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How does consumers' Perception of Sports Stars' Personal Brand Promote Consumers' brand love? A mediation model of global brand equity

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the sports marketing of global brands has focused mainly on the sponsorship of sporting events and the endorsement of products by athletes. This study reveals the unexamined effect of the impact of sports stars' personal brand on global brand equity and consumers' brand love. Based on global consumer culture (GCC) theory and self-expansion theory, this paper examines the influence of sports celebrities' personal brand on consumers' perceptions of global brand equity and brand love. Using survey data from 372 users of "HUPU", our results revealed that the use of sports stars' personal brand (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence) was positively related to global brand equity and brand love. Belief in global brand citizenship has a full mediating effect between attractiveness and brand love but a partial mediating effect between expertise, congruence and brand love. Product quality partially mediates the relationship between expertise and brand love. These findings suggest that it is appropriate to use sports stars' personal brand to build global brand equity and increase consumers' brand love.

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, enterprises invest marketing efforts to build a global brand image and a shared global consumer culture across the world (Akaka and Alden, 2010). The celebrity endorsement strategy has been widely adopted to promote corporate image, which is intended to improve the effects of advertising based on customers' association of the brand with a sports star's high reputation (Malik and Guptha, 2014). Due to sports stars' special expertise, wide recognition and charisma, they have become a preferred choice to serve as spokespeople and are particularly pursued by sports brand enterprises (Yu, 2005). Previous research on sports marketing has focused mainly on the sponsorship of sporting events (Johar and Pham, 1999) and the endorsement of products by athletes (Yu, 2005). However, academic research on the effect of the impact of sports stars' personal brand on global brand equity and consumers' brand love is still in its infancy. With the emergence of the digital age and the globalization of sports and given the pervasiveness and cultural impacts of new media, the personal brand effect of sports stars transcends national boundaries, and these stars may become known worldwide (Santomier, 2008). "Global athletes" are becoming prominent in helping build sports brands' image in the international market for several reasons. First, sports marketers employ foreign sports stars as brand spokespeople to reach global sports fans. For instance, McDonald's hired Yao Ming (Chinese basketball star) as a spokesman to attract Asian fans. Moreover, companies have turned to the world's top sports stars (such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Kobe Bryant) for product endorsements to capture the attention of consumers across borders. Second, sports brands rely on digital media to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships and to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers (Abeza et al., 2013). As social media use has developed, brands have developed practices to communicate with consumers and increase new services. "Brands have been leveraging social media marketing to drive consumers' engagement and brand awareness" (Malhotra et al., 2013, p. 18). Brands that shape their consumers' identity result in stronger emotional responses from consumers (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Kohli et al., (2014) proposed the concept of brand love, a positive emotion that reflects consumers' trust, passion and attachment to a brand. Brand love is considered a strategic construct in brand management. Although brand love is critical to enterprises, little is known about the antecedents

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that generate this type of relationship with a brand.

The primary goal of this study is to combine global consumer culture (GCC) theory with self-expansion theory into one model that delineates consumers' psychological path to brand love in the sports industry and to test the predictive power of the personal brand characteristics of sports stars in explaining brand love. The existing research does not thoroughly explain why this strategy is effective. The mechanisms through which sports stars' personal brand influences consumers' brand attitudes are unclear. Furthermore, studies on global brand equity have highlighted general characteristics, such as perceived globalness, emphasizing that the entire concept can generate positive emotions and convey the meaning of a brand (Steenkamp et al., 2003). However, few systematic studies have examined the effect of a specific dimension of global brand equity on consumers' affective response to a global brand. The mediation effect of global brand equity between perceptions of celebrities' personal brand and consumers' brand love in the context of global social media marketing deserves further research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Personal brand as a unique identity that inspires brand love

According to cultural branding theory, brands are socially constructed and undergo meaningful development by consumers and business participation (Holt et al., 2004). Celebrity can be regarded as a crucial intangible asset due to its promotional effect and profit-generating value (Rindova et al., 2006). The match-up theory suggests that an endorser's personal characteristics and cultural-meaning transfer have a dramatic effect on celebrity endorsement (Till and Busler, 2000). To establish global brands and achieving a market share, sports brands have provided special product lines named after sports stars (Yu, 2005). A key milestone in Nike's growth process was hiring Michael Jordan as its brand spokesman. Nike first launched a pair of shoes named after Jordan, which led to the introduction of the classic "Jumpman" logo. In using Michael Jordan's personal brand, Nike even downplayed its own "swoosh" logo on these shoes and highlighted Jordan's personal icon as the main brand identity. Although appropriate brand communication strategies are essential for creating brand awareness and brand equity, the effects of personal brands have not been tested empirically (van Grinsven and Das, 2016). Therefore, this study considers celebrities' personal brands, which is a critical concept that means that a person adopts brand-related practices to enhance their personal identity or reputation (Khedher, 2014). Shepherd defined personal branding as various activities initiated by individuals to make themselves famous (2005, p. 2). Current research indicates that endorsements by "global athletes" are powerful in increasing brand recall, brand image and consumers' purchase intention (Burnett et al., 1993).

Brand love has emerged as a pivotal construct in the consumer-brand relationship, but little is known about its antecedents and formation process (Albert and Merunka, 2013). Self-expansion theory provides solid theoretical support to explain why the integration of a brand into the consumer's identity is essential to facilitating consumer brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Self-brand integration deepens customers' emotions toward the brand, such as by preventing negative feelings about a particular brand (Kohli et al., 2014). This paper considers the personal brand of a sports celebrity to be the sports star's personal branding strategy, which is easy to recognize and can produce a brand association. In this way, sports stars' popularity, personal charisma and expertise can be transferred to the brand through product endorsement.

2.2. Global brand equity

Brand equity is a core asset to maintain corporate competitive advantage and can provide opportunities for expansion or create barriers to competitive entry (Aaker, 1991). Global brands are brands that use similar brand names, positioning strategies, and marketing portfolios in most of their target markets (Özsomer, 2012). Previous studies have suggested that consumers prefer global brands to rival local brands (Steenkamp et al., 2003; Whitelock and Fastoso, 2007). Global brands contribute to the development of similar tastes and needs among consumers worldwide, which can produce economies of scope and scale, reduce the time costs of localization strategies and accelerate the time from design to market (Strizhakova et al., 2008). Therefore, some scholars have described global brand equity as a global brand dimension. These scholars believe that there are general characteristics that lead consumers to prefer global brands to local brands in different countries (Özsomer, 2012). A review of the existing literature reveals that perceived quality and belief in global brand citizenship (BGBC) (e.g., Strizhakova et al., 2011) are the most frequently mentioned dimensions of global brand equity. On the one hand, Holt et al. (2004) noted that the variation in interpretations of quality signals in consumers' global brand preference is as high as 44%, indicating that perceived quality is an important component of global brand equity. In emerging markets, consumers buy global brands due to both quality signals and self-identity signals (Strizhakova et al., 2011). On the other hand, the perceived cultural capital of global brands is a crucial resource that consumers use to construct their identities, which can provide them with reinforcement and self-value (Alden et al., 1999). If consumers have a stronger belief in global citizenship, they are more inclined to believe that a global brand is a passport that can help them connect with like-minded people and establish a global identity (Holt et al., 2004), which is defined as BGBC by Strizhakova et al. (2008). Thus, this study considers product quality and BGBC as two dimensions of global brand equity that should be studied within a holistic framework. This study does not intend to construct an accurate measurement of brand love but rather incorporates product quality and BGBC as two independent and complementary dimensions of perceptions of hard-sell (quality-based) and soft-sell (image-based) brands, respectively (Okazaki et al., 2010).

2.3. Brand love

Brand love represents an enthusiastic and positive emotion toward a brand that is generated by a benign interaction between the consumer and the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Albert et al. (2008) extended the concept of "love" between interpersonal and product areas and suggested that people's "love" for a brand is similar to declaring their commitment to the brand within the field of products. Based on the above definitions, Batra et al. (2012) described brand love as consumers' emotional passion, attachment and commitment to a brand and that arises due to a long-term relationship between the consumer and the brand. The brand love relationship is deep and enduring and is positively related to consumers' passion for and dependency on particular brands (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love is considered a more powerful explanatory construct to predict satisfied consumers' desirable post-consumption behaviors (Nikhashemi et al., 2019). For instance, consumers who love a specific brand are willing to pay more for its products and are interested in collecting, sharing and recommending the brand or its products. These customers regard the brand as irreplaceable and feel that "something is missing" when the brand is not available.

2.4. Research framework

Akaka and Alden (2010) defined global consumer culture (GCC) as "a set of common symbols and behaviors that are shared by most global consumers". Consumers believe that global brands usually have more rigorous standards of quality, enhanced status, and prestige and share a sense of increasing interconnectedness within the global brand community (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Based on Okazaki et al., (2010) research on two dimensions – soft-sell (image-based) and hard-sell (quality-based) dimensions – this study tests the mediating effects of two dimensions of global brand equity: product quality (PQ) and belief in global brand citizenship (BGBC). First, from a cultural perspective,

the social value and iconic nature of celebrity reflect fans' need for ritual, myth and spiritual fulfillment (Hackley and Hackley, 2016). High-iconicity brands could help consumers understand the dispersed and diverse elements of cultural knowledge and help consumers recall common culturally relevant values (Torelli et al., 2009; Carsana and Jolibert, 2018). Second, product quality is the most frequently mentioned dimension of global brand equity (Holt et al., 2004). Product quality may be the most crucial factor that determines consumers' purchases (Hsieh, 2004). Therefore, this paper validates the mediating effect of BGBC (soft-sell) and PQ (hard-sell) between sports celebrities' personal brands and brand love.

Self-expansion theory (SET) holds the belief that people can gain resources, form identities and develop new perspectives from intimate relationships by swift self-expansion, which improved their capability to achieve goals (Aron and Aron, 1996). Reimann et al. (2012) found that close brand relationships can generally be explained by self-expansion and inclusion mechanisms. In this study, we argue that sports stars are social media influencers who shape audiences' attitudes and attract stereotypical brand users (Freberg et al., 2011). With the appropriate incentives (sports stars' brand endorsement), consumers can have a personal relationship with a brand that is similar to the relationship they have with their icons. In this way, a successful brand can resonate deeply with consumers and can encourage a sense of love and higher brand loyalty. Batra et al. (2012) illuminated an important function of consumers' brand love: promoting self-identification by using a brand to express reality and the ideal. Wallace et al. (2014) also argued that self-expressive brands that align with consumer beliefs are helpful in creating brand love among consumers. Therefore, based on the framework of global consumer culture (GCC) theory and self-expansion theory, this study suggests that the use of sports stars' personal brands is a novel strategy to motivate stereotypical brand users to identify with the global consumer culture community and that the inclusion of a beloved brand into consumers' self-image increases over time. We proposed the research model as follows (Fig. 1).

2.5. The impact of personal brands on consumers' brand love

From the perspective of consumers and self-brand integration, consumers buy a product for both its functional value and its symbolic value. When consumers feel ownership of a brand, the brand represents these consumers because it can be used to define the consumers' characters, their pasts and the futures they want to have (Schmitt, 2012). Consumers achieve self-identification by buying certain brands that allow them to build their personas and present themselves to the outside world (Escalas et al., 2000). Consumers usually perceive special credibility, value, and power to global brands and exhibit a stronger preference for them. Consumers are likely to perceive much more credibility associated with global brands that are endorsed by highly recognizable endorsers (Dwivedi et al., 2016). Consumer brand recognition helps to establish a positive and lasting consumer-brand relationship (Harrison-Walker, 2001) and to form perceptions of high brand quality and brand love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). The empirical research of Albert and Merunka (2013) indicated that brand identification is positively related to brand love. Berger and Ward (2010) confirmed that people with more cultural capital in a particular domain prefer subtle signals that provide differentiation from the mainstream. De Meulenaer et al. (2015) also suggested that when consumers form a psychological preference for a specific brand due to stimulating factors (such as personality design and color collocation), this preference can arouse positive emotions that help consumers develop deep love for the brand. In this study, the use of sports stars' personal brands is a novel strategy that encourages consumers to identify with a brand.

The source model provides an appropriate theoretical basis for this study (Erdogan, 1999; Gong and Li, 2017). The source credibility model regards trustworthiness and expertise as two elements of source characteristics to address the question of why celebrity endorsement leads to a favorable attitude toward the endorsed brand (Ohanian, 1990). The match between a brand and a celebrity is also vital to the effectiveness of endorsements (Till and Busler, 2000). Therefore, based on previous studies, attractiveness, expertise and congruence are used in this study to measure the characteristics of sports stars' personal branding. First, attractiveness is identified as another influential factor that arouses consumers' interest and generates a positive endorsement effect (Hung et al., 2011). Previous studies have found that customers tend to purchase products endorsed by attractive spokespersons (Erdogan, 1999). Second, existing studies show that consumers tend to trust global brands and prefer to choose products endorsed by reliable spokespeople (Spry et al., 2011). Sports stars are believed to hold expert opinions on sports products. A high-expertise spokesperson is considered reliable and persuasive and is positively related to consumers' purchase intention (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Additionally, the match-up theory suggests that high athlete-product congruence produces more positive consumer attitudes toward athlete endorsements on social media (Cunningham and Bright, 2012).

Although research on the direct influence of personal celebrity brands is lacking, some studies have found that online celebrity endorsement could be valuable for motivating customers' purchase intention (Wei and Lu, 2013). Therefore, this paper argues that in the context of sports stars, personalized brands, attractiveness, expertise and congruence are all positively related to consumers' global brand love. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a. *The attractiveness of a sports star's personal brand has a positive influence on consumers' global brand love.*

H1b. The expertise of a sports star's personal brand has a positive influence on consumers' global brand love.

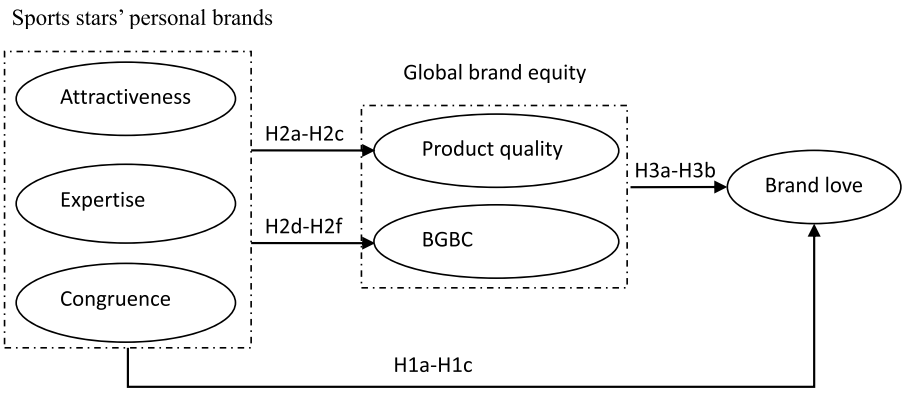

Fig. 1. Research model.

H1c. The congruence of a sports star's personal brand has a positive influence on consumers' global brand love.

2.6. The impact of personal brands on the perception of global brand equity

Building a global brand is becoming a competitive goal for many enterprises to pursue a larger market segment (Akaka and Alden, 2010). Global brands represent a strong global reputation, quality, a sense being fashionable and greater responsibility (Holt et al., 2004). Previous studies have indicated that customers tend to buy global brands, whose brand equity is often superior to that of competitors (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Brand managers attempt to build global brand equity by positioning their brands as global (Gammoh et al., 2011). Global symbols (e.g., the brand name, logo, symbols, and spokesperson) are considered pivotal antecedents to build brand equity (Alden et al., 1999). De Meulenaer et al. (2015) found that global visual elements in an advertisement are positively related to perceptions of a brand's globalness and brand attitude. Tsai (2005) showed that consumers' association with products is strongly related to perceived brand quality. Indeed, many scholars have provided evidence that global brands signify high product quality (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Sports celebrities endorse brands with high brand equity to maintain their reputations. As discussed above, attractiveness, expertise, and the congruence of source characteristics are the critical antecedents to improve consumers' evaluation of brands. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a. Attractiveness has a positive influence on product quality.

H2b. Expertise has a positive influence on product quality.

H2c. Congruence has a positive influence on product quality.

GCC theory suggests that the members of a global consumer market segment share meaningful sets of symbols associated with consumption (e.g., category, brand and consumer activity) (Akaka and Alden, 2010). Therefore, sponsoring a global sporting event is helpful for enterprises in establishing a global brand image, and a global brand can build consumers' global citizenship and cultural themes by using core cultural symbols (e.g., language, aesthetic style, and story theme) (Alden et al., 1999). The existing research shows that when building a global brand, even if the brand is not widely distributed throughout the world, enterprises can influence the global sense of the brand by using a particular language (such as using English in advertising for the brand) or an aesthetic style (such as a spokesman or brand logo) in brand communication (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Alden et al. (1999) outlined three strategies that can help enterprises establish a global brand image in consumers' minds: the use of symbols that visually spell out a brand name, the use of symbols that represent a brand, and the use of a central theme or spokesperson. Gammoh et al. (2015) found that consumers prefer global brands because they help them identify with an imagined global culture. Global brands have a universal symbol and a high level of social prestige, which improve these consumers' belief in a global citizenship. According to De Meulenaer et al. (2015), the spokesperson and the brand logo determine the perceived brand globalness of a global brand. In this study, sports stars' personal brands are symbols that combine with the effects of sports stars' charisma and brand endorsement to deliver brand value to consumers and create a brand association. Therefore, this paper argues that in the context of sports stars' personal brands, the three dimensions of attractiveness, expertise, and congruence are beneficial to the construction of global brand equity. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2d. Attractiveness has a positive influence on beliefs in global brand citizenship.

H2e. Expertise has a positive influence on beliefs in global brand citizenship.

H2f. Congruence has a positive influence on beliefs in global brand citizenship.

2.7. The impact of consumers' perception of global brand equity on brand love

We speculate that global brand equity has an effect on consumers' attitudes and behavior. The basic premise of the study of global brand effects and value is to demonstrate the unique equity value offered by a brand that differs from the value offered by a common brand (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007). First, signals of the quality of global brands account for up to 44% of the variation in global brand preference among consumers (Holt et al., 2004). Holt et al. (2004) used specific global brands as research subjects to identify the key features associated with global brands, namely, quality signals, BGBC, and social responsibility. Superior quality is the main embodiment of a brand. Second, the stronger consumers' BGBC is, the more likely they are to believe that a global brand can help them establish relationships with like-minded people and a global identity (Strizhakova et al., 2011). That is, consumers can raise their status as members of global market segments or strengthen their self-image as modern individuals with global vision and knowledge, such as fashionable youth, business elites, and IT talent, by purchasing a particular global brand. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H3a. Consumers' perception of the product quality of a global brand has a positive influence on brand love.

H3b. Consumers' belief in global brand citizenship has a positive influence on brand love.

3. Methodology

3.1. Measurement

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, all the variables included in this study were obtained from prior research and reworded to relate specifically to the context of sports stars' personal branding. We invited three colleagues who are well versed in the field to revise the statements in the questionnaire via the two-way translation method. This study divided sports stars' personal brands into three dimensions (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence). These dimensions come from the source credibility model and the source attractiveness model (Ohanian, 1990). The study included nine items derived from Chang (2014), with a reliability of 0.922. Representative items included "The personal brand of the celebrity is designed well", "The personal brand of the celebrity looks professional", and "The personal brand of the celebrity used to endorse the brand product is understandable".

The scale of product quality was adopted from Steenkamp et al. (2003), which has three items, with a reliability of 0.935. A representative item was "The product quality of this brand is very good". BGBC was measured mainly following Strizhakova et al., (2011) research, with a reliability of 0.904. A representative item was "Buying the products of this brand makes me feel that I am a citizen of the world". This study adopted a single dimension from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) to measure brand love, with a reliability of 0.913. The scale had six items, and a representative item was "This is an amazing brand". All the items in this study were measured using a 7-point Likert scale.

3.2. Samples and data collection

Most sports, such as basketball, football, golf, tennis, cycling, and Formula 1, have designed personalized brands for specific sports stars and merged these athletes' personal brands with the sport's corporate brand. Stars such as basketball star Kobe Bryant and two top soccer players, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, have their own logos as their personal brand identities for sports products, as shown in Fig. 2.

The research subjects were consumers of global sports brands. In a

pilot study, we used So Jump (a leading online survey agent in China) to ask sports enthusiasts to randomly recall their favorite sports star and products endorsed by the star's personalized brand. Four sports stars' brands (those of Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo) and sneakers were chosen for data analysis because these four sports stars are mentioned the most frequently in China. Four types of stimuli were presented in the survey, with two sports (soccer and basketball) and two brands (Nike and Adidas). In this way, this study tries to prove that the effect of sports celebrities' personal brands on brand love meets the robustness requirement.

The participants were presented with one personal brand logo of the four stars randomly without mentioning the stars' names. Our final sample required the individuals who had bought at least one of the four products to him/her. Our data were collected from the "Nike+" section of "HUPU". "HUPU" is an online community founded in 2004 that focuses on the NBA, CBA, football and Chinese super league, including the discussion of F1, tennis, NFL and other sports content. There are more than 700,000 daily posts on "HUPU" and 55 million active users. In the online investigation, 500 "private" messages were sent to target responders (125 copies for each of the four stars mentioned above), and each user was offered a subsidy of 5 RMB. The "private" messages can be used by clicking the users' "HUPU" IDs. After excluding 128 invalid questionnaires with incomplete answers or response times that were too short, we ultimately obtained 372 valid questionnaires. The effective rate was 74.4%. In the final sample, there were 112 copies related to Jordan's personal logo, 105 copies for Kobe Bryant, 83 copies for Cristiano Ronaldo, and 72 copies for Lionel Messi.

Males accounted for more than half of the total population (60.48%). The largest proportion of respondents were between 18 and 25 years of age (49.19%), and respondents with a bachelor's degree accounted for 47.04% of the sample. With regard to the nationalities of the respondents, 79% were Chinese, 8.9% were from Southeast Asia, and 5.9% were from southeast Africa. The vast majority of the respondents knew the sports star brands that were included in this study (93.55%). Of the respondents, 40.59% had a strong impression of the virtual brand identity of Michael Jordan, followed by Cristiano Ronaldo (22.31%), Kobe Bryant (18.55%) and Lionel Messi (13.55%).

Messi's personal brand has the lowest returns-ratio and impression, which suggested that the users of "Nike+" purchase much fewer Adidas products, even products endorsed by superstars such as Messi. Moreover, the differences between groups were analyzed using one-way ANOVA. The results indicated that the four groups (Jordan, Bryant, Ronaldo and Messi) had no significant differences in terms of brand love ($P = 0.119 > 0.1$). We also compared the user means for Ronaldo and Messi ($M_R = 4.05$, $SD = 0.61$; $M_M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 155) = 27.49$, $P > 0.05$), Ronaldo and Bryant ($M_R = 4.05$, $SD = 0.61$; $M_B = 4.11$, $SD = 0.79$; $F(1, 188) = 22.05$, $P > 0.1$), and Jordan and Messi ($M_J = 4.15$, $SD = 0.83$; $M_M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 184) = 21.76$, $P > 0.05$) using a T-test. The results show that there are no significant differences in brand love between groups. That is, the personal brands of sports stars played a dominant role in shaping consumers' recognition.

4. Empirical results and analysis

4.1. Common method bias and correlation analysis

Our data were collected from the same source, and there may have been a problem with common method variance (CMV). To control for CMV, this paper encouraged the respondents to fill in the questionnaire together, employed reverse items and allocated the items randomly. Harman's one-factor test was used to test the CMV of this study. The results show that six factors were revealed with principal components factor analysis, accounting for 63.77% of the total variance. The first factors explained 21.79% of the variance. This result shows that no

Fig. 2. Personal logos of sports stars Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

single factor was extracted to explain most of the variance. In addition, through the correlation analysis, we found that the mean values, standard deviations and the Pearson correlation coefficients between these variables were in the moderate range. Table 1 describes the specific results as follows.

4.2. Reliability and validity analysis

To ensure the validity of this study, we first compared the correlation coefficient with the mean square root of AVE to test discriminant validity. The results show that the discriminant validity is good (Table 1). Furthermore, we calculated confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess construct validity (Table 2). In our study, we followed Ozer, (2011) approach to compare the fit indices of competing models. The six-factor model was compared with the five-factor model, four-factor model, three-factor model and single-factor model. We compared nine competition models of the measurement model, which showed that the six-factor model had better structural validity than other alternative models ($\chi 2/df = 2.007$, RMSEA = 0.066, CFI = 0.963, GFI = 0.952, IFI = 0.964, and TLI = 0.933). Therefore, the validity of the measure model was acceptable. In addition, the factor loading of scale items is calculated, and the results indicate that all of the factor loading of scale items is greater than 0.5, which means that the measurement items loaded well for the expected constructs.

The coefficient of Cronbach's alpha was calculated to evaluate the reliability of the scales. The results show that each variable's Cronbach's alpha value was greater than 0.7 (see section of measurement). The composite reliability of attractiveness, expertise, and congruence was 0.873, 0.833, and 0.887, respectively. The value of product quality and BGBC was 0.774 and 0.831, respectively, and brand love was 0.932. Thus, this research has good reliability.

4.3. Structural equation model analysis

This study used a structural equation model to examine the relationship mechanism between the characteristics of sports celebrities' personal brands, product quality, belief in global brand citizenship and brand love. Based on our research model, seven competing models (m1-m7, as shown in Fig. 3) were constructed, and the optimal structural model was identified by comparing the fit index of the hypothesis model and the competition model.

M1 was used to test the full mediating effect of product quality (PQ) and belief in global brand citizenship (BGBC) between characteristics of sports celebrities' personal brand (CSCPL) and brand love (BL). M2 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the attractiveness of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the expertise and congruence of CSCPL and BL. M3 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the expertise of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the attractiveness and congruence of CSCPL and BL. M4 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the congruence of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the attractiveness and expertise of CSCPL and BL. M5 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the attractiveness and congruence of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the expertise of CSCPL and BL. M6 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the attractiveness and expertise of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the congruence of CSCPL and BL. M7 was constructed to test whether PQ and BGBC partially mediated the expertise and congruence of CSCPL and BL and to test whether PQ and BGBC fully mediated the attractiveness of CSCPL and BL. As shown in Table 3, the fit indexes of the research model (first line) and the competition model were compared, and the seven competition models and the existing data were well matched, but the fit index of the hypothesis model was not significantly improved. Therefore, the research model is the best model for this study.

Following a two-stage method, the structural model was calculated, and the results are shown in Table 4. Specifically, we have the following statistical results: the effect of attractiveness on brand love was not significant ($\beta = 0.103$, P = 0.129), but the effects of expertise and congruence on brand love were supported. The effect of attractiveness and congruence on product quality was not supported, but the influence coefficient of expertise on product quality was proven significant ($\beta = 0.271$, P = 0.009). Moreover, the influence effects of attractiveness,

Table 2
Competition model of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Variable	χ2/df	CFI	GFI	TLI	IFI	RMR	RMSEA
Six-factor model	2.007	0.963	0.952	0.933	0.964	0.056	0.066
Five-factor model a	5.472	0.765	0.739	0.767	0.783	0.136	0.117
Five-factor model b	5.468	0.768	0.741	0.771	0.786	0.131	0.113
Five-factor model c	5.472	0.764	0.738	0.765	0.781	0.138	0.118
Four-factor model a	5.135	0.602	0.689	0.665	0.691	0.153	0.109
Four-factor model b	5.133	0.605	0.691	0.668	0.692	0.152	0.107
Four-factor model c	5.136	0.601	0.687	0.663	0.689	0.153	0.109
Three-factor model	4.255	0.792	0.766	0.785	0.796	0.143	0.096
Single-factor model	12.355	0.522	0.625	0.485	0.528.	0.294	0.231

Note: Attr, expe, and cong, are attractiveness, expertise, and congruence, respectively; PQ means product quality; BGBC means belief in global brand citizenship; BL means brand love.
Six-factor model: attr; expe; cong; PQ; BGBC; BL.
Five-factor model a: attr; expe + cong; PQ; BGBC; BL.
Five-factor model b: attr; expe; cong; PQ + BGBC; BL.
Five-factor model c: attr + expe; cong; PQ; BGBC; BL.
Four-factor model a: attr + expe + cong; PQ; BGBC; BL.
Four-factor model b: attr + expe; cong; PQ + BGBC; BL.
Four-factor model c: attr; expe + cong; PQ + BGBC; BL.
Three-factor model: attr + expe + cong; PQ + BGBC; BL.
Single-factor model: attr + expe + cong + PQ + BGBC + BL.

Table 1
Correlation coefficients between variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Attractiveness	0.780					
2. Expertise	0.655**	0.756				
3. Congruence	0.551**	0.664**	0.803			
4. BGBC	0.352**	0.367**	0.592**	0.719		
5. Product quality	0.463**	0.495**	0.512**	0.584**	0.789	
6. Brand love	0.596**	0.567**	0.518**	0.602**	0.587**	0.798
M	5.23	5.03	5.49	6.04	4.82	5.18
SD	1.652	1.786	1.367	1.001	0.982	1.82

Notes: BGBC means belief in global brand citizenship; the diagonal value is the square root of AVE; ***$P < 0.001$, **$P < 0.01$, and *$P < 0.05$.

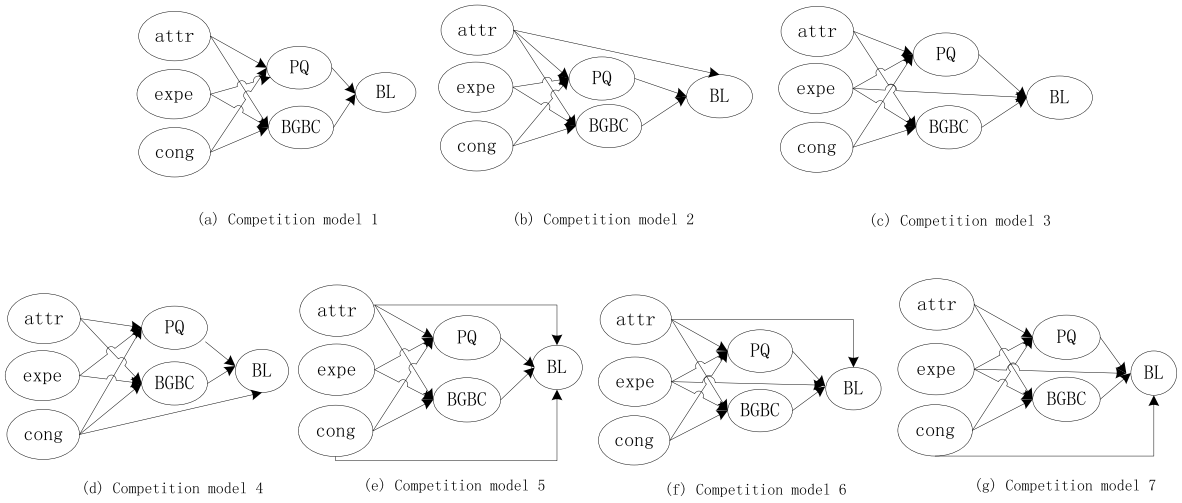

Fig. 3. Seven competition model.

Table 3
Comparison of fit results of the structural equation model.

Model	χ^2/df	CFI	GFI	TLI	IFI	RMSEA
Research model	1.612	0.898	0.902	0.914	0.915	0.068
M_1	1.618	0.898	0.901	0.914	0.915	0.068
M_2	1.714	0.887	0.894	0.904	0.901	0.082
M_3	1.712	0.889	0.898	0.909	0.903	0.082
M_4	1.712	0.889	0.900	0.909	0.903	0.082
M_5	2.223	0.891	0.896	0.907	0.898	0.079
M_6	2.234	0.887	0.894	0.904	0.896	0.079
M_7	2.235	0.890	0.896	0.907	0.898	0.079

Table 4
Path coefficient and hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	C.R.	P-value	Support or not
H1a: Attractiveness→brand love	0.103	1.517	0.129	No
H1b: Expertise→brand love	0.249*	4.608	0.011	Yes
H1c: Congruence→brand love	0.178*	3.826	0.048	Yes
H2a: Attractiveness→product quality	0.011	0.497	0.137	No
H2b: Expertise→product quality	0.271**	5.497	0.009	Yes
H2c: Congruence→product quality	0.076	0.208	0.835	No
H2d: Attractiveness→BGBC	0.198*	2.273	0.042	Yes
H2e: Expertise→BGBC	0.206*	3.312	0.037	Yes
H2f: Congruence→BGBC	0.196*	2.179	0.042	Yes
H3a: Product quality→brand love	0.187*	2.159	0.045	Yes
H3b: BGBC→brand love	0.316**	3.072	0.001	Yes

Note: ***$P < 0.001$, **$P < 0.01$, and *$P < 0.05$.

expertise and congruence on BGBC are supported, and the influence effect of product quality and BGBC on brand love is also supported.

To test the mediating effects of product quality and BGBC between attractiveness, expertise, congruence and brand love, the bootstrapping method was used (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). By iterating 5000 times, the indirect effects of attractiveness on brand love through the mediating effect of BGBC were significant (L −0.1814, U −0.0107). This result means that BGBC fully mediated attractiveness and brand love. Similarly, the indirect effects of expertise on brand love through the mediation of BGBC were significant (L −0.2017, U 0.0305). The indirect effects of expertise on brand love through the mediation of product quality were significant (L −0.1706, U 0.0412). That is, BGBC and product quality both act as a partially mediated variable between expertise and brand love. Lastly, the indirect effects of congruence on brand love through the mediating variables of BGBC were significant (L −0.1406, U 0.0313). Thus, BGBC partially mediated the relationship between congruence and brand love. The results of the revised model fit indexes show that $\chi 2/df = 2.352$, RMSEA = 0.076, CFI = 0.903, GFI = 0.912, IFI = 0.927, and TLI = 0.924. Attractiveness impacted on BGBC significantly ($\beta = 0.198$, $P < 0.05$); expertise had a salient effect on PQ ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.01$), BGBC ($\beta = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$) and brand love ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.05$); congruence had a salient effect on BGBC ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.05$) and brand love ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.05$); and PQ ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.05$) and BGBC ($\beta = 0.316$, $p < 0.01$) had a salient effect on brand love. The revised model is shown in Fig. 4.

5. Discussion

With the rise in global consumer culture, specific consumer groups tend to have the same consumption needs and homogeneous preferences, rendering positioning strategies increasingly attractive to global brands (Frank et al., 2016). Global consumer culture was created by enhancing consumers' identity regarding brand and image, which results in feelings of global belongingness (Strizhakova et al., 2011). For instance, global market segment Generation Y shares a common perception of bungee jumping as being "cool" (Ferguson, 2011). Based on the theory of global consumer culture and self-expansion theory, this study explored the influence of sports stars' personal brand characteristics on consumers' brand love from the perspective of consumers' perceptions of global brand equity. This paper obtained the following conclusions.

First, this study adopted the novel strategy of using sports stars' personal brands to build global brand equity. From the perspective of semiotics and symbol consumption, a personalized brand is the most important visual brand symbol and has a critical impact on the construction of brand equity (De Meulenaer et al., 2015). Our study shows that highly popular sports stars have a strong market appeal to global consumers in the context of global consumers' cultural convergence. Our results also suggest that the effect of sports stars' personal brands suppressed the influence of the corporate brands they endorsed. The powerful endorsement effect involves mainly combining sports stars' personal brand charisma with product endorsements and embedding sports stars' personal brands in products. Our research confirmed that sports stars' personal brand characteristics have a significant influence on consumers' perception of BGBC. However, the effects of attractiveness and congruence on product quality were not supported. One possible reason for this result is that high product quality has been

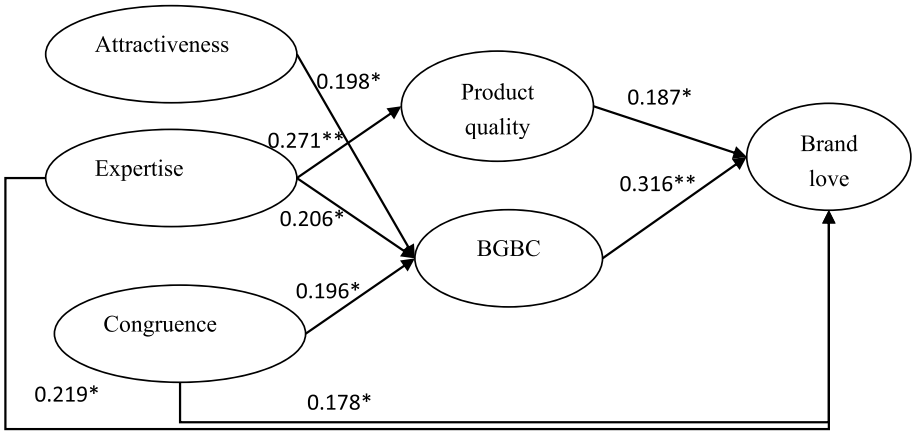

Fig. 4. The revised model.

considered to be the basic attribute of global brands due to improvements in product manufacturing processes. Consumers tend to seek the symbolic value rather than the functional value of a global brand.

Second, this study found that the personal brands of sports celebrities can facilitate consumers' brand love. However, the direct effect of the attractiveness of sports stars' personal brands on brand love is not supported. A possible explanation for this result is that the attractiveness of personal brands is difficult to evaluate and hardly any brand would adopt an unattractive personal brand design. Our research finding is consistent with Gong and Li (2017) finding that the attenuated influence of source characteristics occurs outside of reality. Generally, this study considered sports stars' personal brands as visual equity that is shared and appreciated by audiences from the same community of global consumer culture to facilitate self-expansion. From the perspective of visual equity as perceived by consumers, consumers' perceptions of the prominence of a virtual brand can arouse consumers' positive attitudes (Han et al., 2010). The brand prominence of a virtual brand refers to the intensity of the reaction generated among consumers by visual brand elements such as brand mascots, logos, slogans, and badges. As Farhana (2012) concluded, both strong and weak brand elements need to be well integrated, which will contribute to brand equity and a closer consumer-brand relationship. Therefore, from the perspective of consumption semiotics, a global brand should be designed to satisfy consumers' needs with regard to aesthetic and symbolic value.

Finally, global brand equity may be the missing link between the attractiveness, expertise, and congruence characteristics of sports stars' brands and consumers' global brand love. Global consumer culture means global consumers share and spread the consumption signs and behaviors, which are commonly understood and interpreted according to local meaning systems (Huang, 2010). International advertising is considered a critical factor in diffusing global consumer culture and reflecting cultural symbols in a specific culture (Akaka and Alden, 2010). This study contends that the global image of sports stars helps customers develop enhanced self-worth and a sense of global community through interactions with these stars and brands. From the perspective of soft-sell (image-based) and hard-sell (quality-based) approaches, this study considered two dimensions of global brand equity – product quality and BGBC – as mediators of the relationship between the attractiveness, expertise, and congruence characteristics of sports stars' brands and consumers' global brand love.

The contribution of the present research is three-fold. First, this study found a novel path that links sports stars' personal brands with consumers' brand love in the context of global consumer culture. Our research empirically confirmed Alden et al., (1999) conclusion that personalized brands can contribute to the development of deep and enduring relationships of brand love. Second, the mediation of global brand product quality and the belief in global brand citizenship between the characteristics of sports stars' personal brands and brand love was introduced and empirically tested. Finally, the present research provides directions and inspiration for brand management in the global market.

5.1. Implications

This study provides some suggestions for global sports brand marketing in China.

First, sports stars are valuable assets, and using sports stars and the iconicity of sports stars' personal brands to endorse brands is a novel strategy to build global brand equity. The extant research shows that the endorsement of brands by sports stars can attract consumers' attention and affection by enhancing aesthetics and memorability in traditional visual marketing and influence marketing. On the one hand, visual elements such as logo shape, picture color, and even the location of products in a picture have a subtle effect on consumers' cognitive process and outcomes (Amis and Silk, 2010). As a result, an increasing number of companies have begun to adopt more sophisticated visual designs for brand management. For example, at the visual expression level, Google's series of products are depicted in a flat, minimalist style to maintain consistency and continuity, which has been very successful for Google's brand identity. On the other hand, personalized brands fully translate the influence of sports celebrities to the product, which enhances consumers' brand identity. Brand identity is an integral part of brand equity and an important element of a visual brand. Furthermore, brand identity is a visual asset that strengthens consumer brand association and brand image (Lightfoot and Gertsman, 1998). For example, the global purchasers of Air Jordan basketball shoes may support Michael Jordan and hope that they can also be outstanding in the field one day.

Second, global sports brand marketers should consider crafting global brand equity and using endorsements by charismatic megastars to cultivate consumers' brand love in global markets. With the rise in global consumer culture and the continuous growth of the Chinese economy, there is currently a historic opportunity for Chinese global brands to overtake their competitors by building global brand equity. The study results show that using the sports star endorsement strategy can achieve the perfect combination of the star effect and brand awareness, resulting in the effective transfer of the endorsement effect and promoting support for increased brand love among sports stars' fans. Consumers produce psychological links in the process of interacting with a brand and incorporate the meaning, quality and vision of the brand into their own values. Moreover, consumers can be unconsciously drawn to a brand and even engage in passionate, strong, and long-term brand relationships or brand love (Batra et al., 2012). For example, the Chinese sports company PEAK signed a contract with basketball star Shane Battier for 9 years, which created a unique opportunity for active

U.S. national team players to sign endorsement contracts with Chinese companies. The signature shoes that PEAK designed for Shane Battier have become the most popular basketball shoes in China. Signing a contract with Shane Battier made the "PEAK" brand famous at home and abroad, greatly improving PEAK's brand reputation and brand equity in the global market.

6. Conclusions

This paper addressed the new phenomenon of using the iconicity of sports celebrities as a GCC strategy in the context of the global sports brand boom and revealed the theoretical mechanism that underlies consumer responses to such strategies. From a cultural perspective, prior research has suggested that personalized brands are essential for creating brand awareness and brand equity (van Grinsven and Das, 2016), and the strategic use of athlete endorsements in global markets is an effective approach (Chang et al., 2014). The results of this paper reveal that the characteristics of sports stars' personal brands (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence) are all positively related to BGBC. BGBC fully mediates the relationship between attractiveness and brand love but has a partial mediating effect between expertise, congruence and brand love. Product quality only partially mediates the relationship between expertise and brand love. This study's findings suggest that it is appropriate to use sports stars' personal brands on global social media to craft and maintain global brand equity and increase consumers' brand love.

6.1. Limitations and agenda for further research

There are several limitations associated with this study. First, we tested our research model in the context of the global sports industry. Because of the extraordinary influence of global sports stars, the effect of other celebrities' private brands may have great differences across industries. Second, this paper considered product quality and belief in global brand citizenship as two dimensions of global equity, an approach that has not been explicitly proposed in prior studies. Although this method can simplify the understanding of global brand equity, the measurement itself may be incomplete or inaccurate. Third, this study considered a personal brand as a holistic construct that includes the logo name, color and shape (Farhana, 2012) but did not test the effect of name or shape on brand love separately. Thus, our research did not fully distinguish the effect of the logo, the effect of the brand and the effect of the sports star. Future research should adopt a different design (perhaps an experimental design) to resolve these questions. Finally, cross-sectional data were used to test the model. Future researchers may consider adopting company-consumer match data to avoid the problem of CMV.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.102012.

Appendix. Measure Items and factor loading

Variables	Items	Factor loading
Attractiveness	The personal brand of the celebrity is designed well	0.789
	The personal brand of the celebrity makes me feel comfortable	0.801
	The personal brand of the celebrity is attractive	0.752
Expertise	The personal brand of the celebrity looks professional	0.724
	The personal brand of the celebrity looks experienced	0.737
	The personal brand of the celebrity looks knowledgeable	0.805
Congruence	The personal brand of the celebrity used to endorse the brand product is understandable	0.736
	The personal brand of the celebrity used to endorse the brand product is appropriate	0.822
	It makes sense for this personal brand to be featured with the celebrity	0.829
Product quality	The product quality of this brand is very good	0.698
	I choose brands because of the quality they represent.	0.622
	This brand tells me a great deal about the market quality of a product	0.824
BGBC	Buying the products of this brand makes me feel that I am a citizen of the world	0.751
	Purchasing the products of this brand makes me feel like part of something bigger	0.824
	Buying global brands gives me a sense of belonging to the global marketplace	0.789
Brand love	This is an amazing brand	0.775
	This brand makes me very happy	0.834
	This brand is a pure delight	0.791
	I'm very attached to this brand	0.836
	I am passionate about this brand	0.722
	I love this brand!	0.842

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