Shared Field of Play, Being Part of a Team, Being Part of an Organization: Effects on Building a Personal Brand in Team Sports

Personal Branding 30 hp

Halmstad 2018-05-3
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Acknowledgement

Writing a Master Thesis can be compared to a long distance run with a lot of ups and downs. There is excitement at times, but it is often followed by confusion and frustration. Even though the process of writing a Master Thesis is not always easy, it allowed us to combine our years of academic knowledge and personal skills in an area of interest.

First, we would like to express our gratitude towards the clubs for setting up the interviews, and the respondents who took time from their schedules to participate. Without their contribution and valuable insights, it would not have been possible to conduct this study.

Further we want to thank our supervisor Mr. Gabriel Awuah for his guidance and constructive feedback during the whole process of writing this thesis. We also want to thank the members of our seminar group for giving valuable feedback during the seminars and helping to increase the quality of this study. Thank you!

Halmstad, May 2018

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to identify what effects shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization has on building brand equity for athletes in team sports. Even though personal branding of athletes has received academic coverage over the past years, the role of the shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization have been overlooked. This research gap was addressed through four in-depth semi-structured interviews with professional soccer players from Sweden and Switzerland. Those interviews were analyzed using a theoretical framework which consists of the additional characteristics of team sports and its effect on personal branding. Findings of this thesis show that athletes lose their ‘uniqueness’ when they share the field with other athletes as they are also wearing the same uniform, this leaves only a few opportunities to differentiate themselves from teammates by using product related and non-product related attributes. That the athletes with playing positions that can make a decisive difference on the outcome of the game receive extra attention. That to cooperate and exhibit a strong relationship between athletes towards the audience gives favorable brand associations and an increased following, thus strengthening one’s brand equity. That athletes should try to benefit from the popularity of another athlete’s personal brand as long it is there, but that one must stay authentic in the process. That being employed and getting a stable and continuous salary gives athletes comfort and a feeling of safety which might have a negative effect on their ambition of building their personal brand. And lastly, to use the club’s brand to build one’s own personal brand by paying homage to the club by engaging with supporters through gestures when celebrating victories and individual achievements.

Keywords:
Personal brand, shared field of play, being part of a team, being part of an organization
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1. Introduction

This section will serve as an introduction of the study. Key concepts will be presented and the problem area will be discussed. The aim of this section is to identify the research gap as well as the research purpose and give a roadmap of how this study is conducted.

Today, many television networks are paying large amounts of money to broadcast sports events and the overall media coverage in sports has intensified. Therefore, athletes have started to expand their influence beyond their sports into social activities and businesses. Using the visibility of different platforms, an athlete is considered as a cultural product and not only a vehicle for product endorsement. This allows the athlete to play a variety of roles, as an athletic performer, entertainer, marketable commodity and role model (Jackson & Andrews, 2001). Therefore, today’s athlete can be seen as a brand (Allison, 2005). The athletes receive money not just for their athletic performance on the field, but also from their appearance off the field where various organizations want to associate and partner up with athletes (Nucci, 2015). Therefore, every athlete should consider building a personal brand by design.

The term brand is referring to a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them, intended to differentiate from those of competition (Dictionary, n.d.). When the branding product is a person it is referred to as personal branding. It is not a requirement for a person to be well-known to be thought of as a brand. Building up a name and reputation in a business context can be viewed as building your own brand (Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2011).

In sports, a brand can be viewed as a “name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its product from competition” (Shank & Lyberger, 2014, p. 272). Therefore, every athlete can be seen as a brand as every athlete has a name, a distinctive appearance and a different character. A brand needs to have strong brand equity in order to stand out from competition (Keller, 1993). For athletes, this implies that building a personal brand also means building brand equity.
When comparing the circumstances of athletes in team sports with athletes in individual sports some significant additional characteristics were identified. The authors decided to categorize those additional characteristics into three large sections; shared field of play, being part of a team, and being part of an organization. Shared field of play constitutes the athletes sharing of the field and each athlete’s playing position. Being part of a team constitutes the cooperation and competition between teammates (Kajbafnezhad, Ahadi, Heidarie, Askari, & Enayati, 2011) and co-branding between athlete-brands. Being part of an organization constitutes the employment in a sports organization as well as co-branding between athlete-brand and club-brand (Robinson & Trail, 2005). Previous research has focused on personal branding of athletes in individual sports [such as Arai, Ko & Koplanidou (2013); Arai, Ko & Ross (2014); Hodge & Walker (2015)] but also research of personal branding in team sports have been conducted, e.g. by Parmentier and Fischer (2012). However seemingly surprising, none have conducted research cover the effect of a shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization on building brand equity. Concludingly, these additional characteristics of team sports compose the scope of this thesis. Due to this specified scope there is lack of previous research and thereby a research gap. The importance of addressing this research gap is prominent through different aspects. As the media coverage of sports has intensified, having a strong personal brand becomes more important. Having a strong personal brand offers the athletes the possibility to earn more money on and off the field, as well as it helps transitioning into a post-athletic career. This thesis would provide valuable insight and knowledge of how to utilize the additional characteristics of team sports to efficiently build brand equity.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify what effects shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization have on building brand equity for athletes in team sports. Thus, the research question this thesis answers is: how does shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization affect the building of brand equity for athletes in team sports?

The empirical contribution of this thesis is produced through the perspective of professional soccer players, playing in the highest professional leagues in Sweden and Switzerland.
This thesis begins with a review of literature treating the subject of personal branding of athletes. In chapter 3, a theoretical framework about the additional characteristics of team sports is presented together with how it can have an effect on brand equity. In the methodology the research approach and research process of this thesis is presented. The research gap is addressed by conducting semi-structured interviews with athletes in soccer, covering questions that have been constructed in accordance with the identified additional characteristics of team sports. The results of the semi-structured interviews are presented in chapter 5. Further, this empirical data is analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework. Finally, a conclusion including findings, implications, limitations and recommendations for further research are presented.

2. Literature Review

Before getting into the theoretical framework, a review of literature is given. The goal of the literature review is to offer definitions of relevant terms as well as highlighting key concepts associated with branding practice of athletes and the importance of creating a personal brand as an athlete. The reason why the subject of this thesis is important and especially relevant to explore will also be explained.

Having a strong brand as an athlete can have different effects. According to Gladden and Funk (2001), a strong brand can lead to price premiums on their salary, transfer fees, contract monies and commercial deals. It also helps to maintain the support of the fans, even when the performance is declining (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006).

Having a well-known athlete in the organization can be an effective tool to develop meaningful relations with the customers, as it has a positive influence on consumers associations towards the organization (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998). The brand of an athlete also has an influence on the team’s loyalty. If an athlete changes teams, fans tend to follow the club in which the athlete plays. This can lead to a change of the fan’s favorite team (Hasaan, Kerrem, Biscaia & Agyemang, 2016). According to Yu (2005) sports organizations are interested in
hiring foreign athletes with strong personal brands as they often have the power to win the loyalty of fans for the team the athlete is representing.

As seen above, a strong personal brand can have strong monetary impact on the athlete themselves. A strong personal brand also helps in negotiations with the organization the athlete is associated with. Therefore, building a strong personal brand should be in every athlete’s interest.

Different authors have focused on how a personal brand for an athlete is built. Carlson and Donavan (2013) concluded that the factors distinctiveness and prestige both have a significant influence on an athlete’s identification. They also found that human brands have the opportunity to appeal consumers despite of having very strong negative characteristics. An example of that is the “bad boy” or “bad girl” image of many athletes (Burton, Farrelly & Quester, 2000). For Cortsen (2013) the concept of personal branding of athletes originates from the classic branding theory. He concluded that in personal branding of athletes the main influence on the core identity of the brand is the athlete itself. This leads to the fact that the brand of an athlete depends highly on the athlete’s actions. Arai et al. (2013) and Arai et al. (2014) introduced a model called “model of athlete brand image (MABI)”. Athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle are the three dimensions which are crucial in developing consumer brand equity for athletes. Arai et al. (2014) used Keller’s (1993) concept of brand knowledge in the athlete brand context and therefore the differentiation of performance-related attributes and non-performance related attributes is created. Franck and Nüesch (2012) concluded that talent as well as non-performance related popularity contributes to the market value differentials.

Hodge and Walker (2015) concluded in their study, that the professional athlete is largely in control of their personal brand. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) conducted research about the personal branding of athletes in team sports, more specifically soccer. They conclude that the main factor in building a professional image is the ability to play the game well whereas the mainstream media persona mainly is built on visibility and distinctiveness in the eyes of end consumers. A strong professional image can build a moderate amount of brand equity for an athlete, even without the benefit of having a mainstream media persona. But the athletes with the
highest level of brand equity are the athletes who have a good professional image and a strong media persona.

A more comprehensive research on team athletes was conducted by Chadwick and Burton (2008). The introduction of the variables: team, off-field, physical characteristics, success, transferability, age and reputation led also to the introduction of the TOPSTAR-model. The introduction of the team variable considers the effect of the team’s brand on the athlete’s personal brand, but it does not consider all the effects of being part of a team.

Even though personal branding of athletes has received academic coverage over the past years, the additional characteristics of team sports, i.e. shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization have been overlooked in the literature. Therefore, there are opportunities for further research. Most of the academic literature is focusing on the personal brand of athletes in general or in individual sports. Only a few researchers, like Chadwick and Burton (2008) or Parmentier and Fischer (2012) analyzed the personal branding process of athletes in team sports, whereas their findings are valid for every athlete and does not account enough for the unique characteristics of the team sports setting. It is also worth noticing that none of these studies focusing on team athletes include data collection from the athletes themselves. The personal brand research conducted mainly research through the lens of the consumer (Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Thomson, 2006). Therefore, this study explores the personal branding of team athletes from the perspective of the professional athletes in team sports.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents relevant theories that serve as the foundation for examining the upcoming empirical results and analysis. It includes a descriptive presentation of the additional characteristics of team sports, namely shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization. Within these additional characteristics of team sports, building brand equity is addressed.
Incorporated in this section are the additional characteristics peculiar to team sports. The authors came up with the additional characteristics of team sports by a thorough examination of the existing literature, and by brainstorming and analyzing the characteristics of individual sports and team sports. The characteristics were segmented into three larger sections and then furtherly examined by reviewing the literature and analyzing possible subsections within each larger section. The three larger sections are (1) shared field of play (2) being part of a team, and (3) being part of an organization. Shared field of play consists of athletes sharing the same platform and the different playing positions of each athlete. Being part of a team constitutes variables addressing that the athletes have teammates and compete and cooperate with them (Kajbafnezhad et al., 2011). Being part of an organization constitutes variables addressing that the athletes are employed and represent their club (Robinson & Trail, 2005). The motive for the chosen sections and structure was the overarching comprehensibility of the sections and the sense of clarity for the reader.

As the purpose of this thesis is to identify what effects sharing a platform, being part of a team and being part of an organization have on building brand equity for athletes in team sports, a firm understanding of the concept of brand equity is necessary. The authors use Keller’s (1993) concept of customer-based brand equity as it offers a detailed view regarding the necessary considerations when measuring brand equity and also offers useful insight into the consumers’ knowledge structures. These elements can be partly controlled by the athlete. According to Keller (1993) customer-based brand equity consists of brand awareness and brand image. This aligns with Cordiner’s (2001) view, where the marketing of a sports team or an individual athlete is mostly about creating a brand image. Also, Keller et al. (2011) stated that in the branding process of public figures, such as professional athletes, the main focus should be on creating a well-defined and desirable brand image. Therefore, in the following theoretical framework the additional characteristics of team sports are presented together with how it can have an effect on brand awareness and brand image.
3.1 Characteristics of Team Sports - Effect on Personal Branding

3.1.1 Shared Field of Play

3.1.1.1 Platform Sharing

Platform sharing refers to platforms of selling or exposure purposes that are being utilized simultaneously by different brands, either as products or services. As platforms with only one existing brand may exhibit both favorable and less favorable implications, so does platform sharing. Sullivan (1998) says that the price premium that customers are willing to pay for a favorite brand attached to an otherwise identical product can be substantial. Studies have shown that consumers are willing to pay a price premium to receive the unique features they associate with their favorite brand (Sprott & Shimp, 2004; Sullivan, 1998). The associations that create the unique brand concept may often originate from the actual physical or technical characteristics of the brand’s products that differentiate it from other brand concepts (Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991). Once these unique associations have been learned, consumers can be willing to pay a price premium even when those unique physical or technical characteristics have disappeared through platform sharing (Sprott & Shimp, 2004; Sullivan, 1998).

Other research implies that this willingness to pay a higher price for brand image rather than tangible differences, however, may be largely based on consumer ignorance to the common specification and quality across various platform-sharing alternatives. In this matter, Olson (2008) found that when consumers were informed about inter-brand platform sharing, they thought that platform sharing for lower status brands benefited by sharing with luxury brands and that consumers evaluation of platform sharing luxury brands was reduced. Aaker and Keller (1990) adds to this, suggesting that in cases where a platform used by a higher-class brand is shared with lower-class brands, the brand image that comes from its formerly unique style, technical characteristics and rarity might be lost as the brand’s tangible guarantee of higher quality and status is dispersed. For example, Aaker and Keller (1990) noted that products offered by a lower price/lowest prestige brand would be assumed to not have any differentiating features that justify the premium price typical of higher quality/prestige brands. Evidence from other literature predict that platform sharing may also create opportunities for favorable signals to be sent in
cases where a platform used by a lower-class brand is shared with a higher-class brand (Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2000; Venkatesh & Mahajan, 1997). In this case, the quality and status signaled by the higher-class brand may become associated with its lower-class “twin” through the process of information integration (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Therefore, positively serving the lower-class brand as it gains status of the higher-class brands.

In consequence of those findings, high-class brands have to try to differentiate themselves even more from its competitors if they share a platform. They use the brand image to differentiate themselves in the way the consumer perceives the brand (Keller, 1993). In this case the players in team sports can use their brand associations, more specifically their brand attributes to distinguish themselves. Attributes are a bundle of features that characterize the physical and personality aspects of a brand. Brand attributes are what consumers think of the product/service and what its purchase or consumption will cause (Keller, 1993). Brand attributes can be distinguished between product-related attributes and non-product-related attributes. Product-related attributes are the components necessary for performing the product/service and depend on the product/service category. Non-product related attributes are external aspects of the product/service that relate to its consumption (Keller, 1993). In applying that to the sports context, the athletic performance can be viewed as a product related attribute, as the athlete typically develop their brand status based on their performance in sports (Jackson & Andrews, 2001). Additionally, success can probably be seen as the most important source of brand associations of the product-related attributes (Gladden et al., 1998). Also, the style of play and how the way the athlete competes on the field can be product related attributes (Arai et al., 2014; Kolbe & James, 2000). Non-product-related attributes are other characteristics, which are not directly related to on-field athletic performance, like physical attractiveness and the athlete’s appearance (Arai et al., 2013).

3.1.1.2 Playing Position

Athletes in team sports share their platform with their teammates and every athlete has an assigned position. Previous research has shown that the playing position
may have an influence on the athlete. Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol’s (2007) study tried to explain how the market value of an athlete is linked to their sporting performance and their economic contribution. They analyzed Spanish soccer players and concluded that strikers receive much higher attention and rewards whereas the other positions, goalkeeper, defender and midfielder seem to be undervalued.

A similar trend can be found when the numbers of followers on social media are considered. According to the data provided by Moreno (2018), out of the 20 active soccer players with the most followers on Instagram, none of them is a goalkeeper, only 6 of them are defenders and the highest ranked defender is Marcelo from Real Madrid on the 8th spot. The athletes on top of that list are all attackers with goal scoring or assisting as their main duty. This can also influence the athlete's personal brand. By playing a position that is more exposed and gets more attention the athlete creates a familiarity and brand awareness for his personal brand. According to Keller et al. (2011), brand awareness influences the formation of the brand image and its associations. And therefore, the higher attention allows the athlete to establish a brand node in the memory of the consumers, to create a brand image.

Lucifora and Simmons (2003) tried to link the individual productivity of soccer players and its effect on the salary by using individual performance measurements. But the measurement of the performance of players in soccer is depending on the position. To measure the performance of a striker or a midfielder is easier than the performance of defenders or goalkeepers. Performance measurements like goals scored or given assists are easy to measure and to interpret, but can mainly be applied to offensive players. For defensive midfielders or defenders, measurements like tackles made, interceptions or passes completed are interesting, but not always available and harder to interpret. In order to evaluate the performance of a product, in this case the athlete, the consumer need some kind of norm for what is good and what is bad. The performance quality can have an effect on the brand image (Selnes, 1993).
3.1.2 Being Part of a Team

3.1.2.1 Cooperation or Competition

In numerous situations, employees and functions must compete for an organization’s scarce resources and attention and thus are often reluctant to share - but also receive, information. This, due to fear that it will heighten the value of a competing employee or function’s capabilities (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Although employees and functional areas compete with one another in the pursuit of divergent individual goals (Houston, Walker, Hutt & Reingen, 2001), they must also cooperate so that they efficiently work toward the firm’s common interests (Narver & Slater, 1990). An organization’s functional areas are often forced to compete and cooperate simultaneously with one another. Thus, it is critical to understand how these seemingly conflicting relationships interplay and affect the organization and its functions.

The cooperation between brands, may induce brand associations both strengthening and undermining the credibility of each cooperative brand (Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995). Concerning competition in the context of athletes in team sports, each athlete must compete for the starting position as well as being visible and receiving attention from the audience, thus increasing the brand awareness of their own brand. Creating brand awareness by increasing the familiarity of the brand through repeated exposure and forging strong brand associations with the appropriate product category or other relevant purchase or consumption cues is an important first step in building brand equity (Keller et al., 2011). A prominently important role of brand awareness is its influence on the formation and strengthening of brand associations in the brand image. To create a brand image in the consumer’s memory, it is necessary that the consumer is already aware of the brand (Keller, 1993). Brand awareness is the first step in building the bundle of association which are attached to the brand in the consumer’s memory (Rossiter & Percy, 1987; Stockes, 1974).

Relations are always present in cooperative and competitive situations and the social structure of these relationships influences subsequent behaviors (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). Strong relations are characterized by frequent and stronger interactions such that information is perceived as more trustworthy.
(Granovetter, 1985) and cooperation is high (Gulati, 1998). Thus, strong relations ease cooperation between parties, which as mentioned above, induce brand associations between the cooperative brands (Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995).

Luo, Slotegraaf and Pan (2006) provides indication that employees within an organization that simultaneously compete and cooperate, rapidly gains market learning and thereby more efficiently builds the organizations brand image in the mind of the consumers. In the context of team sports, this implies that organizations where athletes tend to simultaneously compete and cooperate gain knowledge about its competitors and the game of soccer and therefore are more likely to implement successful strategies.

3.1.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete

Blackett and Boad (2002), who have made one of the most substantial contributions to the literature of co-branding, defined co-branding as a form of cooperation between two or more brands with significant customer recognition, in which all the participants’ brand names are retained (Blackett & Boad, 2002). Thus, co-branding is not simply cooperation between organizations or individuals, but must involve the public recognition of the involved brands that are owned or controlled by different organizations or individuals. Therefore, the essence of co-branding is a public relationship between independent brands. This relationship reaches beyond a mere transaction where money is exchanged for an image transfer - to a relationship with mutual benefits (Motion, Leitch & Brodie, 2003).

Through co-branding, two brands can be linked together. These links can enhance or detract from the consumers’ perceptions of each constituent brand and can act to create a new, unique perception of the co-branded product. Hillyer and Tikoo (1995) suggests that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand by acting as an augmenting cue in consumers evaluations. A brand association has been defined as anything linked in memory to a brand: in short, the underlying value of a brand name is often its set of associations or meanings (Aaker, 1991). One brand can undermine the credibility of the other and lower consumer evaluations (Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995).
Simonin and Ruth (1998) states that consumers’ judgements about co-branding may depend on their degree of brand familiarity and prior attitudes toward each brand. Additionally, highlighting that prior attitudes toward each brand in a brand alliance (co-brand) will affect the evaluation of that alliance, and the judgements about each brand will be affected by attitudes toward the partner brand. Additionally, the attitude formation frameworks such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and context effects (Lynch Jr, Chakravarti & Mitra, 1991) strengthens Simonin and Ruth’s statements, suggesting that preexisting, salient and accessible brand attributes and close, observable cues can both influence consumer perceptions of a brand partnership. Further, Simonin and Ruth’s (1998) findings showed that consumers’ attitudes towards a particular brand alliance (co-brand) influenced their subsequent attitudes toward the individual brands that comprise that alliance. Brands that had engaged in many previous alliances were significantly affected by the alliance; and consumer attitudes toward the partner brand(s) prior to the alliance significantly affected their attitudes toward the alliance.

3.1.3 Being Part of an Organization
3.1.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization
Athletes in team sports are employed by the organization they play for and this employment status affects athletes differently. Through this employment there is a difference in the salary structure and training schedule of the athletes in team sports as compared to athletes in individual sports. Simply put, the athletes in team sports must adjust to the situation of being under employment. Due to the set and mandatory training schedule of athletes in team sports and the salary structure of their contracts, there might be an effect on their engagement in brand-building activities. Hence, athletes in individual sports tend to devote nearly all their time to practice and competing and do not invest much of their time in building a personal brand, as their income heavily depends on their game (Hodge & Walker, 2015). Building on Hodge and Walker’s (2015) suggestion, since the income of athletes in team sports is from a continuous salary and the income from athletes in individual sports is from prize money, the athletes in team sports ought to invest more of their time in building a personal brand off the field. Athletes in team sports are often
salaried employees, whereas athletes in individual sports rely on their performance in tournaments (Noer, 2012). Athletes in sports like soccer often earn a set salary guaranteed over the life-time of their contract. In individual sports the performance has an effect on the athlete’s income, whereas in team sports the salary has an effect on the performance and not the other way around (Torgler & Schmidt, 2007).

In today’s media culture, off-field behavior can have an influence on what is associated with an athlete and therefore have a strong influence on the athlete’s image (Andrews & Jackson, 2002). Arai et al. (2014) segments the off-field behavior into an athlete’s off-field marketable features, composing of the athlete’s life story, an athlete’s ethical behavior that society has determined is worth emulating, and an athlete’s positive attitude toward interaction with fans, spectators, sponsors and media.

The “Employer Brand” can be defined as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). The ongoing company and employee relationship provided a series of exchanges of mutual benefit, and is a fundamental part of the company’s total business network. The employer brand concept has most application in high value-added businesses: the higher the salaries and the fewer the number of employees, the more each employee relationship with the employer matters. The employer brand offers employees benefits in terms of functional, economic, and psychological aspects.

3.1.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club

Due to the definition of co-branding provided by Blackett and Road (2002), i.e. as a form of cooperation between two or more brands with significant customer recognition, in which all the participants’ brand names are retained. Both the club and athlete are considered brands, thus the information stated within co-branding athlete-athlete is also applicable in the context of this section. In this section, there is additional theory more applicable to co-branding with an organization.

When two brands are combined in a brand alliance (co-branding), there are several possible bases for brand fit: category fit, brand associations, culture, product usage, self-representation and consumer goals, (Loken, Barsalou & Joiner, 2008;
Martin & Stewart, 2001). The ability to pair two brands in co-branding is likely to be more effective when the brands have something in common and relate to each other in the mind of the consumer. When the fit is considered poor at either level there will be negative spillover effect on how the co-branding is perceived (Prince & Davies, 2002). The associations that consumers draw about the perceived congruence of the partnering brands is what most research considered to be a brand fit. For instance, a partnership between BMW and Rolex is likely to elicit high brand fit since both brands are associated with high quality and good taste (Baumgarth, 2004; Lafferty, Goldsmith & Hult, 2004; Simonin & Ruth, 1998).

Through co-branding, two brands can be linked together. These links can enhance or detract from the consumers’ perceptions of each constituent brand and can act to create a new, unique perception of the co-branded product. Hillyer and Tikoo (1995) suggested that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand by acting as an augmenting cue in consumers’ evaluations. Thus, a strong brand with high brand equity is critical to securing a successful match-up perception in a co-branding alliance (Ahn, Kim & Forney, 2010).

Xiao and Lee (2014) took a somewhat different approach to brand fit as they introduced the perceived congruence or incongruence between two brands’ cultural meaning as an important factor for influencing co-branding success.

In summary, the literature suggests that the bases of fit extend beyond a simple heuristic of general complementarity and/or similarity, and are related to the original consumer value associations with the brand.

4. Methodology

In this chapter, the authors will present the methods of this thesis. The chosen methods will be outlined alongside the arguments why those particular methods were chosen. This is achieved through presenting the research approach, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability and ethical considerations. The aim of this chapter is to offer the reader a comprehensive view on the thesis process.
4.1 Research Approach
The authors of this thesis have carried out a qualitative study with an abductive approach through semi-structured interviews. Below are the concepts of choice alongside the rationale behind them.

4.1.1 Abductive Approach
Induction and deduction has largely been claimed in prior theory as the only approaches. However, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008), amongst other researchers, outline another concept: the abductive approach. The abductive approach can be described as a mixture between deductive and inductive approaches but with the possibility of adding additional benefits to the research process. The benefits of an abductive approach can largely be seen in its allowance to constantly move back and forth in the research process: from theory to empirical observations and thus gaining a better comprehensive view of the whole field. An abductive approach is fruitful if the researcher's objective is to discover new things – in the shape of other variables and other relationships.

Due to the lack of literature on branding of athletes in team sports, the authors of this thesis decided to take an abductive research approach. By using the abductive approach, the data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework which is then tested through a subsequent additional data collection (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016).

In this thesis, the authors did a literature review and then conducted semi-structured interviews with several athletes from different team sports on the topic of personal branding in team sports. Those interviews were conducted to explore and identify phenomena with the topic of this thesis and to adapt the theoretical framework (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Based on the improved theoretical framework, four in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect detailed information on the effect of shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization on the personal brand of soccer players. The choice of implementing this abductive approach has contributed to the author's possibility of understanding, adapting and interpreting the empirical data in a substantial way.
4.1.2 Qualitative Research

Given the lack of specific literature on branding of athletes in team sports, a qualitative research approach was conducted. Additionally, since there is need for deeper understanding of the research area, the authors of this thesis found the qualitative research method appropriate. The flexibility of a qualitative approach allows the researchers to understand phenomena as they actually occur in the real world (Charmaz, 2008). Bryman and Bell (2015) explain that a qualitative research method enables the empirical data to take other shape than just a numeric one and allows it to be focused on fewer cases. Given the qualitative research method, it builds a solid empirical foundation that enables the authors to analyze the data and draw conclusions to create deeper understanding (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is namely the analyst’s interpretation and understanding that aides the bases for the exhibited results (Holme, Solvang & Nilsson, 1997).

4.1.3 Interviews

In line with what Bryman and Bell (2015) propose, the authors of this study have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to ensure comparability among the respondents’ answers as opposed to unstructured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The semi-structured interviews include a predetermined set of broad questions that can be complemented by follow-up questions to further ensure the collecting of correct information (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The majority of the questions were open-ended so that as much information as possible could be acquired. The use of semi-structured interviews allows the respondents to be more relaxed as the interviews are conducted in a relatively informal matter. It also provides respondents with the possibility to have a dialogue with the interviewee instead of a mere monologue. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), it is essential for a researcher conducting interviews to possess in-depth knowledge regarding the subject before conducting the interview. The authors of this thesis therefore reviewed relevant literature regarding the subject prior to conducting the interviews. A guidance for the in-depth semi-structured interviews was developed from the theoretical framework (Appendix A). This aligns with Bryman and Bell (2015), as
they emphasize that questions should be developed from a theoretical foundation. The guidance for the in-depth semi-structured interviews was used to conduct four interviews with four different soccer players. From three out of the four athletes, additional in-depth information was needed. The authors therefore reached back to them which allowed the athletes to expand their thoughts and opinions. The fourth participant was contacted only once he provided in-depth information.

The authors decided to examine the purpose through the team athletes’ perspective. The authors are aware that a more comprehensive representation of this thesis’s purpose could have been achieved through also interviewing parts of the organization or the audience. However, since previous research has ignored the aim to provide the athletes’ unique standpoint on the matter, this was not chosen.

Each of the conducted interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. For the participants of whom more information was needed, a second interview of 15-20 minutes was conducted. The preferred way to conduct the interviews was face-to-face, but due to geographical and financial limitations the interviews were held via Skype or FaceTime. All interviews were recorded, so that the information was captured in the purest form (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It also allowed the authors to perform a more detailed analysis, as they were able to better concentrate on listening rather than taking notes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Each interview began by reviewing the research purpose and assurances of confidentiality as well as the process in which the authors will conduct the interview. Half of the interviews were conducted in Swedish since that is the native language of both the respondents and of one of the authors. The other half of the interviews were conducted in Swiss German since that is the native language of the other author of this thesis and the remaining respondents. Conducting the interviews in the native language of the respondents was deemed important since that would facilitate the respondents to fully express themselves. Therefore, the authors created a semi-structured interview guide in English which then was translated to Swedish and German. After the interviews, all answers were translated back to English so they could be interpreted and analyzed by both authors. The interview protocol is divided into three sections: (1) shared field of play, (2) being part of a team and (3) being part of an organization.
4.1.4 Participants

The participants of the conducted interviews account for a total of four men, of which all are professional soccer players: two from Sweden and two from Switzerland. Due to confidentiality, each participant’s name was excluded from the thesis and are instead presented as athlete 1, athlete 2, etc. Furthermore, their age is presented with ranges of five years. Also, due to confidentiality, the leagues of play instead of specific club belongings are presented. An overview of the participants is presented in table 1. To get a more comprehensive view on the athletes’ situations, their positions and the durations of their contracts with their current clubs are shown. Further, when selecting respondents for this thesis, the authors followed the suggestions from Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) and first and foremost based the selection on the purpose of the thesis and who could provide the information needed. The sampling population becomes less important when it comes to qualitative research, therefore the interviewees were identified with a convenience sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The authors contacted all soccer clubs in the highest leagues of Sweden and Switzerland to set up interviews with the athletes. The authors reached out to three athletes they already had interviewed to get more in-depth knowledge on the topic. The other in-depth interview was conducted with an athlete that had not been involved before.
Table 1
Description of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (est.)</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>League</th>
<th>Years in Club</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 1</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Allsvenskan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 2</td>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Super League</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 3</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Allsvenskan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 4</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Super League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Data Analysis

To be able to control the information retrieved from the interviews and make it possible to examine the information several times, all interviews were recorded. Moreover, the audio recordings made it possible to exclude risks of data loss. In addition, the recordings prevent the researchers to use personal biases and predispositions. Shortly after the interviews, the recordings were transcribed to English in order to preserve the memories of the interviewer. These actions facilitated the analysis of the acquired data.

As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990), a three-phased coding system was utilized. This coding system involves open, axial and selective coding. The first phase of the coding system is open coding. This phase is characterized by careful examination of the obtained data and by creation of tentative labels for data that summarizes observations. The second phase, axial coding, consists of identifying relationships among the open codes. The third and final phase of coding is selective coding. In this phase, a core category, proposition or hypothesis is developed. Appendix B reveals the coding process.
Additionally, the data analysis was performed with careful regard to the theoretical framework. The analysis was always engaged by evaluating what the theoretical framework stated in relation to what the empirical data stated.

Every variable from the theoretical framework was used to analyse the empirical data and the answers of the participants were assessed if they aligned with the theoretical framework and compared to each other.

4.3 Validity and Reliability

Qualitative research is generally associated with lower levels of generalizability and higher levels of subjectivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Different tools were used for this thesis to increase validity and reliability. Validity refers to whether the findings generated by the method accurately answer the research question; and reliability refers to the extent that the investigation will yield similar results on other occasions (Saunders et al., 2016). The external validity represents the degree to which findings can be generalized across social setting. External validity is a problem for qualitative studies, as they tend to employ case studies and small samples (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). This is also the case in this thesis.

According to Patton (2005), there are different types of triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of a study. For this thesis, investigator triangulation is used. Investigator triangulation involves using several investigators in the analysis process, which is applied in this thesis as both authors were collecting and analysing data. As the data is collected and interpreted by two authors, the risk of personal biases was reduced. In addition, the first author conducted the interviews and transcribed the data, while the second author reviewed interpretation and offered additional comments and critiques. This strategy allowed an in-depth interpretation of the data and enhanced the credibility of the information.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

It is utmost important to consider the compliance and privacy of the respondents when conducting the interview: Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that respondents may perceive interference with their personal life when interviewed. The authors of this study have ensured to not harm the career prospects of the participants and made
sure that none of the respondents did incur any physical or non-physical harm (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As part of the interview, the authors began by again reviewing the research purpose and assurances of confidentiality as well as the process in which the authors would conduct the interview. Every person has a different measurement for privacy, so the researchers were prepared to adapt the questions accordingly and gave every respondent the chance to withdraw (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All involved participants received the transcript of the interview to confirm the content. Additionally, according to Kvale and Brinkman (2014) a factor for good research ethics, the respondents were given other names to ensure their privacy.

5. Empirical Data

This chapter embodies the results of the retrieved information from the semi-structured interviews. The chapter presents the content of the four athletes that were interviewed. Each respondent is presented as its own heading with the additional characteristics of team sports as subheadings. The tables presented at the end of this chapter summarizes the empirical data of each athlete.

5.1 Athlete One

5.1.1 Shared Field of Play

5.1.1.1 Platform Sharing

Athlete 1 prefers to stand out amongst the team and be acknowledged. Through that, he tries his best to lead and control the team as much as possible with gestures and by voice. As athlete 1 prefers to stand out and be seen, he is glad that being the goalkeeper is his playing position as it allows him to stand out on the field since his equipment is different from the other athletes. Athlete 1 said that in order for him to furtherly stand out, he focuses on wearing the equipment that helps him stand out, address a certain playing style and that he vividly celebrates great performances with the audience through gestures.

Athlete 1, who is a goalkeeper, said that as a goalkeeper you are to a large extent a "lone part" of the team and therefore don’t get very affected by the fact that
you share the field with other athletes. However, he has experienced that they do get affected to some extent as he stated “there are occasions when you have performed abnormally well in some matches but still do not receive the praise and exposure in media. The reason for this could very well be because other players in your team did even better, or perhaps just entertained the crowd more than yourself”.

5.1.1.2 Playing Position
Athlete 1 has most definitely experienced that your playing position influences your popularity, he mentioned that it very often is for example the number 10 striker which becomes the “star of the team”. Athletes that play offensive and make a lot of goals easily become popular amongst the younger audience. He has also noticed that the way you play, and if you have a special appearance also plays a part in your popularity, regardless of what age or gender the audience is. Further, athlete 1 mentioned that as a goalkeeper you get a lot of visibility and acknowledgement because it is a very exposed position as compared to a lot of other positions in soccer. It is easy to become the man of the match, but even easier to become the reason for the team’s failure if you perform badly. Therefore, he feels that often when you are a goalkeeper you become praised whenever your team performs well and disliked whenever your team performs badly.

5.1.2 Being Part of a Team
5.1.2.1 Cooperation or Competition
Athlete 1 views his teammates as allies and always try to view them as such, regardless if they fight to get a starting position in the team. However, if an athlete whom he competes for a starting position suddenly outshines him with his remarkable performance, then of course it affects him negatively and athlete 1’s compliance for alliance is disturbed. If an athlete outperforms him that he does not compete directly with (that has a different playing position), he doesn’t think it has any effect on him. Athlete 1 continued by stating that personal success is most important for him but that personal success and team success go very much hand in hand. Athlete 1’s argument for this was “as I reach personal success I also
positively affect my team’s success. But to be advancing in my career and be visual for other teams is nevertheless my ambition”.

Athlete 1 continued by stating that “my attitude towards playing and interacting with noticeably popular teammates is positive. I am very prompt to be liked by the audience but first and foremost within the team because I think it aids you in the long run. Perhaps I receive support and offers from other clubs if I am liked internally. I strongly think that having a strong personal brand within the club helps you a lot”.

5.1.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete
When asked whether athlete 1 has experienced that his teammates’ personal brands affect his own, athlete 1’s reply was, “absolutely, we had a very popular player that came from an English team in the Premier League which brought a lot of media attention to our team. Both on practices and of course on matches. I found this to be very positive as we all got more eyes on us. I experience that if we take advantage by the increased attention the team receives when players with strong personal brands join our team, it can be very positive for our own personal brands”. When asked to provide specific and further opinions on how to take advantage of the increased attention, athlete 1 said “I experience that the players who took advantage of the attention did this through regular brand-building activities. Both on the field by working harder, wanting more contact with the ball and by entertaining the crowd. But also outside the field by posting more on social media while the momentum of increased attention is there”. Also, athlete 1 added that “as the time passed and this new player became a part of the team, I noticed through the media how the population had started to associate him with us and the rest of the organization”. When asked how athlete 1 experienced the effect of this association, athlete 1 made clear that he finds it to be very positive. He said “of course I’m happy that this player gets associated with the rest of us, it positively boosts the general audience view on us because of his big name. Both as a team but also on an individual level as well”.

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5.1.3 Being Part of an Organization

5.1.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization

Athlete 1 acknowledged that receiving a salary continuously every month instead of competing for prize money is surely a comfortable and more relaxing state. However, athlete 1 was unsure of how it affects his activities to build his personal brand outside the field. He stated that “I think I’m a bit lazy concerning such activities, perhaps mostly because I feel safe with my continuous salary. But I do try to establish strong relations within the club through networking and always portraying a good side of myself, perhaps it will enhance my possibilities within the club and to be remembered and talked well about when the time comes for me to join another club”. Regarding possible effects the continuous salary would have on athlete 1’s performance on the pitch, athlete 1 stated that it of course is a satisfying safety to receive it monthly and unless anything really strange happens, he will continue to receive it. Nevertheless, athlete 1 said that the demand from the club to perform and one’s own willingness to develop is still strong and present and is not something that is dependent on your income.

Having a set training schedule with mandatory presence does not, according to athlete 1, affect his activities to build his personal brand. Due to the fact that he has a set and mandatory training schedule he can plan and adjust the rest of his free time for personal activities. According to athlete 1, free time is something that he has a lot of. Athlete 1 said that he must always prioritize his training sessions and the sport of soccer but that the time before and after training sessions does however, provide a chance to engage in brand-building activities since there occasionally are sponsors of the club attending at that time.

5.1.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club

Athlete 1 has experienced that the brand of the club influenced his own personal brand, and vice versa. “It’s an ongoing interplay, from my end, I have to act professional towards sponsors of the club and also towards fans, that includes my own fans but also the fans of the club”. When asked whether athlete 1 uses the club’s brand to build his own personal brand, athlete 1’s reply was "I use their brand to build my own each time I put on that jersey. Also, I pay homage to the club every
time I enter the field by for example pointing to the club brand on the jersey when we perform well, and show my gratitude to the audience that has come to watch our games, regardless if they came to see me, other players in my team, or my club as a whole”. Concludingly, athlete 1 felt that he is mostly acknowledged as being "athlete 1” (his name), but also as “goalkeeper for club”. “It is very mixed, for the young audience I am recognized as the goalkeeper for “club”, while for the older audience and for supporters that have been supporting the club for a longer time, I am recognized as “athlete 1” (his name).

5.2 Athlete Two
5.2.1 Shared Field of Play
5.2.1.1 Platform Sharing
When asked about standing out from his teammates, athlete 2 mentioned that the most prominent thing you can do to stand out from your teammates is wearing flashy shoes. According to athlete 2 there are only a few different outfitters available and the choice of models and colors are limited. The outfitters also consider how the athlete acts off the field, because they are looking for special characteristics to position and differentiate themselves on the outfitter market. For outfitters it is hard to get the high performing athletes under contract as a lot of money is involved. Athlete 2 stated: “Me personally, I am wearing a colorful flashy model, this was decided together with my outfitter in line with their positioning”. Another way athlete 2 is standing out is by having a muscular body and tattoos and by wearing his socks lower than normal. Another thing he uses to stand out is wearing only a T-shirt on games, no matter the temperature. Those decisions were taken on purpose, as the goal is to strengthen his overall personal brand image to the supporters.

5.2.1.2 Playing Position
Athlete 2, who is a defensive midfielder said that the position has a strong impact on being popular. He said, “If you score you know you are on the front page of the newspaper and if you are a goalie and save the penalty you are also on the front page of the news”. Especially positions that can make a decisive difference in the game’s outcome become extra noticed and popular. Being a striker or being a
goalkeeper are more in the focus of the supporters. According to athlete 2 it is easier for an offensive player to get attention as he is more likely to score goals. For defenders it is harder to get attention, it seems like the only way you get it is through the personality or a special appearance. Athlete 2 reminded himself of the two defenders playing in the same club as himself, noting how one of them is remarkably more popular than the other although they perform on a similar level. The distinguishable feature therefore does not lay in the performance but in the personality and physical appearance. The more popular defender is rather outspoken and often engages with the audience through gestures and by voice.

5.2.2 Being Part of a Team

5.2.2.1 Cooperation or Competition

When asked about how he views his teammates athlete 2 answered that his view changed over the years. In the beginning as a professional, the focus was mainly on himself and every teammate was a competitor. In every practice session he was looking to go into duels with them and try to win those. The older he got he also got more knowledge of the sport. Also, personal goals were fulfilled and he received responsibility and leadership capabilities, so his focus shifted. As the captain of the team his goal is to get all the teammates together. "Now at my stage I do not see anybody as competition. I see all of them as my teammates and allies and we push each other. Even if you get substituted you realize it is for the good of the team and you can live with it". Also, his perspective of what is more important; personal success or team success, has changed in his career. "In the beginning of the career you are more focused on your personal success and that you get your minutes and games". Athlete 2 stated that he totally bought into the philosophy of the club and therefore he is all in for that project and tries to do everything for the team.

5.2.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete

Athlete 2 experienced that the influence of another teammate’s personal brand on his own is affecting his own personal brand both positively and negatively at times. Having the same outfitter can help creating a little community within the team, as there are often similar representational responsibilities. Athlete 2 experienced that
the positive effect a teammate’s personal brand can have on your own personal brand is that you acquire the supporters of your teammates to become supporters of yourself if you portray to the public that you and the player they support have a strong relationship, play well together, and either align or complete each other's personalities. Further, athlete 2 stated that the negative affect a teammate’s personal brand can have on your own personal brand is in case there is another player with the similar unique selling points that outperforms him. According to Athlete 2 that will definitely have a negative influence on his personal brand.

Moreover, if there is a teammate with similar playing attributes, it can also be an advantage. Athlete 2 said that “It can happen that we push each other and if one market himself well, at some point he will go to another club. This will not diminish my image”. Athlete 2 stated that it will become a problem if you start changing and you start losing your authenticity. He states; “Try to benefit from the popularity of another athlete as long it is there, but it is key that you stay authentic”.

In general, athlete 2 has no problem if teammates try to build a personal brand, as long as it does not interfere with the goals of the overall team. Especially social media offers an easy way to do that. When asked to expand on his thought regarding social media, athlete 2 adds that “social media is so easily accessed and the perfect platform for athletes and celebrities in general to make themselves noticed and engage with fans, thus increasing the general awareness of their name”.

5.2.3 Being Part of an Organization
5.2.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization
Concerning how the fixed salary and the fixed time structure influence athlete 2’s opportunities to build a personal brand he mentions that soccer is a daily business and that allows you to present yourself to the supporters on a daily basis. He has enough free time to deliver content to the fans from Monday to Sunday. This also brings advantages for his personal brand as he starts building a relationship with the fans. “We can interact everyday with the supporters through Instagram and this is an advantage for creating your personal brand. Athlete 2 personally let his followers know what he is eating, how he is working out and how he is recovering. Additional to that, he also posts pictures of the clothes he is wearing to promote his
outfitters. When asked about the content he is posting, athlete 2’s response was “it is a show off world. I only post cool stuff I do. I am not going to post how I do laundry at home”.

5.2.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club
Athlete 2 said that as long as you are authentic you can present yourself everywhere and have success building a personal brand. In his case, he is sharing the identical values, honest work and being humble, as his club. But he only tries to stay authentic. “In my case it just fits with the values of the club, but for my personal brand it is not essential”. He also does not use the club’s brand intentionally to strengthen his personal brand or to promote himself. But he also mentioned that by being a part of the club you will get more attractive as a marketing or business partner in that geographical area.

When interacting with fans off the field athlete 2 gets recognized as the guy they know from his club and his special appearance. They also recognize him as the muscular soccer player and want to pose next to him. “As my personal brand is developed together with my sponsors, we are aiming to be recognized within the fitness world as well. I do not want to be recognized only as the guy from club. In that case my personal brand will be not as desired”.

5.3 Athlete Three
5.3.1 Shared Field of Play
5.3.1.1 Platform Sharing
Athlete 3 gave a decisive yes when asked if he prefers to stand out from his teammates while on the field. According to athlete 3, to share the field with teammates influenced the way the audience views him. “Although we don’t actually say it out loud to each other, it’s obvious that we compete for the recognition and praise of the audience, both the audience physically present in the stadium but also the audience watching at home on their screen. If we want to make the next step in our career it is not only important that we perform well on the pitch, we must also distinguish ourselves so that the audience want to view us for more reasons than
just our performance. The more people want to see us on the field, the more money it generates to the club and that also affects other clubs’ willingness to sign us”.

Athlete 3 said that he experienced that it is very important to not lose yourself in the team and that one must always try to lift his own strengths and what distinguishes oneself. He emphasized to distinguish himself through how he performs on the field, not just by scoring goals and making decisive passes but by trying to show off with fancy dribbles and techniques when the opportunity presents itself. And also by involving the audience as much as possible through gestures when succeeding with such distinguishable actions.

Concludingly, athlete 3 said that to share the field with teammates influence himself through the way he gets exposed and viewed. This was according to athlete 3 not necessarily negative as he said “Of course, sharing the field means that a lot of eyes are focusing on the other players but I shouldn't forget that other players may attract viewers that otherwise wouldn't go to our games or view them on TV. Which means that, since I share the field with those players, automatically also get a lot of new eyes on me”.

5.3.1.2 Playing Position
Athlete 3 strongly believed that one’s playing position has a great effect on one’s popularity. “The more goals and assists you do, the more media coverage you get in newspapers and most of all through word of mouth around the city”. Athlete 3 continued by stating “to make decisive passes or fancy dribbles are also something that is appreciated by the audience but in the end, what really makes you remembered are the amounts of points you score for your team, at least amongst the broad audience, internally within the team it may differ”.

5.3.2 Being Part of a Team
5.3.2.1 Cooperation or Competition
Athlete 3 viewed his teammates both as allies and competition, stating; “When we’re playing matches I always view my teammates as allies because we must lift each other as we are very dependent on each other’s performance if we are to win. When we’re on training sessions I view them more as competition because you need to
make sure that you perform better than those of your teammates that you share the same position with and therefore directly compete with”. Athlete 3 said that he handles competing and cooperating with teammates through maintaining focus on himself and the outcome of the team, not on individual teammates. Further, athlete 3 declared that personal success, rather than team success is what is most important for him, stating: “my own success has always been in center of my actions but I tend to view team success as a byproduct of that because If I do well, my team often does well”.

Athlete 3 continued; “my attitude towards playing and interacting with players that perform really well, or that in general just are noticeably popular for various reasons is positive. I’m driven by the challenge to play with and against players that are on your level or higher. There are always things to learn from each other and of course it’s also so much more fun to win against skilled players, or outperform skilled teammates as it boosts your ego and allows you to evolve”.

5.3.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete

Athlete 3 has experienced that his teammates' personal brands surely affects his own in terms of receiving less time in the spotlight and less exposure. But again, athlete 3 does not view it as solely negative, stating “I don't think it is solely negative how my teammates' personal brands affect my own. I e.g. experience that I have received increased following from the supporters of my teammates whom I am having a strong relationship with. It is like since they support and appreciate this certain player, they automatically support and appreciate what this certain player in turn appreciates”.

If his teammates were to outperform him, athlete 3 said that it would mostly affect his status within the team rather than affect his personal brand because his personal brand is more than just his performance on the field. Stating “my personal brand isn’t solely built of my performance on the field but also how I act towards by team, competition, referees, audience, etc. If you’ve been in the team for a long time, the audience tend to become loyal towards you since you’ve been loyal to their club. Don’t get me wrong though, the performance is the foundation upon what your
personal brand is built upon, but there are many more aspects that plays a part so if your teammates outperform you for a while, it’s fine”.

5.3.3 Being Part of an Organization
5.3.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization
Athlete 3 made it clear that the monthly salary, as opposed to prizemoney is a tremendous relief and sense of safety. He also believed that it therefore may dense his ambitions to engage in brand-building activities and instead solely focus on the sport itself. Athlete 3 stated that as the monthly salary most certainly gives him a sense of safety and more relaxing state of mind, it is only to a certain extent, he was aware that he must still perform well in order to not lose his precious position. The type of income according to athlete 3 has no influence on his performance on the field, instead there are other types of motivations for him to keep performing well, such as self-actualization, maintaining his playing position and simply through being competitive by nature. Lastly, athlete 3 mentioned that their fixed training schedule has no influence on his brand-building activities. When encouraged to expand on this statement, athlete 3 said that although their training schedules are set and that they have to adjust their personal time for it. He experiences that they still have plenty of time to conduct brand-building activities if they would like.

5.3.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club
Concerning co-branding with the club that you are signed for, athlete 3 experienced great differences in co-branding regarding what club he has represented. He said “As I previously played for a less known club with a rather bad history, the supporters of the club were few, were less prompt to become supporters of myself, and I had less media time set up by the club. Today it’s way different as I play for a club with great history, large following and respected values. Here, I rapidly gained the supports of the club to become supporters of myself and I feel as I’m part of something big”. Athlete 3 continued by stating that he really wanted to become associated with the club, nonetheless it would mean that he received a largely increased following due to the loyalty of the club’s fans. He used the club’s brand to build his own through often wearing the colors of his club and by supporting the
other teams within his club through his presence at their games and by publicly acknowledging their moments of success. Additionally, athlete 3 said that he pays homage to the club and its supporters. Athlete 3 did this on the field by engaging with supporters through gestures when celebrating victories and individual achievements. And also by staying after the match-signal to thank the traveling supporters. Outside the field, athlete 3 tried to align his actions with the values of the club and publicly respect the club’s history. Concludingly, athlete 3 felt as if he is being recognized by the audience as “athlete 3” (his name) and not just for the club or position he is playing.

5.4 Athlete Four
5.4.1 Shared Field of Play
5.4.1.1 Platform Sharing
Athlete 4 experienced that sharing the field with his teammates will have an impact on how the public recognizes him. “We all wear the same uniform on the field and the spectators in the stadium or at home see you only from a distance, so therefore if you want to stand out and be recognized you have to do something special”. The popularity of soccer offers him to reach a big audience, but standing out and being recognized is not as easy. Especially the shoes are a good tool to use to differentiate yourself from others, even though you are committed to your outfitter and you have to wear the latest models. “Many teammates are focusing on wearing the newest and freshest shoes and there are competitions in the locker room about that, but me personally, I like my shoes simple, plain black or plain white”. On one hand athlete 4 wants to blend in with the team and be recognized as a part of it, but he wants to stand out through his passion and professional behavior. He stated: “Of course I want to be recognized as part of the team and not as a loner, but I still want to draw attention on me through my commitment and my professional behavior”. He shows his commitment by fighting for every ball until the game is over. “I will run after every ball and tackle until the last minute, that is how I am and I think our fans love it”. Even though he is very passionate about soccer, fair play is always important. “If you don’t respect the game and the opponent, this will have a negative effect on how people view you".
5.4.1.2 Playing Position

When asked about the effect of his playing position on his popularity, athlete 4 answered: “I don’t want to complain, but I think strikers and offensive midfielders and even goalkeepers get more attention than central midfielders and defenders”. He thinks the reason for that is that they play the positions that have the biggest impact on the end result of the game. “You are deciding the game by scoring a goal or saving a penalty in the last minute, that is why those positions get more attention”. He also thinks that for the normal supporter it is easier to assess the performance of a striker than a defender. “If a striker scores many goals you automatically know he is good, but for a defender, or a defensive midfielder like me, it is hard to say if the performance was good or not, especially for normal supporters with not much knowledge”.

5.4.2 Being Part of a Team

5.4.2.1 Cooperation or Competition

Athlete 4 stated that he cannot clearly say if he sees his teammates as allies or competition. “Especially in the beginning of my career I saw everyone as competition. I wanted to make a name for myself around the team and was accepting every challenge to do so. I was playing hard in every practice game and wanted to win every small challenge. I thought that would help me to play more games and become more important for the team”. According to athlete 4, the reasons for that kind of behavior is simple. He wanted to be successful and make the next step in his career as soon as possible. He wanted as much attention on himself hoping bigger clubs would discover him. After being transferred to a big club and established himself as a player of the starting team his approached changed. “After a few years in this industry and having reached most of the personal goals and obtained great knowledge of the sport, I realized that I have to cooperate with my teammates to get the best result from the team. Now, I am really focusing on cooperating with my teammates, push them and also try to mentor some of the younger players”.

He also stated that in the beginning of his career he valued personal success way more than team success. “It was all about proving myself and getting further in
my career. Of course, it was nice to have success with the team, but as long as we were not in danger of being relegated, team success was not that important”. As a young athlete, personal success was being able to play from the start and make an impact in the game and get the attention of bigger clubs. As he established himself in a big club and got more experiences, his definition of personal success changed as well. “In the early years it was all about playing time and getting attention, but as a veteran player I am now responsible to lead the team and show the younger guys how to be a professional soccer player. Therefore, I still think I am chasing personal success, but at this point in my career my personal success has a stronger and more direct impact on the team success than what I understood as personal success in the beginning of my career”.

5.4.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete
When asked about the impact and interferences of a teammate’s personal brand, athlete 4 said it depends on the situation. If the other athlete’s personal brand is completely different than his own there is no negative impact. “If the other player has a strong personal brand that is totally different from mine, there is even the potential that it could have a positive effect. If the midfielder next to me is a different player type and more a technician with a brilliant overview, than a fighter, there is the possibility that we as well as our personal brands influence each other positively and that we become complementary and not substitutionary”. Therefore, he has no negative feelings regarding playing with more popular teammates, as long their popularity and attitude does not interfere with the ambitions of the team.

If the teammate’s personal brand is similar to athlete 4’s personal brand then they would have a negative impact on each other as they are not unique anymore and could replace each other. Especially if the teammate outperforms him, then his personal brand is in real danger. But athlete 4 is not afraid of that as he stated: “You know, the soccer world is fast living and every year new players come and old players go, so there is a constant turnover”.
5.4.3 Being Part of an Organization

5.4.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization

The way soccer players get paid gives athlete 4 some sort of comfort, but he also stated: “You know, in soccer your career can be over quickly. Every injury could be the end for your career and as we soccer players have only a limited amount of time in the spotlight and making a lot money we should use that time wisely”. After having established himself as a professional soccer player, athlete 4 started to explore other opportunities as well. “As a soccer player you are in the focus on a daily basis for 10 months a year and that offers you many opportunities in regards of cooperating with other companies. Those companies are interested in working with you as you are relevant basically all year and still you live a regular life with enough time to meet and discuss different projects. Together with the high popularity of soccer that are the reasons why we are interesting for companies to cooperate”. Athlete 4 is using Instagram to interact with his fans directly and tries to post mainly funny or soccer related content. “I like the direct contact with the fans, as you can get your message, or your brand´s message out in the purest form. As I like having fun, I try to post mainly funny things, like how I am pranking some of my teammates in the locker room”. Even though he is doing that just for fun, it often becomes a point of discussion when a new collaboration is discussed, as the partners are often interested in that.

5.4.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club

Being associated with the club helps athlete 4 to build his personal brand and he makes clear that one must respect the club’s values. He said that especially the geographical connection does help, as he becomes an attractive partner for local businesses as you are representing the area in a nationwide competition. According to athlete 4 the brand of the club has definitely an effect on his own personal brand. “If your team is playing well and you have success, many companies want to partner with you because you are successful and especially a winner. But if your club is struggling for a long period or there is a lot of chaos around the club, other companies do not want to be associated with you”.

Athlete 4 does not relay or use the club brand to strengthen his personal brand mainly because of one reason. “The soccer industry is so hectic and so many things can happen and there are a lot of transfers all the time. Therefore, I do not want to connect my personal brand to much with a club brand, because I might have to leave the club soon. But still if people see me on the streets, they connect me immediately with the club I am playing for and see me more as the midfielder of that club than me as an individual”.

6. Analysis

*The analysis is based on the empirical data and will be analyzed, discussed and compared in relation to the theoretical framework. The empirical data from all participants is analysed and compared to each other within three sections. In the first section, the focus lies on the shared field of play; in the second section on being part of a team and in the third section on being part of an organization.*

6.1 Shared Field of Play

6.1.1 Platform Sharing

Platform sharing refers to purposes of platforms of exposure that are being utilized simultaneously by different brands and can have both favorable and less favorable implications. The soccer field can be viewed as such a platform, as the personal brands of the soccer players are exposing themselves on it. According to Sprott and Shimp (2004) and Sullivan (1998), consumers are willing to pay a price premium to receive the unique features they associate with their favorite brand; in this case the personal brand of a soccer player. They also concluded that consumers are willing to pay a price premium even when the unique associations have disappeared through platform sharing. On the other hand, Aaker and Keller (1990) stated that those unique characteristics might be lost. High quality brands can lose their differentiating features when they share a platform with lower-class brands. For lower class brands this offers an opportunity to be associated with the higher-class brand they share the platform with (Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2000; Venkatesh & Mahajan, 1997). When the four soccer players were
asked what effect they experience from sharing the field with other soccer players, athletes 2 and 3 answered in a similar matter. Sharing the field with other athletes wearing the same uniform only leaves few opportunities to differentiate from the others. Athlete 4 expressed it like this: “We all wear the same uniform on the field and the spectators in the stadium or at home see you only from afar, hence if you want stand out and be recognized you have to do something special”. This can be understood as the athletes’ assumption to lose their ‘uniqueness’ when they are sharing the field with other athletes. This attitude corroborates with the findings of Aaker and Keller (1990): the unique features to differentiate a brand from other brands might not be there when the platform is shared. In consequence, athletes 2, 3 and 4 all try to differentiate themselves even more from the other brands they share the platform with. On the contrary, athletes 3 and 4 also stated that sharing the field and playing the game of soccer with other athletes could draw more attention to their personal brand as well. Athlete 3 mentioned that the other players also attract an audience and because of that they also see him perform and associate him with the other athlete’s personal brand. This is also consistent with the findings of Simonin and Ruth (1998), Vaidyanathan and Aggerwal (2000) and Venkatesh and Mahajan (1997). Therefore, especially players with weak personal brands or players in the early stages of their career can benefit from sharing the platform with more popular players possessing strong personal brands. The athletes are aware of the fact that through sharing the field of play with their teammates, the audience will not solely focus on them but also on the other players and therefore they try to distinguish themselves.

To distinguish themselves from the other athletes and the brands on the field, the interviewed athletes are doing so by mainly using their brand associations; more specifically their brand attributes. According to Keller (1993), brand attributes are what consumers think about the product or service (or in this case the athlete), which he then subdivides into product-related and non-product-related attributes. In the context of sport, the athletic performance along with the athletic success and the style of play can be regarded as product-related attributes, as they directly relate to the athletic performance on the field (Jackson & Andrews, 2001; Arai et al., 2014; Gladden et al., 1998; Kolbe & James, 2000). All interviewed athletes, except athlete
2, mentioned that they use mainly product-related attributes. Athlete 1 mentioned that he automatically stands out merely for being a goalkeeper possessing the most specific position. Athlete 3 mentioned that he tries to mainly use his performance on the field to stand out from the others. He did not only define performance as scoring goals, but also as showing off an attractive style of play containing fancy dribbling. This corroborates the findings of Gladden et al. (1998) and Kolbe and James’ (2000): success as well as style of play might be the most important sources of brand associations of product-related attributes. Player 4 tries to stand out mainly through his commitment to the team and his competitiveness. This supports the findings of Arai et al. (2014): the way an athlete competes can also be viewed as a product-related attribute.

It is worth noting that athlete 3 was the only one to mention that he tries to use success to differentiate himself from the other athletes on the field, even though Gladden et al. (1998) consider success to be the most important source of brand associations. A possible explanation for this behavior of the interviewed athletes could be that they are engaged in team sports, where success most of the time is achieved and shared with teammates. It is therefore hard to use success to effectively differentiate the personal brand from the personal brands of the other teammates when engaging in team sports. The majority of the interviewed athletes use the style of play and the way of competing (part of product-related attributes) to differentiate themselves and regain uniqueness.

On the other hand, soccer players can make use of non-product-related attributes such as physical attractiveness and the appearance (Arai et al. 2013), although these attributes are not directly linked to the on-field athletic performance. Athlete 1 differentiates himself through his goalkeeper appearance wearing different colors than his teammates. Athletes 1 and 3 also stated that they try to interact as much as possible with the fans while they are on the field; mainly through celebrating and showing off gestures towards the audience. As this behavior is neither directly linked to the on-field athletic performance, it can also be considered a non-product related attribute due to it being part of the athlete’s appearance. Athlete 2 uses several non-product-related attributes to stand out through his appearance on the field. He uses flashy shoes that were chosen in cooperation with his outfitter and
are aimed at supporting to build his own brand. He also wears his socks especially low and a t-shirt all year around. He also uses his physical attractiveness of having a muscular body with tattoos. Athlete 4 mentioned that shoes are a tool that several teammates use to differentiate themselves from others, but he personally prefers a simple pair of black or white shoes.

All athletes are aware that they can differentiate themselves not only through attributes directly linked to their athletic performance but also through non-product related attributes. The interviews have shown that athletes use both product related attributes and non-product related attributes to build their brand image. Even though it is interesting that the athletes that try to stand out mainly through their athletic performance do not lay that much focus on the non-product related attributes and vice versa. A matching combination of attributes directly related to the performance, as well as attributes not directly linked to performance, can have the biggest impact on building brand equity. They can strengthen each other and have a big impact on the differentiation of athletes and their personal brand.

6.1.2 Playing Position
A part of being a team athlete is being assigned a playing position. The findings of Garcia-del Barrio and Pujol (2007) as well as data provided by Moreno (2018) indicate that the playing position has an influence on how much attention and reward an athlete receives. Especially strikers and offensive midfielders are more in the spotlight than goalkeepers, defenders or defensive midfielders.

Similar results were found in the answers of the interviewed soccer players. At first, all of them stated that the playing position has a big effect on the popularity of an athlete, especially strikers and other offensive players normally get more attention than the rest. The athletes identified different reasons for that phenomenon. The most common one is that strikers and offensive midfielder are the ones that score the goals and therefore have a direct impact on the outcome of a game. Athlete 3 stated “the more goals and assists you score, the more media coverage you get in the newspapers and most of all through word of mouth around the city”.


Surprisingly, the majority of the interviewed athletes also mentioned that the goalkeeper also receives special attention. This does not align with the findings of Garcia-del Barrio and Pujol (2007), but can be explained by considering the important position of a goalkeeper. Several athletes mentioned that positions that can make a decisive difference in the outcome of the game are perceived to be extra popular. Athlete 1, who is a goalkeeper himself, also mentioned that the position of a goalkeeper is extra exposed and that it is easy to become the man of the match, but even easier to become the reason for the team’s failure.

The additional attention and exposure that offensive players and goalkeepers receive can influence the personal brand of athletes. The more attention the athlete and his personal brand gets, the more he is able to create familiarity and brand awareness for his personal brand. According to Keller et al. (2011), brand awareness influences the formation of the brand image. Creating brand awareness is even a requirement to build a personal brand. Therefore, certain positions in soccer allow the player to create brand awareness for himself and his own brand. Especially decisive positions having a direct impact on the outcome of a game, such as goalkeeper and offensive positions, draw more attention and therefore athletes on these positions are able to build more brand awareness which supports the building of brand equity.

However, not only the decisive character of a position has an influence on how much attention a certain position receives, but also how fast and easy the performance of a soccer player can be evaluated. Throughout the interviews, athletes 3 and 4 both stated that the broad audience is evaluating the performance by the most common and most intuitive measurement i.e. how many goals an athlete scores. Athlete 4 stated the following: “If a striker scores many goals, you automatically know he is good, but for a defender, or a defensive midfielder like me, it is hard to say if the performance was good or not, especially for normal supports without much knowledge”. This corroborates the statement Selnes (1993) stated about the evaluation of a product, that the consumer needs some kind of norm for what is good and what is bad, and performance quality can have an effect on the brand image.
It can hence be concluded that positions with easily measured performance, such as a striker through the number of goals scored or a goalkeeper through the number of saves, have an advantage on building a personal brand compared with positions such as defenders or central midfielders, as the evaluation of their performances can be complex.

6.2 Being Part of a Team
6.2.1 Cooperation or Competition
Relations are always present in cooperative and competitive situations and the social structure of these relationships influences subsequent behaviors (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). Strong relations are characterized by frequent and stronger interactions such that information is perceived as more trustworthy (Granovetter, 1985) and cooperation is high (Gulati, 1998). Thus, strong relations ease cooperation between parties. The cooperation between brands, may induce brand associations both strengthening and undermining the credibility of each cooperative brand (Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995). Both athletes 2 and 3 experienced that by portraying a strong relationship with another teammate that has a strong personal brand, it allows them to tap the supporters of that teammate. Through the provided theoretical framework and presented findings from athletes 2 and 3, one may argue that by portraying a strong relationship between teammates to the audience, they become associated with each other and thus gain some of each other’s supporters. Moreover, As Gulati (1998) says that strong relations are characterized by frequent and strong interactions as well as high cooperation. It can be concluded that due to the strong relations emphasized by athlete 2 with his teammate(s), and by athlete 3 with his teammate(s), they have good cooperation. As stated by Hillyer and Tikoo (1995), this may induce brand associations to strengthen each cooperative brand. Evidently, cooperating and exhibiting a strong relationship between athletes towards the audience results in favorable brand associations and an increased following; thus, strengthening one’s brand equity.

Luo et al. (2006) provided indication that an organization with employees simultaneously competing and cooperating rapidly gains market learning and thereby more efficiently builds the organizations brand image in the mind of the
consumers. In the context of team sports, this implies that organizations where athletes simultaneously compete and cooperate gain knowledge about its competitors and the game of soccer and therefore are more likely to implement successful strategies. This is partly in accordance with the empirical data of athletes 2, 3 and 4 of this thesis. Here, athlete 3 experienced that he actively competes and cooperates; however, the most interesting data is presented by athletes 2 and 4. Both experienced that early in their career they laid their focus on personal success and viewed everyone as competition. Their focus then changed as they matured, received more responsibility, accomplished their personal goals and realized the importance of cooperation. Both athletes 2 and 4 claimed, as they got older, to take more of a leading and supportive role in their clubs which is largely due to their market knowledge and experience. If arguing in alignment with Luo et al. (2006), who suggested that employees within an organization who simultaneously compete and cooperate rapidly gain market learning. Athletes 2 and 4 inhibited their market knowledge and enhanced the ability to lead and support due to their experience of both competing and cooperating in their career. The reason why it is only partly in accordance with Luo et al. (2006) is the fact that athletes 2 and 4 never competed and cooperated simultaneously but instead implemented one, then the other.

In numerous situations, employees and functions must compete for an organization’s scarce resources and attention and thus are often reluctant to share - but also receive - information. This, due to fear that it will heighten the value of a competing employee or function’s capabilities (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). This is evident through the findings presented by athletes 1 and 3 when sharing the same playing position with each other. Athlete 1 namely emphasized that if a teammate whom he competed with for a starting position outperformed himself, it affected him negatively and his compliance for cooperation was disturbed. Similar thoughts were presented by athlete 3 who said that during training sessions he viewed teammates with the same playing position as direct competitors. As pointed out by Houston et al. (2001), employees and functional areas compete with one another in the pursuit of divergent individual goals. However, more importantly, they must also cooperate so that they efficiently work toward the firm’s common interests (Narver & Slater, 1990). Although cooperation is critical, it is evident that to efficiently compete for
starting positions is key to get the exposure every athlete needs to build brand equity. Creating brand awareness by increasing the familiarity of the personal brand through repeated exposure and forging strong brand associations with the appropriate product category or other relevant purchase or consumption cues is an important first step in building brand equity (Keller et al., 2011).

6.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete
A brand association has been defined as anything linked in memory to a brand: in short, the underlying value of a brand name is often its set of associations or meanings (Aaker, 1991). Findings from athlete 1 directly align with Hillyer and Tikoo (1995), who suggested that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand by acting as an augmenting cue in consumer evaluations. This is evident in athlete 1’s experience of how he and his teammates became associated with their newly signed popular player as time passed and this new player became part of the team. This also aligns with Simonin and Ruth (1998), who stated that the quality and status signaled by the higher-class brand may become associated with its lower-class “twin” through the process of information integration.

All interviewed athletes experienced that their teammates’ brands positively influenced their own personal brand. Out of the four interviewed athletes, three of them emphasized the value and great opportunity of obtaining an increased following by making the supporters of your teammates become supporters of yourself; especially if the teammate in question has a strong personal brand as that imposes the teammate to have a large following. They made clear that one should try to benefit from the popularity of another athlete’s personal brand as long it is there, but that one still must stay authentic. By being exposed to the supporters of one’s teammates, one is being viewed by a different audience; especially if the teammate in question just recently joined the club and has a strong personal brand. This, according to Keller (1993), is important to create brand awareness and thus also brand image and brand equity. Keller (1993) also says that creating brand awareness by increasing the familiarity of the brand through repeated exposure is an important first step in building brand equity. Further, a prominently important role
of brand awareness is its influence on the formation and strengthening of brand associations in the brand image. To create a brand image in the consumer’s memory, it is necessary that the consumer is already aware of that brand (Keller, 1993).

Athlete 4 has a different approach to the positive influence of teammates’ brands as he stated that it is only positive if the teammate has a strong personal brand that is different from his own. This way, they are likely to become complementary and not substitutionary. Thus, athlete 4 contradicts Hillyer and Tikoo (1995) who suggested that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand by acting as an augmenting cue in consumers evaluations, as he only finds the influence of his teammate’s brands positive if they do not associate with each other.

Concerning the negative influence of teammates’ brands on the respondents own personal brands, three out of the four respondents emphasized that having a teammate outperforming oneself is negative. Especially if the teammate shared similar unique selling points or plays on the same position. The athletic performance is a product related attribute as the athletes typically develop their brand status based on their performance in sports (Jackson & Andrews, 2001). These findings align with Hillyer and Tikoo (1995) who said that one brand can undermine the credibility of the other and lower consumer evaluations. However, athlete 3’s statements contradict the theories provided by Jackson and Andrews (2001) and Hillyer and Tikoo (1995) as he experienced that being outperformed by teammates for a while is fine. This is mainly due to his personal brand not solely being built on his performance.

6.3 Being Part of an Organization

6.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization

Hodge and Walker (2015) found in their study about professional golfers that the athletes nearly devote all their time to practicing and competing and do not invest much of their time in building a personal brand, as their income heavily depends on their game. On the other side, professional soccer players are often salaried employees (Noer, 2012). Building on these two findings, the athletes in team sports
ought to invest more of their time in building a personal brand off the field. According to Andrews and Jackson (2002), the today’s media culture offers the possibility to build a personal brand also through the off-field behavior and Arai et al. (2014) group the off-field segments into the athlete’s life story, the athlete’s ethical behavior and the athlete’s positive attitude toward interaction with fans, spectators, sponsors and media. Several of the interviewed athletes stated that being employed and getting a stable and continuous salary give them some sort of comfort and a feeling of safety. That financial comfort might have a negative effect on their ambition of building their personal brand, as athlete 1 stated that: “I think I’m a bit lazy concerning such activities, perhaps mostly because I feel safe with my continuous salary. [...]”. The answers indicate, that the athletes would have enough time to carry out specific brand building activities, but only athletes 2 and 4 pointed out that they conduct additional brand building activities such as interacting with their fans over social media. Both athletes mentioned that they use Instagram as a tool to interact with their fans and show them certain aspects of their personal life. This corroborates the findings of Andrews and Jackson (2002), whereas athletes can also build their personal brand through their off-field behavior and also the findings of Arai et al. (2014), whereas the athlete’s positive attitude toward interaction with fans can also influence the personal brand of an athlete. The fact that the soccer season is long helps the athletes to be relevant, and therefore to be interesting for their supporters for a big part of the year.

Athlete 1 mentioned that before and after their practices he can meet sponsors and other partners of his club and start building a relationship with these parties. These interactions can be viewed as a part of the employer brand, where the relationship between organization and employee provides different benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Therefore, through being employed by a sports organization, the athletes can benefit from the network of the organization and use those contacts to strengthen their own brand.

It can be concluded that being employed as a soccer player allows the athletes to have a stable and continuous income while also being provided enough time to conduct brand building activities off the field. However, the comfort of the fixed salary can cause the athletes to not feel the need to strengthen their personal
brand. Being employed by a sports organization in soccer allows the player to have enough free time they can use to build their brand. One way soccer players do try to build brand equity is through social media, as it allows them to interact with their fans directly and immediately.

### 6.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club

When two brands are combined in a brand alliance (co-branding), there are several possible bases for brand fit: category fit, brand associations, culture, product usage, self-representation and consumer goals (Loken et al., 2008; Martin & Stewart, 2001). The ability to pair two brands in co-branding is likely to be more effective when the brands have something in common and relate to each other in the mind of the consumer. Additionally, when the fit is considered poor at either level, there will be negative spillover effects on how the co-branding is perceived (Prince & Davies, 2002). The associations that consumers draw from the perceived congruence of the partnering brands is what most research considers to be a brand fit. Therefore, having the two brands in a brand alliance (co-branding), respecting the same or at least similar values are critical for being considered a brand fit.

Concerning athlete 2, although he stays authentic he shares the identical values, honest work and being humble, with his club. Thus, qualifying for a good brand fit. The remaining 3 athletes, although it doesn't come as naturally as for athlete 2, still emphasized to respect the values of the club by acting professional and in accordance of the club values and guidelines. The alignment of values between athlete and club are evidently important in order to have a brand fit and thus for the athlete to make use of their club’s brand.

All interviewed athletes experienced the club’s brand to influence one’s own personal brand in positive manners. This aligns with Hillyer and Tikoo (1995), who suggest that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand. Additionally, athlete 3 who has been part of both a less-known club and a well-known club, experienced that as through playing for a club with great history, large following and respected values he rapidly gained the supporters of the club to become supporters of himself and making him feel part of something big. This
strengthens Ahn et al.’s (2010) statement that a strong brand with high brand equity is crucial to securing a successful match-up perception in a co-branding alliance.

Athletes 2 and 4 experienced that by being part of a club, you become more attractive as a marketing or business partner in the geographical area of your club. Thus, again aligning with Hillyer and Tikoo (1995), who suggests that strong brand associations of one brand can lend credibility to the other brand.

As it is evident that all athletes experienced the club’s brand to influence their own personal brands, it is of interest to know how they utilize this gain to build brand equity for their own personal brands. On the field, athletes 1 and 3 use their club’s brand similarly as they both emphasized to pay homage to their club. They do this by engaging with supporters through gestures when celebrating victories and individual achievements; e.g. by pointing to the club brand on the jersey and by staying and thanking the traveling supporters after the match signal. Through athletes 1 and 3’s experience, such actions positively influence the audience’s attitude towards their partnership with their club. According to Simonin and Ruth’s (1998), consumers’ attitudes towards a particular brand alliance (co-brand) influence their subsequent attitudes towards the individual brands that comprise that alliance. Therefore, the strategies of athletes 1 and 3 are positively influencing their building of brand equity. Another supportive source for why athletes 1 and 3 are building brand equity and how they use their club’s brand is found in the empirical data. Athletes 1 and 3 are namely both experiencing to primarily be acknowledged by the public by their name, and not by their position in their respective clubs. This is an indicator that the awareness of their name (brand) is prominent.

7. Conclusion

The conclusion is based on the discussion presented in the Analysis chapter. The findings will be presented below in order to fulfil the study’s purpose and answer the research question. Further, contributions in terms of theoretical and practical implications will be given followed by limitations and recommendations for further research.
7.1 Findings

The purpose of this thesis was to identify what effects shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization have on building brand equity for athletes in team sports. This thesis specifically focused on the athlete’s perspective and was therefore conducted through semi-structured interviews with professional athletes in soccer. Sequent in this concluding chapter, the research question i.e. how does shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization affect the building of brand equity for athletes in team sports, is answered.

7.1.1 Shared Field of Play

7.1.1.1 Platform Sharing

The athletes experienced that they lose their ‘uniqueness’ when they share the field with other athletes as they are also wearing the same uniform and shared the attention of the audience with other soccer players on the field. The findings show that all interviewed athletes used different strategies to stand out from other athletes.

On the contrary, several players express the opinion that sharing the field of play with other athletes can also draw more attention to athletes’ personal brands. The reason for this is that popular players attract a new and large audience; an audience that observes and occasionally associates players with their favorite player. Furthermore, findings show that especially players with weak personal brands or at early stages of their career can benefit from sharing the platform with more popular players with strong personal brands.

Concludingly, findings of this thesis show that athletes use both product related attributes and non-product related attributes to stand out and build their brand image. However, it is interesting that the athletes who try to stand out mainly through their athletic performance do not lay that much focus on the non-product related attributes and vice versa. A matching combination of attributes directly related to performance, as well as attributes not directly linked to performance, can have a strong impact on building brand equity.
7.1.1.2 Playing Position

Further findings show that the playing position has a big effect on the popularity of an athlete. Especially strikers and other offensive players normally get more attention than the rest. Surprisingly, most of the athletes also mentioned that goalkeepers get special attention as well, which can be explained by the importance of the goalkeeper position. The findings also show that playing positions with the ability to make a decisive difference in the outcome of a game become extra popular. The additional attention and exposure of offensive players and goalkeepers can influence the personal brand of the athletes. Through the heightened attention, they can more easily build brand awareness supporting the building of brand equity.

However, not only the decisive character of a position has influences how much attention a certain position gets, but also how fast and easily the performance of a soccer player can be evaluated. Findings of this thesis show that the broad audience is evaluating the performance by the most common and most intuitive measurements. Therefore, it can be concluded that positions where the performance of the athlete can be measured easily has an advantage for building a personal brand. Examples for such positions are offensive players (due to the acknowledgement of goals scored) or goalkeepers (through number of saves). This means that athletes with playing positions where the performance cannot be measured as easily need to put more effort into other brand-building activities.

7.1.2 Being Part of a Team

7.1.2.1 Cooperation or Competition

The empirical data was analyzed and findings could be drawn indicating that cooperating and exhibiting a strong relationship between athletes towards the audience results in favorable brand associations and an increased following; thus strengthening personal brand equity.

Findings also show that several athletes do not compete and cooperate at the same time. They tend to compete in the early stages of their careers and are more willing to cooperate in the later stages. This only partly aligns with the proposed theories which suggest to compete and cooperate simultaneously. Therefore, to set up the team to be as successful as possible, the athletes should
compete and cooperate at the same time. Being part of a successful team can have a positive impact on the athletes’ personal brand.

Lastly, this thesis provides findings that although cooperation is critical, it is evident that to efficiently compete for starting positions is key to get the exposure every athlete needs to build brand equity.

7.1.2.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Athlete
All interviewed athletes experienced their teammates' brands positively influencing their own personal brand. The findings emphasize the value and great opportunity of obtaining an increased following by making the supporters of your teammates become supporters of yourself; especially if the teammate in question possesses a strong personal brand imposing a large following. The findings indicate that one should try to benefit from the popularity of another athlete’s personal brand as long it is there, but that one must stay authentic in the process.

Additionally, findings show that being outperformed by a teammate is negative for the personal brand; especially if the teammate shares similar unique selling points or plays on the same position.

7.1.3 Being Part of an Organization
7.1.3.1 Being Employed by a Sports Organization
This thesis shows that being employed and getting a stable and continuous salary gives athletes comfort and a feeling of safety. Being employed by a sports organization also allows soccer players to have enough time to conduct brand building activities off the field. However, the results of this study indicate that several athletes do not feel the need to strengthen their personal brand through off-field brand building activities, as they get their stable and continuous salary. Players that do conduct branding activities off the field are mainly using social media, as it allows them to interact with their fans directly and immediately. The soccer players also benefit from the long duration of the seasons in the European soccer leagues and therefore staying relevant for supporters almost all year.
Being employed by a sports organization does also offer the opportunity to meet sponsors and other partners of the club before and after practice. Therefore, by being employed by a sports organization, the athletes can benefit from the network of the organization and use those contacts to strengthen their personal brand.

7.1.3.2 Co-Branding Athlete-Club

All interviewed athletes experienced the club’s brand to influence their own personal brand in positive manners. One athlete experienced that being part of a well-known club positively affected his popularity as he rapidly gained the supporters of the club to become supporters of himself.

Findings also show that by being part of a club you become more attractive as a marketing or business partner in the geographical area of your club.

Lastly, this thesis shows that the alignment of values between athlete and club are important to have a brand-fit and thus important for the athlete to make use of their club’s brand. Concerning how to make use of one’s club brand to benefit one’s own personal brand, it is evident through the findings of this thesis that you should pay homage to the club. This can be done by engaging with supporters through gestures when celebrating victories and individual achievements; e.g. by pointing to the club brand on the jersey and by staying after the match-signal to thank the traveling supporters.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

Researchers in the field of personal branding of athletes have often put their emphasis on athletes in general or on athletes in individual sports. The previous research on personal branding of athletes did not specifically discuss the characteristics of team sports. This study therefore contributes to the field of personal brand of athletes; especially to the effect of a shared field of play, being part of a team and being part of an organization and their effects on building a personal brand. In order to address these three characteristics, concepts of product
and service branding have been adapted to personal branding. Therefore, this study is adding to the literature of personal branding of athletes in team sports, such as Chadwick and Burton (2008). This study uses certain concepts of Arai et al. (2013, 2014) in the context of team sports and as well from the athlete’s point of view, whereas previous research was mainly focusing on a consumer’s perspective.

7.3 Practical Implications
The findings of this research provide useful information in a more focused area within personal branding of athletes in team sports. The findings of this thesis can provide valuable information to athletes in team sports and their management with a goal to build a strong personal brand.

In order to not to lose their ‘uniqueness’ when sharing the field with other athletes as they are also wearing the same uniform, athletes can differentiate themselves by using product related attributes like superior athletic performance and style of play or non-product related attributes such as flashy shoes or on field interaction with supporters.

Athletes on playing positions that can make a decisive difference on the outcome of a game receive extra attention. Hence, they can use that extra attention to build their own personal brand. Athletes playing other positions have to use different ways to draw attention; one possible way is to use their appearance on the field.

Athletes should try to benefit from the popularity of another athlete’s personal brand as long as it exists, but staying authentic in the process is important.

Even though getting a stable and continuous salary gives athletes comfort and a feeling of safety, athletes should engage with their fans in their free time in order to build their personal brand. Social media is offering a direct and immediate way to do so.

And lastly, to use the club’s brand to build one’s own personal brand by paying homage to the club by engaging with supporters through gestures when celebrating victories and individual achievements provides another important conclusion. When taking these findings into consideration, athletes and their
management may successfully build the athlete’s personal brand and thus benefit from its many advantages.

7.4 Limitations

The authors of this thesis tried to conduct this research with the highest care and competence possible, but usually there are limitations in qualitative research which was also the case in this study. For qualitative research, limitations are often subjectivity, low representativity, low generalizability and the validity that is difficult to accomplish because of the risk of researcher bias. The purpose of this thesis was to identify the effects of sharing a platform, being part of a team and being part of an organization has on building brand equity for athletes in team sports and in the process of providing findings for this purpose, limitations to the study have been identified.

One limitation of this study is that only the athlete’s perspective was considered and other people in sport organization contexts or other people related to creating a personal brand were not interviewed. This might have the effect that certain aspects were not discovered as they do not influence the athlete directly. This approach was chosen as the previous research was mainly focusing on a customer’s or the organization's perspective. To enhance the validity of this thesis, other data sources and not only interviews could have been used.

Another limitation is that the interviewed athletes are all soccer players in Switzerland and Sweden. Therefore, the findings focus on soccer and not on every kind of team sport. The authors decided to focus on soccer players because of soccer being the most popular sport in Europe. The findings might not apply for different sports or different geographical areas.

7.5 Further Research

To get a more comprehensive overview over this subject in further studies, other people in the sport organization or the athlete’s environment should be interviewed and used for data collection. By doing that, further aspects of the way athletes create their personal brand could be identified.
To get more insights in this field, this research should be reproduced in a different geographical region as well as a larger sample size. The participants of this research stem from Sweden and Switzerland and are engaged in soccer in Europe. For further research, the participants in other sports markets and countries should also be considered.

Lastly, further research may take all brand building aspects of athletes in team sports into account and compare the athlete’s brand building activities to the brand building activities of an athlete in individual sports.
References


Appendix A

Interview Guide for Semi-Structured Interview

Shared field of play
In individual sports you have the field for yourself, while in team sports you share the field with teammates. You are also wearing the same uniform as your teammates and so on.

- Influence of sharing the field on the personal Brand
- Blend in or stand out?
  - How do you stand out? What tools do you use?
- Effect of the playing position
  - on your popularity?

Part of a team
As you are part of a team, and your team’s performance depends on all of you. But still there are limited starting spots every game.

- Do you see your teammates as competition or allies?
  - Why this choice?
- How to compete and cooperate with teammates?
  - Effects on daily activities
- More important: team success or personal success?
  - why?
- Personal Brand interferences with your teammate’s brand?
  - why?/how?/effects?
- Effects on your brand when teammate is outperforming you
  - examples?
- How is your attitude towards playing and interacting with new and existing team mates which are noticeably popular?

Part of the Organization
Individual athletes get their salary mainly through prize money, in your case you have a contract with the team, which pays you a monthly salary.

- Influence of the salary structure on your brand building activities
  - off the field/ on the field?
- Effect of salary structure on your performance?
  - how? why?

By being part of an organization, you have a fixed schedule with mandatory attendance, whereas individual athletes have a more flexible schedule.
- Effect of the set timetable set by the organization on your activities to create a personal brand?
  - appearances? social media?..

Being employed and being part of the club, you are also representing it to others. Your club also has a brand which constitutes everything they are and stand for.

- Effect of your club’s brand on your personal brand?
  - How and what?
- Do you use the team brand to build your personal brand?
  - how?
- Do you feel you are recognized of being a part of the organization or do you feel you are recognized for being you? (“striker from this club” or “name, surname”)
**Appendix B**

### Characteristics of Team Sports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-Code</th>
<th>Open Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platform Sharing</td>
<td>- Simultaneous exposure</td>
<td>sharing the field, standing out, differentiate, blend in, exposure, public recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Differentiation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Position</td>
<td>- Receiving attention</td>
<td>position, decisive positions, offensive position, assessing performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Performance measurement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation or Competition</td>
<td>- Common goal</td>
<td>competitors, allies, personal success, team success, competing and cooperating with teammates,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Branding (Athlete-Athlete)</td>
<td>- Brand Cooperation</td>
<td>influence of another’s teammates brand, similar playing attributes, get outperformed by teammates,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Public Relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Employed by a Sports Organization</td>
<td>- Employment</td>
<td>fixed salary, monthly salary, fixed time schedule, daily business, brand building activities, being relevant all year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- off-the field behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Employer Brand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Branding (Athlete-Club)</td>
<td>- Brand alliance</td>
<td>values of the club, club brand, recognizing by fans, associated with the club, pays homage to the club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- perceived congruence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Julian Kneubühler

William Rydell