Do consumers care about human brands?: A case study of using Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to map two athletes' engagements in social and political advocacy

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Abstract

Research Question: We aimed to explore consumers' perceptions of two athletes and athletes' engagements in social and political advocacy.

Research Methods: We conducted 24 individual in-depth, unstructured interviews and applied Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to reflect deeper feelings and thoughts of consumers and construct a perceptual map.

Results and Findings: Findings show how the actions of athletes contribute to the building and leveraging of their own brands—symbolic images and key associations of Michael Bennett and Jason Pierre-Paul. Findings reveal that lifestyle, relationship effort, and role model make a difference in creating unique brands. New categories emerged from the analysis of athlete advocacy: *views towards advocacy, sports as platforms for advocacy*, and *ambassadors*.

Implications: We offer unique methodological contributions to scholarship and distinctive associations of selected athletes and provide implications for both professionals and academics in sport.

   Keywords: athlete brands, brand associations, ZMET, metaphor, athlete advocacy

Introduction

The term *brand* is not limited to products, services, and organizations; every individual can be branded (Thompson, 2006). Consider examples of influencers. First, heads of organizations are brands for public image, reputation, and marketability (Khamis et al., 2017). The cases of Steve Jobs and Elon Musk show how business representatives created distinctive images for themselves as well as powerful brands for companies. Politicians are another example, as people grant "an elite status" because of their political roles and identities (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018, p. 249). Finally, celebrities like entertainers and sports stars are no exception, as they construct unique images and use their status to connect with consumers and have an impact on a community (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). Together, human brands have become an important theme for every professional today (Khedher, 2015; Shepherd, 2005; Speed et al., 2015), and researchers have conceptualized human brands in sport (Berndt, 2021; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Chadwick & Burton, 2008).

From a marketing standpoint, consumers are concerned with not only human brands themselves but also influencers' engagements in social justice and political initiatives (Richelieu, 2014). For example, just as companies and organizations are concerned with a socially responsible brand image that helps their businesses stand out, so too are athletes (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). As human brands become influential by serving their role as "a socially productive agent," influencers are likely to engage in social, political, or philanthropic advocacy, which can lead to their overall brand visions (Schmidt et al., 2018). Brad Pitt's social advocacy after Hurricane Katrina, as studied by Fuqua (2011), is an example of how human brands use their publicity to raise broader awareness and attract attention to social problems and injustices. This reflects the communicative actions of individuals in social justice advocacy (Lee &

Cunningham, 2019) and can serve as a "hook" to cultivate support (Barron, 2014, p. 77). Similarly, the cases of Billie Jean King, LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid, Maya Moore, and Gwen Berry demonstrate how these athletes use their influences to promote social change (Brown et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2021).

However, as seen in Kaepernick's protest in 2016, professional athletes who speak out against social injustice issues and engage in legal and political activism might place themselves at commercial risk (Agyemang et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2018). Kaufman (2008) and Kluch (2020) contended as much that such athlete-activists can face precarious dilemmas and various repercussions. Nevertheless, Edwards (1969) noted that previous and current athletes of color have become engaged in social justice initiatives to challenge white dominance and tackle racial inequities and inequalities. He stressed that athlete activism has entered its fourth wave in the United States (US), characterized by boycotts of the Olympics for human rights, protests against desegregation in team sports, and engagement in the civil rights movement. This wave has encouraged a welcoming climate for athlete advocacy worldwide (Hartmann, 2019), and there is emerging evidence that athletes are unprecedentedly engaging in progressive conversations about race (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Mac Intosh et al., 2020) and gender (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Williams, 2022). Importantly, contemporary athletes tend to speak up on equity/equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) issues and raise socio-political awareness globally (Schmidt et al., 2019). Scholars called for such advocacy work (e.g., Black Lives Matter—a protest racial injustice against black people) and activist efforts by high-profile athletes, given that sport is a prominent platform that garners immediate and high levels of media and public attention. Overall, scholars have supported Edwards' (2016) contention that athlete-advocates can use their power, ability, and responsibility to promote sociocultural changes through sport and address

power imbalance and social justice issues in sport (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010).

Yet, questions remain unknown how athletes' engagements in various forms of advocacy contribute to leveraging their distinctive image, a topic-scarcely addressed in the field of sport management. Cooper and colleagues (2019) classified five types of activism through sport (symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, sport-based, and economic) and defined activism as engagement in intentional actions that challenge dominant ideologies and systems and promote social change and movements. Brown and colleagues (2022) categorized activism based on message types (risky and safe) and efforts (high and low). While activism and advocacy are similar concepts, we adopt the term advocacy and defined it as someone who actively champions social change initiatives and informs related activities on behalf of another person or group (Lee & Cunningham, 2019), to explore how consumers view athletes' involvement in diverse advocacy efforts. Here, we consider athlete-advocates as agents of social change, not activists.

Moreover, from a methodological standpoint, extant scholarship shows the impacts of human brands through quantitative research (Brown et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2018; Na et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Walsh & Williams, 2017), indicating there is an opportunity for deeper understanding through qualitative approaches. Considering the growing complexity surrounding consumers' choices and values, a qualitative method can be useful to unpack verbal and nonverbal aspects of consumers' thoughts involving the intuitive values and characteristics of brands (Marie, 2014). Among others, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) helps illustrate a deeper level of the perceptions and minds of consumers towards brands (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Although qualitative studies exist focusing on human brands outside of sport (Fillis, 2015; Fuqua, 2011), there is limited qualitative evidence to capture external aspects of those, such as lifestyle, storytelling, and human brand-community relationships.

Thus, we aimed to qualitatively elicit consumers' perceptions and feelings about athlete brands and map consumers' brand associations towards two athletes' engagements in social justice and political initiatives. The following research questions (RQs) guide our study:

RQ1: How do consumers perceive and associate the brand features with athlete brands?

RQ2: In what ways are athlete brand associations identified similarly or differently to create their brand image based on two athletes' engagements in advocacy?

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Review of Relevant Literature

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Human brands, personal brands, and human branding

Brands stand out with symbolic values, visual and verbal identity, and unique selling propositions of products, services, or organizations (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Similar to this, individuals identify and differentiate themselves to make their markers visible to the outside world. Researchers claimed that every individual can be a *human brand* (Thompson, 2006), and as a result, human brands emerged as an important concept inside and outside of sport.

The concept has theoretically evolved and become popular after Peters (1997) introduced the term *personal branding*. Researchers have often used the terms personal branding or *personal brands* interchangeably and continued the debate around the conceptualizations (Hennessey, 2018; Shepherd, 2005). Whereas personal brands or personal branding demand individuals' practices of positioning and representing the self to customers and organizations, the term human brands responds to wants and needs from the outer world (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Because brand identity and brand image constructions reflect consumers' perceptions of the outside world (Keller, 1993), we used the definition of human brands for this study.

In light of this notion, researchers have examined symbolic images and unique associations of human brands (Close et al., 2011; Fillis, 2015; Omojola, 2008; Parmentier et al.,

2013; Peacock, 2007; Rein et al., 2006). Further, researchers have advanced empirical understanding of the attributes and values of human brands, arguing that brand-building efforts enable everyday individuals to produce a unique quality and favorable personal profile as brands to a specific market (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Drawing from the works of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), researchers have highlighted the growth of human brands and have focused on consumers' perceptions of human brands.

Brand equity frameworks

The consumers' perceptions of human brands were highlighted in two models. Some researchers have used Keller's (1993) consumer-based brand equity model to explore a human brand image. According to Keller (2002), brand knowledge, consisting of two components of brand awareness and brand image, contributed to the creation of brand equity. Brand awareness is concerned with recognition and recall of a brand, whereas brand image is linked with a set of associations (i.e., attributes, attitudes, and benefits), favorability, strength, and uniqueness that consumers hold their memory to a particular brand (Keller & Aaker, 1998). Much of this work has tied to a human brand in various fields (Close et al., 2011; Doyle et al., 2022; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Omojola, 2008; Speed et al., 2015).

Using Aaker's (1991) brand equity framework, other researchers have focused on human brand personality. According to Aaker and Fournier (1995), a collection of consumers' perceptions shapes unique characteristics of a brand-as-a-person and meaningful relationships with brands (Aaker & Fournier, 1995). Aaker (1997) conceptualized this as brand personality, an indicator of brand equity that consumers identify which features are connected to a brand's value and appeal. Brand personality is comprised of four elements, including brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations. The elements of brand personality are culture-

specific and symbolic (Aaker et al., 2001), and consumers' attitudes and perceived quality lend

an increased value to a brand, which leads to future earnings of a high-technology organization

(Aaker & Jacobson, 2001). A stream of work has appeared in human brand-related literature

(Bendisch et al., 2013; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Lunardo et al., 2015). In sport, Carlson and

Donovan (2013) demonstrated how visible human qualities of an athletes are transferred to their

brand personality states and create meaningful consumer-athlete brand relationships.

    While evidence based on both brand equity models suggests that a strongly established

human brand is likely to have a specific image of creating values for consumers and

organizations (Keller, 2008; Speed et al., 2015), we drew upon Keller's (1993) consumer-based

brand equity framework, and did so for several reasons. First, utilizing Keller's (1993) model,

Arai and colleagues (2013) proposed a conceptual model of athlete brand image with three

components in the sport setting— (a) athletic performance, which involves athletes' on-field

athletic features, such as playing skills and styles, (b) attractive appearance, which reflects

athletes' physical qualities and body fitness, (c) and marketable lifestyle, which reflects athletes'

off-field life stories and interactions with fans or communities. In their subsequent study, Arai et

al. (2014) have examined images of athlete brands, identifying such characteristics of athletes'

brand image. Second, Arai and colleagues' (2013) recently developed a conceptual framework to

define athlete brands, and these factors can serve as a baseline for our study. Finally, we pay

attention to athletes' life stories—a sub-dimension of marketable lifestyle to add personal and

professional implications to the literature on human brands. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010)

argued that storytelling of a human brand is critical to construct memorable and compelling

brand personality and associations. They further highlighted that a brand story evokes emotional

connections with consumers at a deeper level and is thus vital to branding. We also found the

importance of this factor being echoed in the sport context, as Arai and colleagues (2013) called

for more research on athletes' life stories, and Hodge and Walker (2015) argued as much in their

qualitative study of professional athletes.

Influences of athletes' engagements in advocacy

As we previously discussed, the features and images of sports stars form a unique athlete

brand (Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Hodge & Walker, 2015); in turn, researchers

have stressed the importance of more value-based research concerning sociocultural aspects and

philanthropic endeavors of human brands that can easily draw consumers' attention today

(Fuqua, 2011). Considering the range of platforms available to promote oneself, and social roles

and influences that sports icons create, athletes and coaching staff have leveraged themselves

through mainstream and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or personal blogs as a way of

self-marketing (Green, 2016). Serena Williams, Cristiano Ronaldo, Yuna Kim, and J. J. Watt,

listed on the Time's 100 most influential people for on and off the field activities, especially

philanthropic advocacy, were recognized as pertinent examples of athlete brands. As such,

researchers have focused on how individual athletes can construct unique characteristics beyond

their athletic performance (Agyemang et al., 2010).

However, controversial debates have continued as athletes are more involved in social

and political advocacy than they were in the past (Miller & Balsam, 2018). Researchers argued

that, unlike philanthropic advocacy, championing social movements and speaking out on

political issues are not usually beneficial to athletes for their potential loss of sponsorship and

fans (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Unlike the 1960s when athletes stepped into socio-political

initiatives to support civil rights, today social justice advocacy entails a financial risk and

potential decrease in reputation (Edwards, 2016); in turn, some athletes become indifferent to

these issues (Agyemang et al., 2020; Devasagayam et al., 2017). Finally, it is also possible that socio-political advocacy may not create a good and socially responsible image of athletes, even if athletes choose to initiate cultural discourses on topics of social injustice, such as gender and racial issues (Agyemang et al., 2010; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Cunningham et al., 2021; Mac Intosh et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). Most importantly, consumers are less likely to watch games of athlete-activists (Devasagayam et al., 2017), when they have a racial bias (Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020), resulting in more negative evaluations towards teams or endorsers due to the roles and influences of athlete advocacy on an organization (Schmidt et al., 2018). Read and Brown (2020) revealed that cognitive and affective responses of consumers towards off-field behaviors of athletes' endorsers are heightened by negative news and stories compared to positive posts.

Nevertheless, the cases of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe have shown how sports stars connect with fans and followers through their engagement in socio-politically charged social justice movements globally (Schmidt et al., 2019). For example, kneeling has emerged in Europe since 2015 (e.g., British Formula 1 drivers including Lewis Hamilton and Premier League footballers at kick-offs) and spreads across the world in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Given the growing awareness and role of professional athletes and coaches in advocacy through sport, athletics performance alone is not enough to build a human brand and differentiate themselves. From the consumer perspective, discussing controversial issues may allow athletes to form their unique human brands, foster strong social bonds, and solidify connections with a community (Agyemang et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2022). We thus extend the study of Arai and associates (2013) on athlete brands to discover consumers' deeper perceptions about the engagements of athletes in socio-political advocacy.

ZMET study in sport

In exploring human brands, most sport academics have oriented towards a quantitative method (Chang et al., 2018; Na et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Walsh & Williams, 2017). Unlike quantitative market research, a qualitative inquiry is beneficial to extract consumers' latent thoughts and nonverbal languages and address user experiences (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Further, preplanned traditional qualitative methods, e.g., focus groups or semi-structured interviews, do not reflect consumers' deep insights and emotional landscapes about brands (Khoo-Lattimore & Prideaux, 2013). Finally, researchers have explored consumers' brand associations through various qualitative mapping techniques. Among those, brand concept maps (BCM; John et al., 2006), social network analysis (SNA; Henderson et al., 1998), and ZMET are well-developed tools replicated in many studies to analyze consumers' thoughts about brands and determine uniqueness and strengths of brands. However, brand concept maps and social network analysis are unable to capture consumers' nonverbal terms and images. For instance, in their study of brand associations using BCM technique, Bouzdine-Chameeva and colleagues (2015) and Ilicic and Webster (2015) could not present sensorial metaphors and visual pictures of brands.

On the other hand, ZMET is designed to overcome these constraints of quantitative and qualitative mapping tools (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). ZMET enables researchers to use metaphor and photo elicitations and go beyond the binary answers—yes or no—to present visual and mental constructs of consumers' needs (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman, 1996). Further, a qualitative ZMET study is beneficial to get access to consumers' deeper thoughts and feelings and transfer cognitive constructs of a brand to establish a consensus map. As such, researchers have recognized this possibility and implemented research using ZMET as the medium of data

collection in different areas of consumer research (Anghelcev et al., 2015; Chen, 2010; Danilet &

Stoian, 2017; Khoo-Lattimore & Prideaux, 2013; Wilson & Elliot, 2016). Together, we applied

Keller's (1993) consumer-based brand equity and Arai and colleagues' (2013) athlete brand

image models to guide our study and used ZMET to answer our research questions.

Methods

We employed a qualitative and image-based study. To collect and analyze data, we used

in-depth, unstructured interviews based on ZMET (Zaltman, 1996). This tool is useful to capture

deeper elements of beliefs and emotions. Researchers have used ZMET to elicit hidden

knowledge about individual tastes and preferences in making choices, as well as gain insights

through collages (Khoo-Lattimore & Prideaux, 2013). We thus adopted ZMET to uncover the

unconscious thoughts and feelings of sport consumers towards selected athletes and attain a

holistic understanding of perceptions of athletes' engagements in socio-political initiatives. For

the data analysis, we utilized both deductive and inductive, interpretivist analysis to discuss

findings and generate new knowledge from participants' experiences.

Participants

We conducted 24 individual, face-to-face interviews based on ZMET and collected the

data in 2018. Participants were individuals from the southern part of the U.S. who indicated

above average involvement in athletes ($M = 4.7$), where 1 indicates a low level of involvement,

and 7 indicates a high level. As consumers' involvement in brands has both direct and indirect

effects on consumption behavior (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985), respondents who showed at least

moderate to high involvement in athletes were eligible for the study. We presented the

participants' demographic characteristics in Table 1.

--------------------------------Insert Table 1 here--------------------------------

ZMET procedure

Recruitment and sampling

ZMET is a qualitative, photo-elicitation technique, and the number of research

participants requires at least 12 individuals or more people (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008, p. 213).

Although the sample size for a qualitative inquiry depends on data saturation, Zaltman and

Coulter (1995) recommended 20 interviews as a suitable sample size for a ZMET study. In the

previous ZMET studies, the sample size generally included 8-16 participants until data saturation

is reached (Anghelcev et al., 2015; Coulter et al., 2001). We purposively sampled and invited 24

respondents since we chose two players as athlete brands: Michael Bennett and Jason Pierre-

Paul. We chose these athletes for their being out for socially or politically responsible advocacy

and selected as one of the top defensive ends (Rosenthal, 2017). We ensured that the two athletes

were comparable in terms of engagements in advocacy and position of play and allocated 12

slots per each group, where one group consisted of individuals who had their interests in Michael

Bennett, and the other group in Jason Pierre-Paul. Participants for the interviews were first-come

first-served, and we offered them a $25 gift card per interview.

3.2.2. ZMET interview protocol

Our interview protocol was derived from the marketing literature (Coulter et al., 2001;

Figure 1). In preparing the interviews, participants were given information of the study, asked to

bring 5-8 pictures associated with athletes and think about athletes' engagements in relevant

advocacy. On the interview day, the first stage began with a storytelling of participants.

Participants illustrated how each image was related to their chosen athletes. In the second stage,

participants identified whether there were images they did not prepare for the interview that

would better represent the chosen athletes.

The third stage was to expand on participants' explanations. In this stage, we attempted to elicit participants' unconscious emotions and mental constructs by asking them to convey deeper level feelings and meanings about each image. In doing so, participants elaborated on similarities and differences among the pictures and found common images. In the fourth stage, participants rearranged the pictures that they brought into several piles to introduce new sensorial metaphors, specifically using nonvisual senses (e.g., touch, sound, smell, taste, and colors). Here, this was done so by removing the images from participants' sight while participants linked their feelings with their chosen athletes and engagements in advocacy.

In the fifth stage, participants created a story, imagining a movie scene that can convey their feelings and thoughts about the chosen athletes and related advocacy. Finally, participants created a collage—cognitive mental map by sorting, positioning, prioritizing, and zooming in and out the pictures. When appropriate, participants adjusted the brightness, shapes, background, and size of the collage. After the interviews, participants reviewed constructs and collages to check whether elicited information presented accurate elements for their chosen athletes and related advocacy.

---------------------------------Insert Figure 1 here---------------------------------

Data collection and analysis

Data collection

Prior to the investigations, we reviewed various studies that adopted or modified ZMET (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Chen, 2010; Khoo-Lattimore & Prideaux, 2013; Zaltman, 1996; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). We then followed the instructions of the six stages of ZMET method demonstrated by Coulter et al. (2001). As ZMET involves unstructured interviews, we reviewed the interview questions and protocol and worked to ensure

the feasibility of the current ZMET study by conducting three pilot studies before the actual

interviews. In this process, the third author engaged in a pilot talk as a co-creator to refine the

interview guides and identify potential researcher biases (see Supplementary Information for our

reflection on positionality).

We collected the data through direct observations and personal interviews and gathered

digital informed consent from participants 7-10 days before each interview. The interviews lasted

90 to 120 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. We read the transcripts multiple times for

accuracy in coding, coded the same transcript, and discussed agreement in the coding. Additional

resources included field notes, reflective journals, mental maps, and visual images co-created

with and produced by participants.

Data analysis

We performed the interpretive analysis and followed the underlying tenets of open-coding

process (Charmaz, 2006). When approaching the data, we created numerous codes to define

overarching themes and subthemes for advocacy while comparing each other's code scheme. We

then grouped similar codes under a common category to generate emergent themes (Creswell,

2014). During the open and axial coding, we also triangulated field notes and individual

reflective journals to ensure transferability that the extracted codes were well grounded in the

voices of the participants. To finalize the main themes and subthemes during the selective coding

(Charmaz, 2006), we utilized the categories described in Arai and colleagues' (2013) athlete

brand image framework to reflect our analysis and discussed any contradictory codes or fewer

codes mentioned by one or two participants to arrive at a coherent perspective.

While using these *a priori* codes to categorize the features of athlete brands, we produced

posteriori or iterative themes and subthemes from our subsequent analyses of athletes'

engagements in advocacy. As a result, combining inductive and deductive data analyses allowed

an incorporation of *a priori* and emergent themes, thereby enriching the presentation of our

findings of the study (Drayer et al., 2010). After the data analysis, we read the defined themes

and subthemes to arrive at coherent codes, metaphorical images, and consensus maps. We

reached the saturation point at the 12th interview. Finally, through member checks (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985), study participants were engaged in the data analysis and provided constructive

feedback on the interpretations and visual images.

Ethical concerns

While acknowledging that inevitable individual biases exist across the authors, the

second author generated and shared a detailed ZMET protocol to implement a consistent process

across the interviews. Further, two peers of the second author reviewed the reports for potential

biases and mitigating ethical concerns. Finally, we assigned participants a pseudonym for dignity

and confidentiality and obtained ethical approval and consent from all study participants.

Findings and discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore consumers' perceptions of athlete brands and

various features of athletes' engagements in advocacy. We drew on Arai and associates' (2013)

athlete brand image framework to reflect our findings and generated three categories for athletes'

engagements in advocacy: (a) *views towards advocacy*, (b) *sports as platforms for advocacy*, and

(c) *ambassadors*. We applied a cutoff rate of at least one-third of the responses per theme, as

suggested by Christensen and Olson (2002), and discussed the emergent themes, subthemes, and

collages.

Arai and associates (2013) identified three overarching categories of athlete brand image:

(a) athletic performance, (b) attractive appearance, and (c) marketable lifestyle. The first

category explains an athlete's overall athletic performance consisting of four main themes: athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry, whereas the second category describes an athlete's external aspects of appearance, including three primary themes: physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fit. The last category involves three major themes: life story, role model, and relationship efforts which reflect an athlete's personal values and personality. We discussed the findings of the two athletes under each category.

Athlete brands: Michael Bennett

Athletic performance

Table 2 presents an overview of the representative features of Michael Bennett. Michael Bennett was described by three themes in this category, as we did not identify any aspects of sportsmanship from the interviews. First, all participants selected pictures of Michael Bennett playing on a football field to indicate his athletic expertise. One participant noted, "I really like what he has done as a defensive end, which also makes his play through sacking. He is genuinely enjoying his time on the field, and I have always appreciated that about him" (Participant 4). Participant 6 shared a similar sentiment, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> When you watch him playing out, it is like watching a movie or even an opera show as
> the way he displays himself is big, strong, charismatic, and very excited. Have you
> watched him sacking and celebrating? He is a very aggressive defensive player, but that
> is what he makes him unique and his catchier identity.

Second, "Celebration," "Enjoyment," "Defensive End," "Charismatic," "Aggressive," and "Tough" represented the competition styles of Michael Bennett. A picture displayed in Table 2 shows an example from Participant 4, describing Bennett's sack dance ceremony. For some participants, his hard work and bravery were seen as unique associations of the playing style of

Michael Bennett. Lastly, the attributes of "Dallas Cowboy," "Brother," and "League Defensive

End" were described as his team-related rivalry. One participant said for example:

> I know that he [Michael Bennett] came in around the same time his younger brother
>
> [Martellus Bennett] was a more outstanding and well-performing player, but then
>
> Michael has improved a lot to show his hard work and he has to prove that he is a good
>
> player. He has done well, and I tend to follow Michael more than others, as his sacking is
>
> exciting (Participant 7).

> Overall, our findings illustrate that the three primary themes, except for sportsmanship,

were key to make his athletic performance special. However, the omission of this element may

be because of his outspoken message. For example, few participants mentioned that Michael

Bennett is more of an engaged individual in social media than being an athlete on a field, and he

is politically too active in the sport setting, such that his off-field branding efforts may be

undermined his features of sportsmanship (e.g., fairness, honesty, respect, integrity, etc.). Thus,

our findings suggest that consumers may recognize different values of sportsmanship in a field

and athletes' virtuous behaviors outside of a field, which can overlap but do not necessarily

influence one another.

Attractive appearance

> Over half of the participants indicated that Michael Bennett can be seen as "sexy" and

represented as a symbol of "Seattle Seahawks." Some participants highlighted Michael Bennett's

attractive appearance as the following quotes show:

> I think that Michael Bennett does a really good job on and off the field being sexy. You
>
> know what I mean? I see him playing while hitting each other, but such scenes make a
>
> sound like cracking. When you think of this, I can see that he is very beautiful and sexy

while taking some strengths inside and outside of his body (Participant 11). Other subthemes for physical attractiveness were sweaty and strong whisky, and the subtheme for symbols included Eagles and the NFL, which can have the impacts of athletes' transgressions on teams and leagues.

Other participants mentioned the feature of Bennett's body fit, tying his physicality with a characteristic of a "body builder." This comment was explained by a picture of the actual bodybuilder that several participants brought to the interview. As illustrated in this quote: "He is like a brick if you imagine touching all his muscles. So, you will be threatened if such a player comes in front of you and tackles your body." As such, Bennett's body fitness was seen as another important factor to consumers relating to his brand image. As Arai et al. (2013) noted, an outfit of any human brands, including fashionable and trendy qualities, is a great addition to the part of the overall brand's vision and appeal. Together, all three themes pointed to the outward features of Michael Bennett.

Marketable lifestyle

Michael Bennett was illustrated by three themes regarding marketable lifestyle, explained by some unique features, including athletes' life stories, social and ethical behavior outside of sport, and interactions with other entities. Our findings demonstrate that, "A&M," "Arrest," "Kneeling during the National Anthem," "Super Bowl," "Traded (to Eagles)," and "Book-writing" were key to the theme of life story. One participant who presented a picture appeared in Table 2 summarized this as follows:

> He [Michael Bennett] is an activist but got arrested for allegedly assaulting an elderly
> woman. Then, he wrote a book against police and racists. His being socially active I see
> someone who can inspire people and make a difference. I think his being active on social

media, even if it is not directly connected with people, you know, his social engagement

has a huge influence, and he can have the spotlight on him (Participant 1).

Participant 2 echoed this sentiment and said, "Michael Bennett has become more relevant and

more popular in media just because of what he has done recently in the aspect of activism."

Further, we found that "Community Service" and "Political Correctness" were the

important elements of Bennett's feature of a role model. One participant said for example:

"Players nowadays try to express what he or she thinks our society and community could change

on. Through activism, Michael helps around the community and makes an impact" (Participant

11). Various participants highlighted his support for the Black Lives Matter movement, features

of a role model, as well as relationship efforts. They also selected the pictures of Michael

Bennett standing with groups of people to describe the features of a role model.

Finally, all participants noted that Michael Bennett utilized several social platforms to

speak out on political issues, such as racial discrimination and police brutality, and connect with

a specific community as well as broader consumers. The last theme associated with his

relationship efforts includes "Interactive with Fans," "Attachment to Aggies," "Raise Voice with

Teammate and Awareness for Message," and "'Calling out' Other Prominent Players," such as

"Kaepernick," "Brady, and Rogers." Of the associations of Bennett's marketable lifestyle, his

relationship endeavors and life stories had a seemingly great influence on consumers and

communities than did other features, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

> The collective efforts towards human rights and equality, especially activism based on
>
> gender, color, sexuality…it is activism that brings people together from the bottom to the
>
> top, and such a collective idea is important to make a positive for the future (Participant
>
> 12).

Collectively, all these examples point to the unique features of Michael Bennett, which reflect on the deeper perceptions and feelings of consumers. Based on the interviews, we elicited two metaphors, one of which represents a microphone, and the other indicates sports drink. Figure 2 shows the consensus map and collage for Michael Bennett that combined consumers' mental structures and meanings of his engagement in advocacy. While some held more positive attitudes towards Bennett's action of kneeling down describing it as a collaborative effort, others also pointed to the negative impacts on his overall brand image and value. This is supported by the works of Agyemang and colleagues (2010) and Read and Brown (2020) who recognized both the advantages and disadvantages of athletes' engagement in advocacy. Further, our findings extended the research of Arai and colleagues (2013) by providing a holistic view of consumers' perceptions about Michael Bennett.

--------------------------------Insert Figure 2 here--------------------------------

Athlete brands: Jason Pierre-Paul

Athletic performance

Table 2 also presents an overview of the specific attributes of Jason Pierre-Paul. In the same line as Michael Bennett, Jason Pierre-Paul was described by only three themes in this category. First, all participants who showed their interest in Pierre-Paul were aware of his unexpected firework accident in 2015. While some participants have mentioned that he missed almost half of the 2016 season after the accident, they praised his career history, describing the element of athletic expertise with "Super Bowl Caliber" and "2 x Pro Bowl." One participant said, I always picture him [Jason Pierre-Paul] winning the Super Bowl because he [Jason Pierre-Paul] is a really good player and won a number of awards and recognition for the winning" (Participant 17).

Next, due to his hand injury, some participants described his distinctive competition style as "Enduring," "Serious," and "Adaptable to Fit His Circumstances." A picture presented in Table 2 illustrates an example of Pierre-Paul's suffering from the firework accident and bitter challenges of resuming his playing career. However, his playing style was also observed as "Aggressive" for his position of "Defensive End." One participant mentioned for example:

> Jason Pierre-Paul is a very important player on the team [Giant] and his position of play is a lot more popular. For example, the defensive ends get paid millions of dollars, so winning the Super Bowl as a defensive end; that is how athlete brings sponsorship and lots of money (Participant 22).

Finally, "Patriots," "Doubters and Hecklers," and "Cowboys" emerged as the subtheme of rivalry. For some, Pierre-Paul's return was observed as doubtful because people did not believe whether he could be able to cope with tackling when he decided to remain and play for Giant for the rest of the season after the recovery. Particularly, one participant noted, "I was feeling uncertain about the fact that he needs to play with one hand. I was very doubtful since he does not have his fingers to play normally" (Participant 24).

Together, we found a similarity that the element of sportsmanship was missing to elaborate on each athlete's unique aspects of performance and competition. As mentioned earlier, this omission was probably because consumers hold a baseline assumption that these athletes, who are known for their socially and politically responsible behaviors outside of sport, would display the value of fair play and integrity in a field already or these features can be evaluated separately. Thus, we argue that researchers further explore why the element of sportsmanship was not an influential factor to describe athletic performance and unveil the potential relationship between athletes' virtuous behaviors inside and outside of sport.

Attractive appearance

Due to his hand injury, almost every participant brought similar pictures of Jason Pierre-Paul to describe his brand features in the category. First, Pierre-Paul was seen as "negative" since many participants pointed to his absent index finger. One participant said for example:

> People stigmatize him [Jason Pierre-Paul] or athletes with disabilities somehow seeing
>
> them as incapable of playing at the professional level. I think it is also the same for
>
> Shaquem Griffin, who has an injury, or other kids and young players with disabilities
>
> (Participant 20).

As such, our findings indicate that Pierre-Paul's physical attractiveness was seen as less positive in determining his overall physical appearance.

However, most participants highlighted that "Cast," "Hand," "Hardship," and "Luxury" can serve as the representative symbolic associations of his brand. In addition, "Strong," "Lifting," and "Compensating for Hand" were related to the element of Pierre-Paul's physicality (Table 2). For instance, Participant 18 claimed that, "Jason Pierre Paul is like iron or metal because of his durable body and strong force." As we found in the earlier analysis of Bennett, the second theme physical appearance relating to an athlete's symbolic image and physical fitness is reaffirmed as an important feature that makes their brand unique.

Marketable lifestyle

"Firework Accident," "Ability to Overcome," "Super Bowl before Injury," and "Traded to (Bucs)" were key to Jason Pierre-Paul's unique life story. Almost every participant presented a picture of his hand, showing how he was affected by the firework accident and how it contributed to the creation of his unique episode. For example, Participant 15 stated, "I knew Jason before the accident and when I heard about the firework injury I immediately thought that

he would overcome." Participant 19 echoed this sentiment, adding "He [Jason Pierre-Paul] was

not a good performer back then, but after the accident, I think it was an accident what is

permanently shined the light on him."

Next, "Donation," "Charity," and "Disability Advocacy" were Pierre-Paul's illustrative

role model behavior, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

As Jason is a Super Bowl champion, he utilized some platforms to help lots of people

who have disabilities and do some charitable work to increase social awareness. I know

that he gives lots of money he makes through awards and championship to charities and

host some events to bring awareness to the issue of disability and cancer (Participant 16).

While his actions differed from Michael Bennett's engagement in political protests in terms of

the types of advocacy, Pierre-Paul's philanthropic engagement and contributions to a particular

community parallel the impacts that Michael Bennett creates on a society. In doing so, athletes

can incorporate social and ethical behaviors into the marketable appeal as a unique human brand

(Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

Lastly, the subthemes for his relationship effort were "Private Relative to Other Athletes,"

"Post-game Interaction," and "Cancer Patient Celebration." Compared to Michael Bennett's

scale of outreach and social circle to support his participation in various social and political

advocacy, Pierre-Paul is reserved and quite indifferent towards such controversial issues in his

social media. However, as a sports star, he is involved in interactions with fans after games. One

participant brought a picture of his family during the Super Bowl ceremony to describe as:

"Jason has solid bonds with his family more than those with the fans"(Participant 21). While

Pierre-Paul intended not to expand his fan base by actively engaging in political movements, he

reached out to a group of people who are suffering from cancer and disability. Thus, our findings

show that his philanthropic advocacy and initiatives eventually led to form a favorable brand image. Furthermore, the marketable lifestyle of Pierre-Paul is different from that of Bennett to a greater extent, constructing their unique features as a brand.

Collectively, we identified two specific metaphors for Jason Pierre-Paul: A Cadillac to show how luxurious Pierre-Paul is in terms of overcoming difficulties and obstacles. The other metaphor indicates "Firework Awareness." Figure 3 illustrates the consensus map and collage for Jason Pierre-Paul. To conclude, we found numerous differences in terms of the unique features of each athlete, but we also explained common items in both Michael Bennett and Jason Pierre-Paul, which are "absent sportsmanship" and "collaborative efforts to a community."

--------------------------------Insert Figure 3 here--------------------------------

Athletes' engagements in advocacy

Through the subsequent analysis of athletes' active participation in social and political movements, we identified three themes: (a) *views towards advocacy*, (b) *sports as platforms for advocacy*, and (c) *ambassadors*. As Cunningham and colleagues (2021) noted, the debate has continued around whether athletes can deliver any political and cultural discourses in sport. Thus, we show diverse views of athletes' engagement in advocacy and discuss some advantages and disadvantages in terms of types of movements.

First, 45% of 24 participants (*n* = 11) agreed with athletes' engagement in advocacy; six of them supported any type of advocacy, such as Michael Bennett's protest against racial injustices, while two of them disagreed with athletes' participation in politics. Proponents mainly see the values of each side in terms of athletes' participation in any kind of advocacy to avoid polarization. In this respect, sport can function as a viable, global platform for athlete to express their opinion on socio-politically challenging issues. Schmidt and colleagues (2019) echoed

similar arguments in their analyses of the national anthem protest, and Cunningham and colleagues (2021) supported this assertion that advocacy for various types of activism can be an option for athletes today to make their brand image unique.

In contrast, those who disagreed about athletes' active participation in advocacy indicated relatively less concerns for athletes' engagement in philanthropic activities, including donations and charitable events. These respondents argued that athletes should focus on their athletic performance and games only, instead of being active in socio-political issues. One respondent said that, "Athletes are important resources of a team, so it cannot be possible to imagine when they are disrespectful to the National Football League (NFL) tradition, which is driven by a great part of the US history." Another participant emphasized that athletes are required to adhere to leagues and teams' traditions considering several benefits they receive from consumers, teams, and leagues.

Finally, 41.6% of participants ($n = 10$) held a neutral perspective on athletes' engagement in advocacy. Regardless of type of advocacy, these respondents commented that teams and leagues must guarantee athletes' freedom to express their opinions towards controversial issues and allow discretion to participate in advocacy. By doing so, individual athletes can play a role of *Ambassadors* of a community while representing a collective idea, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Conclusions

Our study responds to the growing body of research on athlete brands and expanded knowledge on athlete advocacy. Through this exploration, we identified similarities and differences in attributes of the two athlete brands and highlighted unique associations of athletes' engagements in advocacy. The findings of the study were similar to Arai and associates' (2013)

categorization of athlete brand image though we paid more attention to lifestyle and consumer-human brand relationships. Based on our findings, the metaphors of Michael Bennett included a microphone and sports drink, whereas iron and/or metal indicated the ones of Jason Pierre-Paul.

Additionally, three categories emerged from our subsequent analysis of consumers' perceptions about athletes' engagements in advocacy: *views towards advocacy, sports as platforms for advocacy*, and *ambassadors*. Our findings reveal that, although not all athletes are viewed as favorable and transferred as a brand, many of today's athletes who use diverse platforms can function as a bridge to connect people and benefit from their sociocultural, political, and civic engagements. In doing so, as Marshall (2017) noted, individuals, including sports stars and coaches, can cultivate distinguishable identities; thereby, enabling them to be converted into an economic and social capital and become an iconic brand.

Practical and theoretical implications

Our findings have practical implications for sport practitioners. First, it is important to understand the meanings of athlete brands about their socio-political advocacy. As views towards advocacy discussed in the study, sport marketers should be aware of recognize the advantages and disadvantages associated with athletes' engagements in advocacy. For example, Colin Kaepernick lost his career due to his kneeling during the playing of the national anthem, but also gained a social reputation over his brand and made massive earnings from endorsements instead. Similarly, LeBron James has undermined his reputation and received criticism for his advocacy for social justice issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter), but his brand also created some positive endorsement effects on the sales of Gatorade (Moulard et al., 2015). Such impacts could spill-over globally (e.g., England football squad's kneeling prior to kick-off against Romania), considering the positive and negative impacts of athlete advocacy (Schmidt et al., 2019), and our

findings would add a new marketing strategy for athletes, endorsers, teams, and leagues.

Second, building long-term consumer-brand relationships is imperative for every athlete. According to Bouzdine-Chameeva and colleagues (2015), professional sports teams and leagues offer numerous products and services to entertain their consumers, while fans and communities consume their brands. Consumers have preferences for a particular athlete, team, or league as a result of the cumulative effects of brand awareness and brand image. Thus, sports teams and leagues leveraged their brands through branding activities to attract consumers' attention and build a strong relationship. As these consumers' attitudes and future behaviors can be assessed as brand equity, creating, managing, and maintaining a strong brand equity help athletes define various segments of the consumer base, which may lead to the development of meaningful consumer-human brand relationships (Carlson & Donovan 2013).

We also offer theoretical implications. First, given the importance of human brands, examining consumers' perceptions of each athlete and their attitudes towards athletes' engagements in advocacy seems to be appropriate and timely. We extended research on human brands by focusing on how athletes construct marketable lifestyles inside and outside of sport and how they engage in real-world activities. Further, a comparison of several athletes was largely missing from the existing literature. Thus, we compared two athletes in terms of on- and off-field performances (e.g., a position of play and socio-political initiatives), which were contingent on the creation of unique attributes and metaphors. As seen here, uncovering consumers' both peripheral and central associations of other athletes can be interesting to discuss brands' value and appeal in a more nuanced way.

Second, our findings provide additional conceptual insights into athlete brand image. Specifically, drawing from Arai and colleagues' (2013, 2014) framework, we found that

marketable lifestyle shapes different athlete brands. Consistent with Arai and colleagues' (2013) assertion, such findings demonstrate that consumers reach the holistic aspects of an athlete brand. This is supported by Agyemang and colleagues' (2010) assertion that athletic performance is not sufficient for athletes or coaching staff to differentiate themselves from others. Our study therefore suggests that advocating for various socio-politically charged movements can be an option for athletes today to crystalize the social bonds with consumers and fans and, consequently, increase the overall brand equity.

Finally, we demonstrated the feasibility of ZMET in sport, providing a new perspective to understand consumers' perceptions of athletes and their athletic life and personal actions. Although ZMET involves a time-consuming process, compared to other qualitative studies and mapping techniques, it allowed us to analyze consumers' cognitive structures and maps and draw unique metaphors. As ZMET is a great addition to existing methods in sport, it would be interesting to investigate the impacts of athletes' engagements in advocacy in both negative and positive aspects through the lens of metaphors and emotions of consumers.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

As with most studies, this study has limitations. First, we employed ZMET interviews, with 12 participants representing each athlete. Although we achieved saturation in the number of talks, future scholars should consider conducting more interviews, as 20 interviews are a good starting point for a ZMET study (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Further, participants were solely of residents in the southern part of the US, which may not reflect insights of consumers from other areas or countries. As athlete advocacy is on the rise globally (Schmidt et al., 2019), researchers may consider replicating the study with larger samples across the world and several athletes. For future work, we call for investigations on consumers' feelings and thoughts about other potential athletes

and consumers' attitudes towards athletes' engagement in various types of advocacy.

We see another potential opportunity for future research. We used ZMET for data collection and analysis. ZMET is a useful medium of data collection since it allows researchers to present metaphors based on the pictures provided by participants. According to Zaltman (1996), most human communication is nonverbal, such that metaphors can be instrumental in eliciting consumers' visual, verbal, mathematical, and even musical components of cognitive constructs. Indeed, ZMET has been applied in the marketing literature to develop realistic advertising strategies for a company, such as Coca-Cola and Reebok, and the like. While ZMET can shape consumers' metaphoric constructs, researchers also pointed to its labor-intensive and time-consuming procedure, thereby suggesting alternative mapping techniques, such as BCM and SNA. Therefore, researchers should explore these possibilities of other innovative mapping techniques in future sport studies.

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    the-Customer-Metaphor-Based-Advertising-Research

Do consumers care about human brands?: A case study of using Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to map two athletes' engagements in social and political advocacy

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Appendix A.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Throughout the research process, it is important to identify and reflect on how identities and experiences (ontological), knowledge (epistemological), and positionalities (methodological) of researchers influence the study design, data collection and analysis, and interpretations (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). For transparency and rigor purposes, we acknowledge potential biases that exist across the authors and provide readers with such additional information in this supplemental space.

The second author was the lead author, who came to this study with a background in consumer marketing coursework that covered how to conduct a ZMET study, contributed to producing the study protocol and situated this study within a constructivist paradigm. Her two colleagues, with 8 to more than 20 years of research experience in the sport field, reviewed the initial interview guides. During the pilot testing, the third author engaged in an interview as a co-creator to refine and strengthen the interview protocol and identify potential biases that might arise from interactions with study participants. All authors had no previous relationship with the

study participants, and the second and third authors implemented the interviews. Data analysis

started upon the first interview by the second and third authors, and in analyzing the collected

data, all authors read the transcripts multiple times for accuracy and agreement in coding. As

previously mentioned, the first author, with over 10 years of expertise with qualitative inquiry,

did not participate in the data collection and initial coding process, but provided a critical lens on

the study procedure and analysis. With that said, the lead and third authors continuously

compared and contrasted initial codes and themes, approaching from an inductive perspective,

while the first and lead authors were involved in a deductive approach to the data; hence aiding

the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Furthermore, the first author is an Asian woman of color and a foreign-born, global south

researcher (South Korean) who has a track record of experience with qualitative inquiry

throughout her work experience. The lack of interactions with the study participants allowed her

to analyze the data with minimal bias, which provided a meaningful and critical insight into the

interview setting and deductive data analysis. The second author identifies as an Asian woman of

color and as a South Korean citizen by birth and has research interests in diversity and inclusion,

with a history of studying and working abroad. She constructed the study, facilitated all

interviews from getting to know through socializing with the study participants, and led the data

collection and analysis. The third author is another interview facilitator, a white man, who was

born and raised in the southern part of the US and has been an undergraduate researcher. He was

unfamiliar with the study setting but greatly assisted in the data collection and analysis and

practical engagement with the study participants. Both the second and third authors met once a

week to reflect on the interviews and coding schemes, as the two researchers kept reflective

journals to review dialogues with each study participant. Overall, our researcher positionality

allowed us to rethink the concepts and models related to human brands, social-political initiatives taken by athletes, and consumers' views toward athlete advocacy in sport.

In particular, we would like to acknowledge that the findings from the sub-dimension of the *attractive appearance* of both athletes are considered stereotypical physical features of black athletes. The authors are meant to counter such stereotypes, as certain physical attributes associated with attractiveness in black athletes may perpetuate stereotypes about essentialist ideas of race and ethnicity; thereby having detrimental effects on athletes of color. It can also lead to biased evaluations and discriminatory treatments both within and outside of sport. For an in-depth discussion about the risk of essentializing race and ethnicity and debate surrounding stereotypical physical attributes of black athletes, see a textbook by Grainger and colleagues (2006).

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