

# Branding Process for Professional Football Players in Thailand

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This article aims to study both the composition and process of branding for professional football players in Thailand. Quantitative research is used to obtain the composition of professional football players by using the survey research for 400 football enthusiasts of professional football clubs in Thailand. Additionally, using the Delphi technique to get the branding process for professional football players with the 17 persons as the sample group. The research results found that the branding process for professional football players in Thailand consists of seven steps: 1. Marketing planning of football players; 2. Searching for an athlete's identity: exploring the identity of the athlete; 3. Creating an identity for athletes; 4. Communication of athletes to the public through various channels; 5. Keeping the identity of athletes to be active continuously; 6. Promoting athlete's brand development strategies; and 7. evaluation.

**Key words:** *Brand Building process, Athletes Brand, Professional Football Player.*

## Introduction

Football business in England has originated from a passion of many local fans. Therefore, football clubs can make their revenue through many means, such as ticket sales, merchandise, team souvenirs, sponsorships, and the rights to broadcast live games (TCDC, 2012). Noted in the Deloitte report, the highest record for football club audiences ranking is Manchester United with 75,203 audiences. In 2013, Manchester United generated revenue for a total of £363.2 million (15.3 thousand million Baht), and in 2014 their revenues increased up to £433.2 million (18 thousand million Baht). The sources of revenue for Manchester United came from match day revenue of £108.1 million (4.6 thousand million Baht), broadcasting for a total of £135.8 million (5.8 thousand million Baht), and from sponsorship agreements amounting to £189.3 million (7.9 thousand million Baht) (Deloitte, 2015).

Other than the products and services that football clubs generate income from consumers through, superstar players with skills and good appearance are an additional factor that attracts fans into the stadium, which can generate significant player related memorabilia sales. Relating to this, transfer of the football players between clubs is very important, in order to have superstar players joining the club to help create more income (TCDC, 2012). Deloitte sports business group (Deloitte, 2015) said that Premier Football League had the highest amount of transfer fees spending, with total transfer expenditure of 31,500 million Baht. The most expensive transfer fee was Mesut Özil from Germany, as high as 2,120 million Baht. And the most expensive player who had total transfer expenditure of 4,250 million Baht was Gareth Bale, a Welsh professional footballer. As a very high spend in the transfer window of Premier Football League to get the superstar players with skills and good appearance to join the club, having the potential to create brand building of those superstar players is one of the factors.

Brand building is not only applicable to products and services, but also applicable to individual athletes (Jermsittiparsert, Sutduean, & Sriyakul, 2019). Brand building for athletes is important to bring out their uniqueness and standout image, which can differentiate and create more value to an athlete (Monkolsiri, 2004). Those footballers who have their own brand image will be interested by all merchandise. David Beckham is an example of a good-looking footballer who cares about his appearance, both on and off the field. He also has outstanding skills, which make him a world-famous footballer. He is one of the most recognisable athletes throughout the world, making him a presenter of many famous brands including Adidas, Marks & Spencer clothing, Pepsi, and Gillet razors and shaving products. Beckham generates a minimum income of a thousand million Baht per year.

Beyond the significant income of some athletes — from their own salary and being a merchandise presenter — the athletes who have their own brand image and are admired by million fans until they become an idol, will have a chance to release their own brand. For example, Nike collaborated with Michael Jordan, producing Air Jordan shoes. Nike Golf and Tiger Wood produced The Nike Tiger Woods TW golf clothing, and Cristiano Ronaldo Shoes as well. Not only have famous athletes collaborated with sport corporations to create their own merchandise, but there are very famous athletes — such as David Beckham and Serena Williams — who have their own clothing brand to expand their personal brand image as well. However, expanding personal brand image is not only used within the sport industry. Famous singers, including Jennifer Lopez and Jay Z, have produced their own perfume and clothing under their name. In this regard, brand image is very important; athletes should have their own image in order to create more value and maintain longevity of popularity.

To build the brand image of athletes, the important factors are to identify the character of the athlete, their outstanding skills which make them world famous, and how to make an

emotional connection between the individual and their fans to differentiate them from other athletes. Firstly, marketers must identify the very character of an athlete. This will allow them to create their specific identity, which ultimately becomes their symbol. The identity of the athlete should then be communicated through different media, that can help increase fans' awareness. Based on the interview of the brand building specialist, fans' awareness and fans' perception must always be consistent in order to maintain the public image. Athletes should feature in commercial media consistently, such as broadcasting and all social media. Furthermore, athletes need to maintain a high standard of play to help preserve the longevity of the brand.

In Thailand, brand building can help athletes increase their fame or have their own merchandise. However, at a global level, this is still very limited compared to other countries (Sriyakul, Fangmanee, & Jermstiparsert, 2018). Famous team athletes in Thailand, such as Charyl Chappuis, Teerasilp Dangda, and Chanathip Songkrasin, or famous individual athletes, Paradorn Srichaphan, Tamarine Tanasugarn, Ratchanok Intanon, and Buakaw Banchamek, are limited compared to other countries. However, once their skills deteriorate, their fame, popularity, and value will also deteriorate since their popularity only resulted from their athletic performance at the national level, not from the right and appropriate brand building strategies.

In this regard, to maintain the longevity of the athletes' popularity, the brand building process is an important tool. The research will explore the branding process by identifying the factors and process of brand building for professional footballers in Thailand.

### ***Research objectives***

The objectives of this research are to study the composition of the professional football player brand in Thailand, and to study the process of branding professional football players in Thailand.

### **Literature Review**

Marketing is a business activity which involves the exchange of products and services between a manufacturer and final consumer, to satisfy the final consumer's needs. Marketing does not end at the point of buying products and services, but marketing must be concerned with customer satisfaction after consumption (Wittayaudom, 2012; Sutduean, Joemsittiprasert, & Jermstiparsert, 2019). In accordance with Kongyimplamai (2007), Kotabe (2001: 10), Kotler (1994: 13) and the American Marketing Association, (1985) (referred from Yuwadee Pusamlee, 2004) have stated the meaning of marketing as the process of planning, the executions of concept, the price set up, the advertisement, sale promotion, special offer

and the distribution of idea, goods and services, which create an exchange to satisfy individual needs and achieve organisation objectives. However, marketing also includes marketing of sports as well. Pitts and Stotlar (2013) stated that sport marketing is a process designed to adapt to all sport activities — no matter product, price, promotion and channel distribution of sport product or service to satisfy the consumer needs and organisation objectives. Besides, Mullin and Bernard (2014), Smith (2008) and Millin, Hardy and Sutton (2000) stated that sport marketing encompasses all activities that are designed to meet the needs of sport consumers by the process of market exchanging. Sport marketing is divided into two categories: sport marketing — offering sport products and services directly to consumer; and marketing through sport — products and services which are not related to sport that become involved in the match game or being a team sponsor. However, for the marketers to be successful in sport marketing activities, it is important that they understand the methods of marketing communication and sport marketing communication and can apply the methods in an effective way. Lothongkam (2011) and Shim (2000) stated that marketing communication is public relations that manages communication to consumers to influence how they perceive products and services information. Organisations need to use the proper marketing communication tools, which can be anything from advertising, promotion, personal selling or direct marketing. These tools can incorporate more than one type and should correspond appropriately with products and services.

Nowadays, sport marketing communication is an essential factor in the sport industry (Sutduean, Prianto, & Jernsittiparsert, 2019). Chedchusaksakul (2009) stated that sport marketing communication is the process of an athlete, or anyone who is involved in sport, interacting with a form of identity. Sport marketing communication also emphasises the relationship between the process of sport management, athletes, fans, and all others that are involved. These relationships will affect both athlete and team success. For example, sport marketing communication of Manchester United has used Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). IMC is the mix between the process of marketing and marketing communication to create identity and consumer persuasion, using communication tools as follows. Advertising and public relations can include a team booklet, magazine or website to inform fans about club history. Event marketing is used to launch new products, including rookie inauguration. After new players have joined the team, the club will introduce them to mass media and announce the new player's number. This activity is used to advertise new team members. Regarding display and merchandising, Manchester United has a team store both in and off the stadium. Selling products that feature Manchester United's logo, such as team jerseys, scarfs, caps, watches, or glasses, can create more frequent consumer awareness. Packaging aids consumer brand perception, and Manchester United has designed a remarkable package with its logo. In terms of licensing, Manchester United has sold their logo license to several private companies, including Air Asia, AIG, and Smirnoff. These companies now have the right to use the logo of Manchester United on their products.

The football business in England has originated from a passion of many local fans, creating a significant audience of match spectators. Therefore, football clubs can make their main revenue by selling tickets, merchandise, team souvenirs, sponsorships, and the rights to broadcast live games. Live broadcasts can generate a substantial income. Three football clubs that generate major revenue from this source are Real Madrid C.F., FC Barcelona and Manchester United (TCDC, 2012). In England, football businesses are very successful. Deloitte sports business group (Deloitte, 2015) noted the business of footballer transfers in Europe has the statistic record of £1,845 million pounds (about 92,250 million Baht). Premier Football League had the highest amount of transfer fees spending, with a total transfer expenditure of £630 million pounds (31,500 million Baht), more than the highest rank on 2008 that had a total transfer expenditure of £500 million pounds (25,000 million Baht). The high spending in the transfer window of Premier Football League is to gain superstar players to clubs, to sell that footballers' jersey. In addition, it is “not only footballer skills and abilities that can attract fan to come watch the game, the famous clubs pay attention to increase their revenue by selling the rights to broadcast live games and sponsors”.

Marketing of the Premier Football League in Asia has also widely expanded with the buying of Asian footballers Ki Sung-yueng and Park Ji-sung. They are now the ambassadors of Swansea City A.F.C. and Manchester United. Reinforcing, football clubs in Europe have spent huge expenditure in transferring fees to have superstar players join their clubs. Footballer brand image is another factor driving clubs to entice famous footballers to join their teams. They believe that rather than skills and abilities, footballer brand image can help generate huge income and worth of investment. If Thai professional footballers want to add value to themselves, building brand image is very important. Kotler (1991) stated that brand is the name, word, sign, logo, figure — or a combination of these — to identify that products and services are owned by a company. There are four levels of brand identification. Attributes are the images that consumers can identify a brand by including logo, name, colour, shape of package. Benefits is the benefit that the consumer can feel when using a product or service, including having a good taste, no more dandruff when using shampoo, etc. Value is the perception to product value such as trustworthiness, confidence in use, familiarity because it has been in the market for a long period, is up to date, etc. Personality is creating consumer personality and expecting other's perceptions, such as chic looking, smart buyer, and modern housewife. Laakso (2003-22 referred to Solja Sulkunen, 2012) mentioned that branding adds value to products, compared with the same type of products that do not identify their brand. However, creating a brand is not just creating products and services, it can also be used for individuals as well.

Pettis and Chuck (1998) have presented about personal identity building, “Lessons of personal brand identity”. It said, “Personal branding is not about being someone fake”.

Meaning, personal brand building should not be created from the unreal, but requires finding the real personality of a person and presenting it to society. Members of society will perceive a brand personally, and finally develop this image in their mind. In order to make a footballer become a football star, the footballer must engage in building his own brand. The brand building process is critical to make the footballer become a star and maintain his popularity in the long-term. Football stars also possess high economic value. The theories of brand building are developed by many scholars.

### **Research Methodology**

The Quantitative research and Delphi technique are used as the methodology in this research. The survey is utilised as quantitative research to study the important factors for brand building of professional footballers in Thailand. Delphi technique is used to study the process of brand building for professional footballers in Thailand. The research steps are outlined as follows:

Quantitative research will study the important factors for brand building of professional footballers in Thailand by using survey research with spectators of four professional Thai football clubs. The research comprises a sampling of 400 and uses in-depth interview in order to acquire the data and rationality of factors for building a brand for professional footballers in Thailand. There are 12 stakeholders, including professional footballers, sport marketers of football clubs, sponsors of professional footballers and athletic agents or personal managers.

The Delphi technique is used to study the process of brand building for professional footballers in Thailand. There are 17 experts who were selected as a purposive sampling. The criteria of selection included possessing an expertise in brand building, personal brand building and athlete brand building. The defined sample group must have at least 5 years' experience in brand building — including success in personal brand building — and be able to provide relevant information pertaining to academic marketing, academic sport marketing, personal branding expertise, personal managers, and sponsors of professional footballers.

### *Data Analysis*

1. Quantitative research: a statistical analysis method is used to explain opinions regarding the factors of brand building strategy via frequency, percentage, standard deviation and mean, using the SPSS for Windows program.
2. Delphi technique: statistics used for data collection and analysis are as follows: analyse the consistency of the question by using interquartile range (IQR); and analyse the possibility of each factor that will impact the process of brand building by

using median, explained through the SPSS for Windows program.

## Results

### *Analysis of data on the opinions of factors for brand building strategy for professional footballers in Thailand.*

1.1 The opinions on the factors for professional footballer brand building in Thailand in terms of competencies of a footballer.

The opinions on the factors for professional footballer brand building in Thailand in terms of competencies are sport expertise, sport performance and style of playing of footballer are in high level. For sport expertise of footballer is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.13$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers understand rules and regulations which is at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.35$ ). For sport performance is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.73$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is footballers receive award from competing with the club at both youth and professional level which is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ) and style of playing is high ( $\bar{x} = 4.09$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers display determination and fierceness which the average score is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.11$ )

1.2 The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of lifestyles of footballer.

The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of lifestyles of footballer are history of footballer and Lifestyles are in high level. For the history of footballer is high ( $\bar{x} = 3.68$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers are praised as someone who has determination during practice until becoming a professional footballer which the average level score is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.90$ ). And lifestyles of the footballer is high ( $\bar{x} = 3.74$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers are a role model for social contribution which is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.85$ )

1.3 The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of support.

The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of support are support from people around them, support from merchandise's owners and support from football fans are in high level. The terms of support from people around them is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.01$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers receive support from family which is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.12$ ), terms of support from merchandise's owners is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.84$ ). Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers receive support in terms of competitive equipment from sponsors which is in high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.87$ ) and terms of support from football fans is in high level ( $\bar{x} =$

(3.90. Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers have large number of followers which is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.98 =$ .

1.4 The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of images that attract the interest of fans.

The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of images that attract the interest of fans are the attractiveness of bodily appearance, the image of the footballer, the sign of footballer's identity, the acceptance from teammates, the sportsmanship and The interpersonal relationship with fans are high level. For the attractiveness of bodily appearance is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.95 =$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers have strong muscles which is in high level  $\bar{x} = (4.19$ . The image of the footballer is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.75 =$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers have their unique style when giving interviews which is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.90 =$ . The sign of footballer's identity is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.77 =$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers have unique way to celebrate their success which is in high level  $\bar{x} = 3.89($ . The acceptance from teammates is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.88 =$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers have important position on the team, such as being a captain which is in high level  $\bar{x}(4.00 =$ . The sportsmanship is in high level  $\bar{x}.4 = 13)$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score is Footballers play at their fullest abilities which is in high level  $\bar{x}(4.27 =$  and the interpersonal relationship with fans is in high level  $\bar{x}(4.13 =$ . Consideration by item, the highest average level score are footballers are humble when meet with sport fans and Footballers must show their humility and friendly when meet with sport fans which are in high level  $\bar{x}4.1 = 8($ .

1.5 The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of Presentation of footballers through the media.

The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of Presentation of footballers through the media is shown in high level  $\bar{x}(3.79 =$ , Consideration by item, the highest average level score is footballers are continuously being followed and requesting for interviews which is in high level  $\bar{x}(3.87 =$

1.6 The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of Good role model for the society.

The opinion on the factor for professional footballers brand building in Thailand in terms of Good role model for the society is shown in high level  $\bar{x}(4.05 =$ . Consideration by item,

the highest average level score is Footballers are grateful to their parent which is in high level  $\bar{x}(4.32 =$ .

***Result of opinion analysis of process for brand building for professional footballers in Thailand by using Delphi technique which the detail as follow.***

2.1 Marketing planning of football players found that marketers must analyze the market situation and determine the target market by dividing the target groups into criteria such as 1) Demographic criteria 2) Geographic criteria 3) Mental criteria and 4) Behaviour criteria. And select the target group according to various criteria required (Mdn = 5, IQ = 0.75).

2.2 Athlete's identity search: Explore the identity of the athlete, found that marketers analyzed the strengths of athletes, including analysis of football playing skills and analysis of personal football playing styles and take various talents that have analyzed are used to present the athlete when competing (Mdn = 5, IQ = 1).

2.3 Creating characteristics for athletes found that marketers provide a form of athlete's dress that identifies characteristic or identity, such as dress from a simple outfit, sportswear, sneakers that indicate athletics or a dress that looks good, elegant, indicates a high taste of athletes (Mdn = 4, IQ = 0).

2.4 Communication of athletes to the public via various channels, found that marketers must consider the target group that the athlete will communicate that who they are? (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1).

2.5 Keeping the identity of the athlete for continuous efficiency, found that marketers must advise athletes in creating a personality, including answering questions to the media to be natural and friendly to the media as well as using positive words (Mdn = 5, IQ = 1).

2.6 Promotion of strategies for developing athletic brands, found that marketers must convince athletes to get to know people outside the great sports industry. Which will result in the athletes being presented on the news and creating more awareness opportunities for other target groups (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1).

2.7 Evaluation found that marketers determine the income of athletes that must be received from being a presenter for various products and salary received from affiliate clubs (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The analysis of the process of brand building for footballer in Thailand are as follows: 1) Marketing plan for footballer 2) Searching for footballer's identity 3) Setting up specific identity for footballer 4) Communicating about footballer through different media 5) Maintaining the footballer's identity 6) Developing a strategy for footballer's identity development 7) Evaluating the result of footballer brand building with the following details

1) Marketing planning of football player found that marketers must analyze the market situation and determine the target market by dividing the target groups into criteria such as 1) Demographic criteria 2) Geographic criteria 3) Mental criteria and 4) Behavior criteria. And select the target group according to various criteria required (Mdn = 5, IQ = 0.75) in accordance with Rampersad (2014) that discusses the brand building process in step 1 should start by identifying the target group.

2 (Athlete's identity search: Explore the identity of the athlete. It was found that marketers analyzed the strengths point of athletes, including analysis of football playing skills and analysis of personal football playing styles. Bring various talents that has been analyzed to be used to present the athlete when competing (Mdn = 5, IQ = 1) which corresponds to Rampersad (2014) said that finding someone's identity or athlete is the first step that is important to know who that person or athlete is. What is the inspiration for being a professional football player? Which will make them see their own potential.

3 (Creating an identity for the athlete found that the marketer provided an athlete's dress pattern that indicates appearance or identity, such as dress a simply cloth, sports shirts or sneakers that indicate toward an athlete or a dress that looks elegant that indicated a high taste of athlete (Mdn = 4, IQ = 0), which corresponds to Maslow's personality elements theory as cited in Porkatong (2010) mentioned that athletes who want to be successful in sports should have a good personality, such as dress, polite, clean and suitable for temperament.

4 (Communication of athletes to the public through various channels found that marketers must consider the target group that the athlete will communicate to, who are they? (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1) which corresponds to Sanaha (2011) Schawbel (2008) and Arruda (2009) mentioned the target group that communicate in the same direction is before communicating to various people must first consider that who do we want to communicate with? And identify the target group that wants to communicate then planning communication and selecting the appropriate communication tools.

5( Maintaining the identity of the athlete to be consistently effective found that marketers must advise athletes to create a personality. Including answering questions to the media to be natural and friendly as much as possible, along with the use of positive words (Mdn = 5, IQ = 1), which corresponds to Noriya, W. (2013) mentioned David Beckham in terms of personality, David Beckham has a distinctive personality in many areas such as personality,



looks good, a charming or charismatic face. Which charismatic is another part that makes the David Beckham's brand become interested.

6 (Promoting athlete's brand development strategies found that marketers must convince athletes to get to know people outside the great sports industry. Which will result in the athletes being presented on news and creating more opportunities for awareness among other target groups (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1) which corresponds to Saneha (2011) that discusses the brand accessibility is to make the brand into every areas where consumers can access. At present, the idea of having a good business partner can also be a part of strengthening the brand as well.

7 (The evaluation found that 1) Marketers determine the income of athletes that they must receive from being a presenter for various products and salaries received from the affiliation clubs (Mdn = 4, IQ = 1) which corresponds to Arruda (2009) said that if a personal brand as an employee of an organization, should use work efficiency to determine the indicators to evaluate or use the evaluation from listening to the opinions of other people who can provide reliable information.



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