

Insights From The Inside: Marketing Agency Practitioners' Perspectives On Developing Athlete Brands

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Extant research on athlete brands has significantly illuminated the components that contribute to the formation of these brands and the resultant customer-based brand equity they embody. Prior studies have established that consumers assess athlete brands based on both on-field and off-field attributes (Arai et al., 2014), and how various sources of information and related brands serve as signals that shape and evolve consumer perceptions (Doyle et al., 2022). Building upon this conceptual foundation, recent inquiries have sought to understand how athletes manage their brands (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) and how consumers react to specific brand management strategies employed by athletes (Doyle et al., 2022; Kunkel et al., 2022). While existing knowledge has greatly advanced our understanding of how athletes can construct their brands, it has primarily been derived from research focusing on two stakeholders: the consumer and the athlete. This study extends the literature on athlete brands by incorporating the perspective of professionals tasked with building these brands. Specifically, we address the following research question: How do marketing agency practitioners strategically endeavour to build athlete brands?

Qualitative data were gathered through 28 semi-structured interviews. The interviewees, all marketing agency practitioners (MAPs) employed in UK-based public relations or marketing agencies, represented 16 agencies with diverse client portfolios in both sports and the broader entertainment industry.

The findings elucidated a three-step process that characterizes the approach MAPs take in developing athlete brands. These steps—brand brainstorming, brand pillaring, and brand training—underscore how MAPs strategically identify, position, and leverage commercially appealing aspects associated with athletes. This described process, which is a collaborative effort between marketing practitioners and athlete-clients, necessitates distinct contributions from both parties, with their roles and levels of involvement evolving at each stage. The findings of this research enhance our understanding by highlighting the value-added role that MAPs play in developing distinctive and appealing athlete brands. This is particularly significant given the growing prominence and influence of athletes in the sport marketplace and responds to scholarly calls for a deeper comprehension of how athlete brands are created and perceived (Doyle et al., 2022). Previous research on outsourced marketing activities in sport has underscored the importance of collaboration in co-creating brands (e.g., Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2017). Similarly, our findings reveal that while MAPs' expertise and skills are crucial, the involvement and commitment of athlete clients are

essential for creating an authentically designed brand that will be coherently managed post-process. Our findings illustrate how MAPs perceive and develop athlete brands with two key stakeholders in mind: fans and sponsors, while identifying that brand equity is derived from both on-field and off-field characteristics. This perspective supports the principles of the MABI (Arai et al., 2014) and highlights how an athlete's private and public personas can be managed to shape perceptions. The emphasis on identifying non-sport-related attributes demonstrates the value MAPs add in the early stages of brand development, opening opportunities the athlete may not have otherwise considered (Kunkel et al., 2022), such as focusing on underrepresented or seemingly trivial attributes. At the same time, while MAPs described a process of training and implementation, it was rudimentary and requires further attention. Unlike brand management practices in sports organizations (e.g., teams), athletes and agents were provided with basic brand guidelines, with minimal ongoing involvement from MAPs (Manoli, 2020). Assistance from agency practitioners was typically available only upon request or during crises (e.g., scandals or loss of fans/sponsors). This contrasts with other studies on outsourcing marketing activities in sports, which emphasize continuous collaboration (e.g., Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2017). By capturing these issues, our study suggests that the strategic implications of rudimentary training and the lack of long-term relationships between athletes and MAPs warrant further investigation, presenting valuable avenues for future research.

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