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Monetizing Athlete Brand Image: An Investigation of Athlete Managers' Perspectives

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Abstract

In a highly competitive sport marketplace, personal branding is a top priority for athletes. Thusly, marketers should leverage athletes' talents and influence in creative ways to maximize their earning potential. This research explored the attributes of a marketable athlete, as well as promotional strategies to help secure athlete sponsorships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposefully selected talent marketing practitioners with sport marketing agencies. The findings revealed relatable story, as well as perceived persona, as prevalent themes for a marketable athlete. Additionally, the themes of athlete-brand alignment and social media marketing were important to securing client promotion and sponsorships. These findings extended previous conceptualizations by illuminating the essential role of brand authenticity not only in quality of fan-athlete interaction, but in appeal to prospective sponsors.

Keywords: *athlete brand, brand management, brand equity, sport marketing agencies*

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Introduction

Sport consumers idolize the athletic achievements of star athletes (e.g., Serena Williams, Stephen Curry, etc.), and also expect these stars to personify the values of their communities (Sailes, 2001). The meaningful connection between consumers and an athlete is a distinct attribute of the athlete brand construct, where increasing the popularity of athletes can result in lucrative endorsement deals. Further, athletes can optimize their relationship with fans to ensure market permanence by solidifying personal brands (Darlow, 2018), which is often handled by brand managers at sport marketing agencies (Smith et al., 2022).

Athlete brands can be easily identified, which presents a unique opportunity for athlete brand managers to maximize their clients' earning potential and publicity (Arai et al., 2014). Specifically, practitioners can leverage consumers' knowledge regarding an athlete brand and related images through perception of athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014), where an athletes' on-court image can also determine sponsor preference (Kunkel et al., 2019). Given that professional athletes are adopted as influential role models, it is especially important to solidify their image through socially responsible actions off the playing field (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Guest & Cox, 2009) where these meaningful, authentic interactions with fans can fulfill consumers' need for relatedness (Thomson, 2006). Athlete brand managers as well as sport agents play an integral role in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their athlete's brand as well as building and managing their athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2013).

Fan engagement and interactions are especially relevant for establishing an indelible bond between human brands (e.g., athletes) and followers (Thomson, 2006), and previous scholars have highlighted the significant impact of fan engagement on consumer behavior (Yoshida et al., 2014). One way athletes can market their brand and entertain consumers is through social media activations (Doyle et al., 2020). Importantly, the produced content and related source credibility should be given equal importance in these social media ventures, to ensure trustworthiness of the information source (Luo et al., 2013; Na et al., 2020), as these activation pursuits will impact the areas of consumer experience, sponsor support, and athlete brand promotion. Further, fans are particularly receptive to athletes' involvement in community initiatives (Taniyev & Gordon, 2019). While the existing scholarly work regarding athlete branding has started to conceptualize this construct (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2016), additional evidence is needed in relation to how brand marketers employ specific strategies to promote an athlete brand. Moreover, additional insight is needed on practitioners' efforts in understanding athletes' personal qualities that are deemed relatable by consumers for cultivating the athlete brand. Therefore, the purpose of this research endeavor was twofold: a) to uncover the characteristics of a marketable athlete from those that cultivate athlete brands; and b) to analyze brand strategies used to expand athletes' marketability and drive sponsorship revenue from a practitioner's perspective. The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

RQ_1 What are the attributes of a marketable athlete from the perspective of brand managers?

RQ_2 What type of tactics are used by athlete brand managers to promote clients and secure sponsor support?

Review of the Literature

Brand Image and Athlete Branding

The outcomes of brand equity are of particular significance for athlete brands' long-term viability. Sport agents, who serve as personal brand managers, evaluate an athlete brand based on consumer associations linked to an athlete's name (Arai et al., 2014; Ruxin, 2004). Termed as the differential effect of brand-related knowledge, brand image is at the core of organizations' and brands' marketing strategies (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Research has indicated that a brand's (e.g., team brand) success hinges upon consumers' ability to identify a brand within the crowded marketplace and form a set of unique perceptions regarding its meaning (Bauer et al., 2005; Keller, 1993). From the consumer's perspective, these intricate brand attributes can be relied upon to justify their behavior (Keller, 2008). To illustrate, Carlson and Donavan (2013) reported that athlete distinctiveness had an effect on team-related outcomes (e.g., number of games watched).

The salient roles of brand image and consumer satisfaction have also been evidenced to assist service entities (e.g., sport organizations, agencies) with marketing and strategic communication (Berry, 2000; Underwood et al., 2001). There is evidence to suggest that athlete brand equity is directly affected by an athlete's professional image (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). For this reason, it is of particular importance for sport agents to rely on the existing models of athlete brand image. Specifically, the athlete brand image model (Arai et al., 2014) put forth that consumer brand equity is developed from the complete athlete brand image, which included three dimensions (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle). In particular, the dimension of athletic performance encompassed athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry, the dimension of attractive appearance included physical attributes, symbol, and body fitness, and the dimension of marketable lifestyle included life story, role model, and relationship effort. However, the above conceptualizations did not include input from those that actually create and manage these athlete brands.

Method

The objective of this research was to glean insight from experienced athlete marketers who represented a variety of sports, thereby gathering a broad range of views concerning the topic under study (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Open-ended interviews were conducted to derive insight into branding practices utilized by practitioners with experience in professional athlete talent management. It has been acknowledged that smaller samples are useful for collecting qualitative data concerning understudied constructs such as athlete brand marketing (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). In total, seven practitioners with player representation expertise from sport marketing agencies were deemed appropriate to participate in the study, and agreed to share their perspectives on this subject by means of semi-structured interviews that lasted 25-30 minutes. The one-on-one interviews were conducted over Zoom, and Table 1 provides a further breakdown of the participants.

Table 1

Variable Definitions and Calculations

Participant Number	Years of Relevant Experience	Type of Agency	Client Level of Competition
Participant 1	3-4	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 2	4-5	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 3	4-5	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 4	4-5	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 5	3-4	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 6	3-4	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional
Participant 7	9-10	Full-Service/Multi-Sport	Professional

Sample questions that guided each interview included: a) What makes an athlete marketable? b) What role does a client's marketability play in sponsor recruitment? c) What marketing tools do you use to reach consumers? Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and open coding was conducted to examine and categorize the data for thematic analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After initial coding by the primary author, the deductive approach and inductive reasoning (analysis guided by interview data) were performed to identify prevalent patterns across the collected data (Patton, 2002). Specifically, inductive reasoning guided the analysis of interview data to discern among the emerging themes and new concepts (Kyngas, 2020). Detailed descriptions of findings along with sample compatibility were deemed to be key aspects in ensuring validity and reliability of this study (Creswell, 2014; Morse et al., 2002). In addition to verbatim quotations from participants, the results section provides a summary of themes emerged from the data.

Results

The data analysis revealed the following themes in relation to athletes' marketable attributes (i.e., RQ1): relatable story and perceived persona. With respect to prevalent themes derived from the data concerning integrated athlete marketing strategies (i.e., RQ2), participant responses were categorized as follows: athlete-brand alignment and social media marketing.

Attributes of a Marketable Athlete (RQ1)

Relatable Story

While athletic performance is essential to athletes' visibility, what makes their brands resonate with fans is a distinct personal story. Participant responses indicated a client's marketing influence was directly connected to relatability toward the fan base. Specifically, much of the discussion regarding marketability revolved around the personal story of a client, and its appeal to fans' emotions. To illustrate, Participant 1 offered the following perspective: "I think there are a few different components that come into play as to making an athlete marketable. I think first, they have to have an interesting story, having a story that is different" is what makes a client stand out and "bring in audience numbers who can kind of find themselves in [an athlete's] story." In relation, and as evidenced in the response provided by Participant 6, consumers' relatability toward a memorable story is instrumental in furthering athletes' marketability and earnings:

I think the big key there is relatability, that is where brands are vetting ambassadors for them and look at athletes. They want someone who can relate to the consumer and consumers want that too, that is the whole reason why. It is just that ability to connect with consumers and with brands, and I think that is the most important thing.

Similarly, other participants attributed increased marketability to authentic personality and unique story. Despite highlighting athletic performance, Participant 3 underlined the role of a client's story by stating, "I think being really good on the court, on the field and I think also having your own identity and really knowing who you are. Not everybody is LeBron James." Another comment was provided by Participant 4, who noted that athletes' long-lasting marketability is related to:

Their personal story and what their identity is, so if they identify maybe with a nationality where one of their parents is from or if they identify with maybe they love to cook, if there is something else other than their sport that they have a passion for… or school they went to or anything like that…having interest, having something else other than being an athlete that gives them an identity other than the sport itself.

Evidently, telling a story is instrumental in building an athlete brand. Participant responses suggest that an athlete's memorable life story solidifies brand identity and builds awareness among fans, thereby increasing earning opportunities.

Perceived Persona

Consumers' perception of personal traits was equally important to athletes' marketing potential. Throughout the interviews, participants alluded to attributes of the athletes such as authenticity and personality. As suggested by the responses, fans' desire to connect with athletes on a personal level manifests itself in positive engagement and loyalty to their brands. When asked to discuss specific traits of a marketable athlete, Participant 5 emphasized, "authenticity…regardless of who they are on the field or off the field, and that is part of the battle is to stress that authenticity and then being true to who they are and true to their personal brand." Further, athlete marketers stressed the value of fostering genuine connections between a client and their fan base. This finding is illustrated by the following comment: "it is really the level of engagement that you have with these people that has to be on some genuine level of engagement and I think that a lot of fans can kind of see and smell through" (Participant 3). As further evidence, Participant 2 explained the implications of authentic personality for athletes' marketability this way:

I think there are a couple of buckets, one is personality-driven, so I think the ability to be personable and relatable to your consumer base is actually quite important and there is also some level of charm. I would say relatability, charm, getting people to like you, and your personality are pretty important also.

The following representative quote illustrates how personality can impact fans' perception of an athlete:

> If you have a really outgoing, bubbly personality and you talk to the media after matches, [personality] that people kind of dive into and attach to, and you make them smile and laugh, then they will become your fans because of your unique personality traits (Participant 1).

Other participants had similar opinions in regards to perceived personality and the relationship with fans. These participants made it clear that while athletic talent is necessary to reach the sport's biggest stage, what solidifies a brand is an athlete's ability to build genuine, lasting connections with consumers by being authentic and personable.

Athlete Brand Promotion Tactics (RQ2)

Athlete-Brand Alignment

With respect to the underlying aspects of athlete promotion and endorsement strategies, participants pointed to a fit between an athlete and a sponsoring brand. In terms of consumer outcomes, the perceived relationship between companies and athlete endorsers was particularly relevant. Companies seek athlete ambassadors who align with the overall business strategy and image, thereby extending their customer reach. Consistent with multiple references to this theme, Participant 6 offered the following perspective: "if I am on the brand's side, you want an athlete to be a fit with you, but you also want them to be a fit with the consumer that you are trying to target." It was clear from the following excerpt that an athlete's performance might not be a high priority for sponsors.

Rather, given the focus on fan perception and engagement, companies tend to opt for ambassadors who embody similar values and beliefs. To illustrate, Participant 7's response exemplified the approach from: "It becomes very contextual. Part of marketability is how we are able to present these players as the right fit for what the client is looking for. Sometimes it does not necessarily mean that it is the most visible and highest performing player." Participant 3 commented on the sponsor prospecting process this way:

> For an athlete, we look at 'where did they go to school?' 'who were the partners for the team?' 'what kind of things that are common there?' so they can get some fans there, 'is it a local grocery chain there? 'where is their home town?' You try to find organic connections with them…so I think for brands, stuff like that is a slam dunk.

Participant 1's response further emphasized the value of matching a client with the right sponsor: "We want to align a corporation and our athlete…we certainly look for alignment in personality of the brand as well as our athlete…'are they similar?' 'will they complement each other well?" Likewise, another response exemplified the current theme by reporting on perceived similarities between an athlete's image and the sponsor. As such, it is clear that athlete marketers' efforts revolve around recruiting relevant sponsors that fit with a client's persona and story, thereby forming mutually beneficial partnerships.

Social Media Marketing

Participant responses revealed multiple references to a reliance on social media platforms in reaching a target audience and demonstrating the value of their client to corporate sponsors. While the number of active social media followers was mentioned throughout the interviews, participants made it clear that the quality of digital content was considered especially valuable among prospective sponsors. For example, despite stating that "the best case scenario is that you have a lot of followers, you are really good at content creation, you have really high engagement," Participant 5 accentuated, "the most key factor that they are looking for is engagement…so, it is great that you have ten million followers, but if no one cares about what you are posting, that is not super appealing [to prospective sponsors]." Participant 1's comment exemplified the present theme relating to engagement this way:

> One thing that a lot of companies ask before they even see a sponsorship depth of an athlete is their social media numbers, 'what are they following?' 'what is their average [number of] likes, retweets, etc.?' They want those stats, it means a lot to corporations before they do an endorsement deal.

Participant 4's comment pertaining to this theme was as follows: "social media helps seeing things they [athletes] are associated with, and sometimes it is a stretch, but usually there are pretty authentic ties to an activity or something they are doing in their lives that can relate to that company." Another representative highlight was provided by Participant 3 who said, "I think someone who has I would say a million followers but there are only two comments or three likes, they [sponsors] are like 'umm, no engagement,' so brands look at that for sure." Importantly, this participant made it abundantly clear that:

> Brands are smart about it. You are trying to access a certain demo or a certain base of people, so it is smart to work with the talent even if they are not the top talent, it could be that c-level bench guy, so brands I think they look at it [engagement] a lot, but they look at it in different ways and trying to make sense of the data (Participant 3).

These participant comments made it apparent that companies seek to partner with athletes who are capable of engaging with fans and serving as influential social media ambassadors. Consistent across responses, participants highlighted the importance of the athlete marketers' role in guiding the clients' development of social media content and fan engagement strategies.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study sought to identify specific traits of marketable athletes, as well as brand promotion strategies utilized by talent representation practitioners to secure sponsor support. The findings revealed several implications regarding athlete brand management. Notably, while Arai and colleagues (2014) highlighted life story as one of the components of the marketable lifestyle dimension of athlete brand image, our findings shine light on how a unique story can elevate an athlete's brand. Fans are inclined to gravitate toward athletes with relatable character, and as such, evidence emerging from this study expands previous research on brand marketing for athletes (e.g., Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

The findings related to perceived personality and authenticity are rather intriguing. Results indicated consumers expect authenticity and engagement from athletes. Although lifestyle and personality have been recognized as integral facets of an athlete brand that can ultimately enhance their marketability (Hasaan et al., 2016; Hasaan, et al., 2018), the current study extends these investigations by providing a more practical perspective on the intricate demands of athlete brand consumers. Building upon these findings will be critically important to athlete brand scholars and practitioners alike given the marketing agencies' role in talent management and social media marketing.

In terms of athlete promotion and sponsor prospecting, past research has demonstrated that certain products (e.g., sport energy drinks, athletic clothing) elicit the perception of a natural fit with an athlete, thereby aiding marketers in recruitment of suitable sponsors (Walsh & Williams, 2017). Our findings support this evidence by pointing to sponsors' desire to partner with athletes that align with their overarching mission. In particular to sponsor involvement, an important takeaway is participants noted that perceived fit with an athlete and respective consumers can take precedence over their athletic accomplishments. As such, this further underscores the implications of personal characteristics for athletes' long-term brand viability and earnings (Taniyev & Gordon, 2019). The results also highlight the impact of athletes' presence on social media, and the necessity of its growing use. Similarities can be drawn between previous research on fans' response to athlete social media marketing (e.g., Doyle et al., 2020; Hambrick et al., 2010) and the current findings. Therefore, this study provides additional and newer guidance for athletes' use of social media platforms with respect to the expectations established by their target audience and sponsors.

Practical Implications

The findings from this research should inform athlete marketing strategies to solidify a client's position in the marketplace. While sporting achievements draw attention to a client, a compelling story further solidifies their brand among consumers. For this reason, athlete marketers should concentrate on reinforcing their clients' off-court persona and personal story. For example, positioning an athlete brand to resonate with consumers based on nationality, college affiliation, regional status, and/or family upbringing can foster feelings of relatedness of fans to the athlete. This storytelling approach should be especially beneficial for athletes competing in non-Big Four sport leagues. Irrespective of sport, consumers' genuine desire to learn about their admired athletes' lives off the court should guide marketers in their efforts to showcase clients' personal interests and favorite activities, and "normalize" these world-class athletes a bit by sharing some of their history, and perhaps even some of their struggles. Another way to promote a client's story and interests is through community engagement and volunteerism. Athletes' public appearances at the community level should create opportunities for authentic interaction to reveal admirable and relatable qualities, an aspect of particular significance to building trust and loyalty with consumers. These widely regarded traits of a role model celebrity, displayed through community-centered initiatives for the athlete to display an authentic self, can make fans perceive an athlete in a more positive light and thereby strengthen their popularity and fan following.

The results also direct talent agencies to recruit sponsors that fit with the brand image, background, and persona of their client. An emphasis on the interests and personality traits of a client should be made for congruency with prospective sponsors. In particular to specific aspects of an athlete brand, marketers should leverage dimensions (e.g., personality, role model) that align with the goals and target audience of a prospective sponsor. Given the marketers' effort to differentiate their clients, athletes are likely to benefit from sponsors across multiple product categories. For example, while partnering with a local company may seem like a natural fit, practitioners should employ a more holistic approach to sponsor prospecting. Placing

companies into groups based on perceived similarities with an athlete should encourage repeat sponsorships.

Our findings should also be used to assist athletes with social media marketing. As noted by participants, producing relevant content with behind-the-scenes look into their lives that keeps fans engaged should be a high priority for athletes. Hence, practitioners should adapt this content and posting times to meet consumer needs. Additionally, given the athletes' relatively short careers, practitioners should leverage these mediums to foster long-term relationships with fans, especially in the early stages of athletes' careers. Also, sponsor preferences of an athlete's social media content and engagement should not be overlooked or discounted. Sponsors are more likely to partner with athletes who mirror their core values and promote the brand with engagement from their fans to facilitate sponsorship activation. Thus, these results should be utilized by practitioners to not only guide clients in fan engagement, but also provide advice on social media content that can be of value to prospective sponsors, and even future potential clients. In particular to the recent negative athlete perception of social media and mental health (Lutz, 2021), it would be wise to look at a future model that better protects an athlete from the negative aspects of social media. Perhaps an approach that includes co-caretaking of social media between the agency and client, with early education to equip the athlete with tools on how to manage and handle fan interactions, and for better handling of the workload and potential stressors of social media while maintaining authentic stories, athlete presentation, and sponsorship activation.

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