanding of how to build strong athlete brands in youth consumer minds.

Another limitation of this study can be drawn from its focus on only positive associations. While understanding which associations positively influence youth brand perception, examining negative associations that may have greater impact on brand choice and loyalty would be beneficial. Also, examining different age groups and different types of brands using a larger sample would increase the generalizability and applicability of the findings. Research focusing on different consumer segments identified with motivation, opportunity, involvement and other brand specific concepts would be also encouraged.

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