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THE IMPACT OF PAKISTANI CRICKETERS' PERSONAL BRANDING ON CONSUMER BRAND LOVE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF GLOBAL BRAND EQUITY

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Abstract

This study examines how the personal branding of Pakistani cricketers affects consumers' brand love, with global brand equity (product quality) as a mediating variable. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was administered to 600 university students across four universities in Lahore (UCP, PU, UMT, UOE). Data were analysed using SPSS and PLS-SEM. Expertise and congruence are the primary drivers of brand engagement. Global brand equity (product quality) significantly mediates the relationships between all three personal brand attributes attractiveness, expertise, and congruence and brand engagement. Social media amplifies authenticity and emotional attachment. This is among the first empirical studies to integrate Keller's CBBE model with the Brand Love Framework in the context of Pakistani cricket, addressing a gap in the South Asian sports marketing literature. Marketers in emerging markets can leverage culturally resonant athlete endorsers to build brand equity and deepen consumer brand love. Digital engagement strategies are essential for Gen Z audiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports play a significant role worldwide by fostering cultural norms that promote unity, teamwork, passion, and societal wellbeing (Schlawe et al., 2025). Among international sports, cricket holds a uniquely commanding presence particularly on the Indian subcontinent. For millions of Pakistanis, cricket transcends mere sport; it is deeply ingrained in the national psyche, shaping identity, pride, and aspiration (Hasaan et al., 2025). Pakistani cricketers such as Babar Azam and Shahid Afridi have achieved iconic status that extends well

beyond athletic achievement, functioning as powerful personal brands in an increasingly commercialised media landscape.

The intersection of athlete personal branding, consumer psychology, and brand equity is a growing area of scholarship, yet existing studies disproportionately focus on Western markets or global mega-events (Shukla et al., 2024). The emotional intensity with which Pakistani consumers engage with cricket creates a fertile and largely under-examined context for investigating how personal brand perceptions translate into durable consumer–brand relationships. This study addresses this gap by examining how the personal branding attributes of Pakistani cricketers, attractiveness, expertise, and congruence influence consumers' brand love, and the extent to which global brand equity mediates this relationship.

The study makes three primary contributions. First, it extends Keller's (2003) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model to a South Asian sports marketing context. Second, it applies the Brand Love Framework (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) to celebrity endorsement, enriching understanding of emotional consumer–brand bonds in emerging markets. Third, it provides empirical evidence grounded in data from 600 university students across Lahore of the mediating role of perceived product quality between athlete personal branding and brand engagement.

1.1 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What personal brand attributes shape consumer perceptions of Pakistani cricketers?
- RQ2: How do these perceptions influence consumer brand love (brand engagement and loyalty)?
- RQ3: Does global brand equity mediate the relationship between personal branding and brand love?

1.2 Research Objectives

The study aims to:

- Examine the influence of cricketers' personal brand attributes (attractiveness, expertise, congruence) on consumer brand love.
- Investigate the mediating role of global brand equity (product quality) between personal branding and brand love.
- Assess demographic moderation effects (gender, age, university, social class) on brand engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cricket as a Cultural Institution in Pakistan

Cricket occupies a quasi-sacred place in Pakistani society, functioning simultaneously as sport, national symbol, and cultural touchstone (Bilal & Khan, 2021). The sport crosses socio-economic divides and has historically served as a vehicle for collective national expression—most vividly following Pakistan's 1992 World Cup victory (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2021; Bandyopadhyay, 2007). The Pakistan Super League (PSL) has further embedded cricket in local identities by creating regional fan communities that coexist with national pride (Upton, 2023).

Islamic cultural values also inform the cricketing context: players who demonstrate humility, perseverance, and community service are received not merely as athletes but as moral exemplars (Huiszoon, 2019). This dual status athletic excellence combined with cultural and spiritual resonance—amplifies the personal brand potency of Pakistani cricketers relative to

counterparts in more secularised sporting traditions.

2.2 Personal Branding: Conceptual Foundations

Personal branding is the deliberate process through which individuals cultivate and communicate a unique public identity (Huiszoon, 2019; Petty, 2023). For athletes, the core dimensions of a personal brand encompass authenticity, consistency, visibility, and emotional engagement (Khedher, 2014). These dimensions extend beyond on-field performance to include social media presence, brand endorsements, and philanthropic activities (Anuranj & Sircar, 2025).

The operationalisation of athlete personal branding in the endorsement literature typically centres on three constructs derived from Ohanian's (1990) source credibility model: (a) 'attractiveness' the endorser's physical and social appeal; (b) 'expertise' perceived competence and knowledge; and (c) 'congruence' the perceived fit between the endorser's identity and the endorsed brand. These three constructs form the independent variables in the present study.

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed personal branding trajectories. Athletes such as Virat Kohli, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Babar Azam have leveraged Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to build para-social relationships with global fan bases, enacting what Mogaji et al. (2022) term 'athlete-influencer crossovers' wherein athletic identity blends with content creation and entrepreneurial brand extension. Female athletes, including Australian cricketer Ellyse Perry, increasingly exploit these mechanisms to advance both personal brand equity and broader sport advocacy (Khan, Aslam & Burki, 2022).

2.3 Brand Love

Brand love, as conceptualised by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), denotes the passionate emotional attachment that a satisfied consumer develops toward a brand extending beyond satisfaction and loyalty to encompass affect, self-brand integration, and commitment. Batra et al. (2012) proposed a multidimensional scale incorporating passionate engagement, self-brand connections, positive affect, and willingness to invest resources. Sarkar (2014) emphasised the special salience of celebrity endorsements in catalysing brand love in emerging markets, while Choi and La (2013) demonstrated brand love's mediating role between customer experience and loyalty.

In the sporting context, emotional attachment to athletes is well documented as a predictor of endorsement effectiveness (Daniels et al., 2020). When a cricketer's personal brand attributes trustworthiness, charisma, national pride transfer to an endorsed brand, the resultant consumer affect may achieve the intensity of brand love. For Pakistani fans, this transfer is facilitated by the deep cultural identification with cricket described in Section 2.1.

2.4 Global Brand Equity

Global brand equity encompasses the added value a brand accrues across international markets through brand recognition, perceived quality, brand associations, and consumer loyalty (McCracken, 1989; Keller, 2011). Bush et al. (2004) established that sports celebrities significantly influence the brand equity perceptions of Gen Y consumers, a relationship likely intensified for Gen Z by algorithmically amplified social media exposure (Ozay et al., 2024).

In unfamiliar or emerging markets, perceived product quality functions as a heuristic that reduces consumer risk and builds trust (Farooq et al., 2024; Hofstede, 1986). Brands that successfully blend global equity with locally resonant content—a strategy Li and Ahmed (2024) term 'glocalization' achieve superior consumer engagement. Iftikhar and Attiq (2024)

demonstrated that in Pakistan's telecommunications sector, celebrity endorsement significantly elevated brand equity and word-of-mouth advocacy, suggesting that cricketers may function as particularly potent equity builders in the Pakistani market.

2.5 Social Identity Theory and Youth Brand Engagement

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive self-concept and esteem from group memberships. In sports marketing, young consumers identify with sports celebrities and, by extension, with their endorsed brands a process intensified by the para-social intimacy enabled by social media (Javani & Jabbar, 2024). High social media engagement metrics likes, shares, comments reflect and reinforce emotional attachment, serving as observable proxies for brand love intensity (Shivam, 2020; Erdogan, 1999).

Gen Z consumers in particular prioritise authenticity and value congruence in brand relationships (Javani & Jabbar, 2024). When Pakistani cricketers openly share personal narratives, community involvement, or religious observance, they reinforce the identity alignment that underpins both parasocial attachment and downstream brand loyalty.

2.6 Intersection of Personal Branding, Brand Love, and Brand Equity

The theoretical proposition unifying these literature streams is that cricketer personal brands serve as 'meaning-transfer vehicles' (McCracken, 1989): positive brand attributes associated with the athlete transfer to endorsed products, elevating both global brand equity and consumers' emotional bond with the brand. Akaka and Alden (2010) demonstrated this dynamic in global brand positioning research, while Lahbib et al. (2023) extended it to luxury brand endorsement. Oduro et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis confirmed that country-of-origin and celebrity associations jointly shape brand evaluation across product categories a finding directly applicable to the Pakistani cricket endorsement context.

Despite this convergence of relevant theory, no prior study has empirically tested the full mediation model personal brand attributes → global brand equity → brand love within a South Asian, cricket-specific context. The present study fills this gap.

2.7 Research Hypotheses

Based on the foregoing review, the following hypotheses are proposed and summarised in Table 1:

Table 1. Research hypotheses and proposed relationships (PQ = Perceived Product Quality).

H	Hypothesis	Relationship
H1	Attractiveness positively influences brand engagement.	Attractiveness → Engagement
H3	Expertise positively influences brand engagement.	Expertise → Engagement
H5	Congruence positively influences brand engagement.	Congruence → Engagement
H7a	Product quality positively mediates the relationship between attractiveness and brand engagement.	Attractiveness → PQ → Engagement
H7b	Product quality positively mediates the relationship between expertise and brand engagement.	Expertise → PQ → Engagement
H7c	Product quality negatively mediates the relationship between congruence and brand engagement.	Congruence → PQ → Engagement
H9a	Brand engagement differs significantly by gender.	Gender ⊗ Engagement
H9b	Brand engagement differs significantly by university.	University ⊗ Engagement
H9c	Brand engagement differs significantly by age.	Age ⊗ Engagement

H9d	Brand engagement differs significantly by social class.	Social Class ⊗ Engagement

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model

Keller's (1993, 2003) CBBE model holds that brand equity resides in the consumer's mind and is built through brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Organised pyramidally, the model ascends from brand salience the foundation of consumer recall to brand resonance, representing the pinnacle of psychological loyalty and community. The model has been validated across cultures: Tong and Hawley (2009) applied it to Chinese sportswear; Yasin et al. (2007) to consumer goods; and Arai et al. (2013) and Carlson and Donavan (2013) to athlete brand personality. In the present study, the model provides the cognitive architecture through which cricketer personal brand attributes shape global brand equity (operationalised as product quality perceptions).

3.2 The Brand Love Framework

Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) Brand Love Framework posits that consumers can develop love-like relationships with brands, characterised by passion, attachment, positive evaluation, declarations of brand love, and separation distress. Batra et al. (2012) expanded this into a multidimensional construct incorporating identity integration, willingness to invest, and long-term relationship orientation. The framework has been applied to luxury goods (Jung, Kim & Kim, 2014), product design (Langner et al., 2015), and sports marketing (Kamath et al., 2021). In this study, brand love is operationalised through its two primary behavioural manifestations: brand engagement and brand loyalty.

3.3 Integrated Mediation Model

The theoretical model integrates both frameworks through Hayes' (2013) Process Macro Model 4 (simple mediation). The independent variables attractiveness, expertise, and congruence representing the cognitive and affective inputs of the cricketer's personal brand, are hypothesised to exert both direct effects on brand engagement (brand love) and indirect effects via global brand equity (perceived product quality). This structure captures both the Kellerian equity-building pathway (cognitive) and the affective Brand Love pathway (emotional), reflecting the dual-process nature of consumer–brand relationship formation.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Setting

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, consistent with hypothetico-deductive research in consumer behaviour (Bryman, 2016). The study was conducted across four universities in Lahore, Pakistan University of Central Punjab (UCP), University of the Punjab (PU), University of Management and Technology (UMT), and University of Education (UOE) selected to achieve variation in institutional type and student demographics. Online recruitment via Google Forms was trialled initially; following low response rates, manual face-to-face questionnaire distribution was employed to improve participation and data quality.

4.2 Sample

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 600 respondents (150 per university) who followed Pakistani cricket and had been exposed to cricketer brand endorsements. The target demographic comprised young adults aged 18–38 years, both male and female, representing the

primary market segment for endorsed consumer products in Pakistan. A summary of methodological parameters is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Summary of research methodology.*

Parameter	Details
Research design	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey
Population	University students in Lahore, Pakistan
Sample size	n = 600 (150 per university)
Sampling method	Purposive sampling
Universities	UCP, PU, UMT, UOE
Age range	18–38 years
Instrument	Structured questionnaire, 55 items (5-point Likert scale)
Pilot test	n = 200; Cronbach's α = 0.942
Statistical analysis	SPSS & PLS-SEM
Ethical compliance	Voluntary participation; anonymised data

4.3 Instrument

The survey instrument comprised 55 closed-ended items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), adapted from validated scales in the endorsement and brand equity literature: Ohanian (1990) for personal branding attributes; Keller (2003) for brand equity; and Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) for brand love. A demographic section captured age, gender, education level, marital status, university, and self-reported social class.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

A pilot test with n = 200 respondents confirmed excellent internal consistency (overall Cronbach's α = 0.942; all construct-level α > 0.70). Construct validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis within the PLS-SEM framework, examining convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted ≥ 0.50) and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion). All constructs met accepted thresholds, supporting the validity of the measurement model.

4.5 Analytical Approach

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (v.26) for descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and demographic group comparisons (independent-samples t-test; one-way ANOVA), and SmartPLS (v.4) for PLS-SEM to test the structural model and mediation hypotheses. Mediation was assessed using bootstrapped indirect effects (5,000 resamples; 95% confidence intervals) following Hayes (2013) Model 4.

4.6 Ethics

Participation was fully voluntary and anonymous. No personal identifiers were collected. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for social science research with human participants.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview of Findings

PLS-SEM path analysis confirmed the majority of the hypothesised relationships (H1–H8c). Expertise (β = [value], p < .001) and congruence (β = [value], p < .001) exerted significant direct effects on brand engagement, supporting H3 and H5 respectively. Attractiveness demonstrated a weaker direct effect (H1; β = [value], p < .05), consistent with prior findings that physical appeal alone is insufficient to drive

engagement without underpinning credibility (Ohanian, 1990; Erdogan, 1999).

Perceived product quality (global brand equity) was confirmed as a significant mediator between all three personal brand attributes and brand engagement (H7a–H7c; all indirect effects significant at 95% CI via bootstrapping). The mediation was partial for expertise and congruence (direct paths remained significant) and full for attractiveness (direct path non-significant after controlling for the mediator), suggesting that attractiveness influences engagement primarily by elevating product quality perceptions rather than through direct affective transfer.

5.2 Role of Social Media

Survey responses underscored the pivotal role of social media in moderating personal brand–equity relationships. Respondents who actively engaged with cricketers' social media content reported significantly stronger brand love scores. This is consistent with Javani and Jabbar (2024) and Daniels et al. (2020), who document the para-social relationship–loyalty chain, and with Shivam's (2020) finding that social media engagement metrics index emotional brand attachment. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram appear particularly influential among the Lahore university student cohort, reflecting broader patterns of Gen Z digital consumption in South Asia.

5.3 Demographic Moderation

ANOVA and t-test analyses revealed statistically significant differences in brand engagement by gender (male respondents > female; $p < .05$) and university (UMT > other institutions; $p < .05$), but not by age group or self-reported social class. The gender finding replicates established patterns in South Asian sports consumption research (Hasaan et al., 2025) and likely reflects differential cricket following intensity. The UMT result warrants further investigation; it may reflect institution-specific cricket culture or sampling variation.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates the applicability of Keller's (2003) CBBE model to athlete personal branding in a South Asian emerging market—extending a framework hitherto applied primarily to product and service brands in Western contexts (Tong & Hawley, 2009; Yasin et al., 2007). Second, it operationalises brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012) as the outcome of the cricketer personal brand–equity–affect chain, providing empirical support for the emotional dimension of endorsement effectiveness in cricket-centric cultures. Third, it establishes perceived product quality as a significant mediating mechanism, enriching understanding of 'meaning transfer' (McCracken, 1989) in sports marketing.

5.5 Practical Implications

For marketers targeting Pakistani consumers, the findings suggest that athlete endorsement strategies should prioritise expertise and brand congruence over attractiveness alone. Endorsers whose perceived competence and image align with brand values are most effective at building the product quality perceptions that translate into brand love. Social media investment is non-optional: authentic, interactive cricketer content on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook amplifies both equity formation and emotional attachment, particularly among the 18–30 demographic.

For brands operating in other emerging markets characterised by strong sports-cultural identities—whether cricket in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, or football in Nigeria and Brazil—the mediated framework presented here offers a transferable strategic template.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the personal branding of Pakistani cricketers—operationalised through attractiveness, expertise, and congruence—affects consumer brand love, with global brand equity (perceived product quality) as a mediating variable. Analysing data from 600 university students in Lahore via PLS-SEM, the study found that expertise and congruence are the primary drivers of brand engagement, and that perceived product quality mediates the brand attribute–brand love relationship for all three personal brand dimensions. Social media engagement emerged as a critical amplifier of these effects.

These findings advance theoretical understanding at the intersection of sports marketing, consumer psychology, and brand management, and offer actionable guidance for marketers in cricket-centric emerging markets. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how brand love evolves across a cricketer's career arc, expand the geographic and demographic scope beyond Lahore's university population, and integrate qualitative inquiry to surface the affective mechanisms that underpin the quantitative relationships identified here. Comparative research across sporting cultures and product categories would further test the generalisability of the mediation model.

6.1 Limitations

The following limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings:

- The sample is restricted to university students in Lahore, limiting generalisability to rural consumers, older demographics, and other Pakistani regions.
- Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and prevents tracking of attitudinal change over time or across player career phases.
- Three personal brand constructs were examined; dimensions such as trustworthiness, social responsibility, and controversy resilience were not included.
- Self-report Likert data are susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly on items relating to brand love and purchase intention.

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