

Citation: Gholami Biveh Rah, M., Mohamadian, F., & Matinfard, A. (2024). Developing a Model for the Impact of Social Networks on the Creation and Development of Olympic Athletes' Personal Sports Brands. *Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence*, 2(3), 1-7.

Received: date: 2024-05-24

Revised: date: 2024-06-12

Accepted: date: 2024-06-26

Published: date: 2024-07-01



Developing a Model for the Impact of Social Networks on the Creation and Development of Olympic Athletes' Personal Sports Brands

Mohsen Gholami Biveh Rah¹, Fariba Mohamadian^{2*}, Ahmadreza Matinfard³

1. PhD Student in Sports Management, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qazvin Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Sports Management, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qazvin Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

3. Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Imam Hossein University, Tehran, Iran

*Correspondence: e-mail: Faribamohamadian47@gmail.com

Abstract

The objective of this study is to develop a model for the impact of social networks on the creation and development of Olympic athletes' personal sports brands. This research is applied in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing interviews and the grounded theory approach. The statistical population consists of elite Olympic athletes who are members of national teams in Mazandaran Province, totaling 37 individuals. For the qualitative phase of the study, 25 experts were selected for interviews. Data analysis in the qualitative method was conducted using MAXQDA software. Based on the research findings, a total of 115 subcategories were identified within 32 codes, ultimately leading to the extraction of six main categories: media and virtual networks in branding, opportunities and threats of social networks, personal brand development for naming, athletes' income generation through virtual space, strategies for creating a personal sports brand, and becoming a global personal brand.

Keywords: Social networks, personal sports brand, Olympic athletes.

1. Introduction

Social media can enhance the sports experience as it serves as a complementary medium for other experiences of followers of popular athletes (Kennedy & Funk, 2023). The consumption of sports-related social media often coincides with other sports behaviors, including engaging in physical activity (Fenton et al., 2023), streaming content (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022), and watching television (McCarthy et al., 2022). When social media is used simultaneously with live broadcasts of competitions on television, it serves both game-related and non-game-related activities (Doyle et al., 2022). Famous athletes contribute to the prominence of sports brands in the market for various reasons. Sports marketers use star athletes as brand ambassadors to reach sports fans as potential customers. For instance, McDonald's hired Yao Ming, a Chinese basketball star, as a spokesperson to attract Asian fans. Additionally, companies have approached world-renowned sports stars, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Kobe Bryant, to endorse products and capture consumer attention across borders (Chang et al., 2014). With the development of social media, athletes can now introduce their followers to elements or perspectives of their daily lives. Previous research (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023; Nichols & Shapiro, 2023; Park et al., 2020) suggests that athletes discuss their personal lives



(past phase) rather than their professional lives (present phase) to cultivate their personal brands through direct interaction and differentiation. Research has shown that managing and promoting personal brands through social media is a more effective method of engaging consumers (Filo et al., 2015).

The impact of social media on sports interactions and sports marketing has garnered significant attention from athletes and sports enthusiasts. A strategic plan currently being developed in this field could open new pathways for the development of professional sports and sports marketing through social media. Research by Witkemper et al. (2012) identified the reasons why individuals follow athletes or their favorite teams through social networks, highlighting factors such as fandom and allegiance. Additionally, Seo and Green (2008) noted that fans often want to express their opinions and discuss their favorite teams with others, making social media an emerging intermediary for such interactions (Witkemper et al., 2012). Özsoy (2013) demonstrated that social media users among sports fans are primarily male, highly educated, affluent, and older, whereas younger fans show significant engagement on Facebook and YouTube, leading to lower engagement on Twitter (Ozsoy, 2011). Furthermore, Studies found that female followers are more likely to be motivated by informational, commercial, and social engagement functions, whereas male followers are more likely to be driven by physical attractiveness (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Clavio et al., 2013).

Athletes' attention to their personal brands in the virtual space indicates the need for strategies to establish and develop social interactions within online networks. Burton and Chadwick (2008) argue that sports celebrities possess unique characteristics and embody distinctive traits that set them apart from other athletes (Burton & Chadwick, 2008). This has led to the conceptualization of the term "personal brands," which implicitly asserts that such individuals are not merely "on-field" performers but also valuable "off-field" assets (Green, 2016). Brodie et al. (2013) state that social networks allow famous and branded athletes to gain a competitive advantage through exposure and interaction, fostering emotional connections with fans and companies while providing added value across various communication channels (Brodie et al., 2013). This symbolic approach to branding reinforces the concept of customer-centric brand equity development (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), which in this research occurs when fans and organizations are familiar with the brand and associate it with favorable, strong, and unique attributes. The more distinctive a brand is, the more it contributes to the development of shared knowledge and identity, stimulating positive emotions and brand attachment (Richelieu et al., 2008). Armstrong et al. (2014) demonstrated that teams, through their creative and personalized approaches on social media, can cultivate a unique personal identity, thereby fostering personal connections, trust, and an improved market perception (Armstrong et al., 2014). Additionally, findings suggest that Pegoraro (2014) identifies Twitter as an innovation in personal branding (Pegoraro, 2014). The use of social media for technical branding efforts can yield positive outcomes, such as increased sponsorship opportunities and greater brand awareness for athletes (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015).

A personal brand, as a unique identity that inspires brand affinity, is socially constructed according to cultural branding theory and is continuously shaped by consumers and corporate engagement. Fame, due to its promotional influence and profit-generating value, can be considered an intangible asset. To establish sports brands and achieve market share, sports product manufacturers introduce special product lines named after sports stars (Yu, 2015). While effective brand communication strategies are essential for building brand awareness and equity, the impact of personal branding has not been empirically tested (Van Grinsven & Das, 2016). Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to determine a strategic model for the impact of social networks on the creation and development of Olympic athletes' personal sports brands. Accordingly, the central research question is posed: What is the strategic model for the impact of social networks on the creation and development of Olympic athletes' personal sports brands?

2. Methods and Materials

This research is applied in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing interviews and the grounded theory approach. The statistical population of the study consisted of 37 elite Olympic athletes who were members of national teams in Mazandaran Province and were knowledgeable about the research subject. Using purposive sampling, 25 individuals were



selected as the study sample. Theoretical saturation was the approach used in qualitative research to determine the adequacy of sampling. Data analysis in the qualitative method was conducted using MAXQDA software.

In this study, in-depth interviews were employed for data collection. The interviews were conducted individually and in person by the researcher, with an average duration of 45 minutes per session, taking place at the participants' workplaces and within their respective organizations. The questions were posed in a semi-structured interview format, and participants provided responses accordingly.

Grounded theory employs three stages of coding for data analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is an analytical process through which concepts are identified, and their attributes and dimensions are discovered within the data. In this stage, the grounded theory researcher segments the data to form initial categories related to the phenomenon under study. Open coding consists of three phases. In the first phase, key points (text excerpts) are coded, where the researcher meticulously examines the interview transcripts line by line and assigns codes to highlighted points. The second phase involves identifying incidents, events, and occurrences as potential indicators of the phenomenon (open codes), which are then analyzed and labeled conceptually. These open codes, though seemingly different in appearance, share similar meanings and are grouped together to form concepts. The third phase involves constructing categories, which are more abstract and represent a higher level of analysis. This categorization process is conducted through comparative analysis to highlight similarities and differences, which are then used to generate concepts. Following open coding, axial coding is performed, where one of the open coding categories is selected as the core category, and other categories are formed around this central phenomenon. The final stage, selective coding, involves developing propositions or hypotheses that connect the categories within the model or narrate a story that describes the interrelationships between categories (Creswell, 2019).

3. Findings and Results

Ninety-two percent of participants in the qualitative phase of the study were men, while 8% were women. Additionally, 20% of participants held a doctoral degree or were doctoral candidates, while 64% held a master's degree.

Table 1 presents the results of identifying and determining the main categories and codes based on the qualitative interviews.

Table 1. Identification and Determination of Main Categories and Codes

Codes	Main Categories
Influence of media and virtual networks in branding	Influence in national broadcasting Utilization of print media and newspapers Use of Twitter and Instagram The significant role of national television
Opportunities and threats of social networks	Creation of controversies for athletes Management of virtual space Conscious use of virtual space Wasting time due to improper use Proper culture of using virtual space
Personal brand development for naming	Attention to popular sports in the city and region Public polling to determine popularity level Personal sports branding after an athlete's passing Mutual support from the government and the public Public recognition and reputation Organizational networking
Athletes' income generation through virtual space	Knowledge of relevant expertise Utilization of a professional manager Income generation after winning titles Development of professional activities and revenue streams Learning from international experiences Knowledge of sports marketing Creating opportunities for virtual activities
Strategies for creating a personal sports brand	Attention to sports branding in the country Existence of knowledge on personal sports branding Establishment of an appropriate media team Advertising through media and virtual spaces Strategic planning Continuous support for athletes
Becoming a global personal brand	Altruism



Through personal branding, athletes increase the interest of commercial companies in signing advertising contracts, leading to significant financial gains. Additionally, personal branding in sports enables athletes to maintain a prominent presence in both sports and non-sports arenas even after retirement, allowing them to continue generating income. One of the key features of a personal sports brand is the ability to accept advertisements on personal social media pages. These advertisements, which have high engagement rates, can generate substantial revenue for athletes. Page | 4

Accordingly, the strategic model for the impact of social networks on the creation and development of Olympic athletes' personal sports brands can be explained as follows:

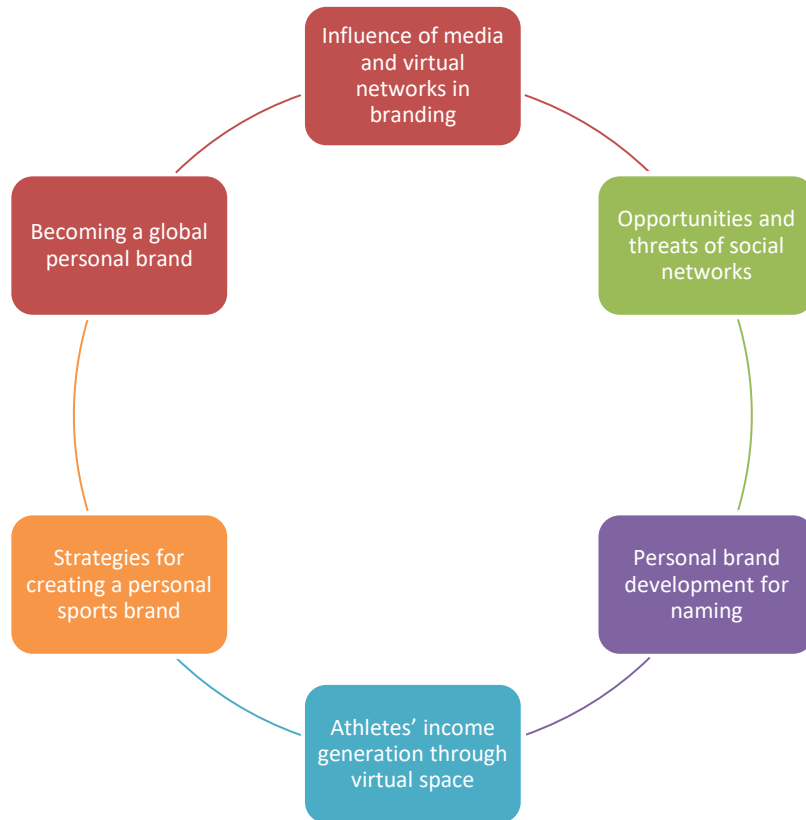


Figure 1: Strategic Model for the Impact of Social Networks on the Creation and Development of Olympic Athletes' Personal Sports Brands

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Each year, the top individuals in personal branding in sports are introduced, and the value of their brands is calculated based on average annual income, including television broadcasting, sponsorships, licensing, and ticket sales. Both short-term and long-term professional strategies can help athletes acquire the necessary skills for growth and establish their personal sports brands (Nazemi et al., 2019). In this regard, for the implementation of an effective strategy and plan, the professional, personal, educational, social, media, and economic value of each athlete must be determined. In personal sports branding, an athlete must create a favorable public image for fans and sports managers (Amoko & Bernard, 2018). Accordingly, the strategic model for the impact of social networks on the creation and development of Olympic athletes' personal sports brands, as formulated, consists of the following categories: media and virtual networks in branding, opportunities and threats of social networks, personal brand development for naming, athletes' income generation through virtual space, becoming a global personal brand, and strategies for creating a personal sports brand.

Explaining the results, it can be stated that some athletes earn significantly more from sponsorship contracts and brand endorsements than from professional contracts with clubs and competitions. The commonality among all of them is that they have successfully commercialized their popularity and success through personal branding (Woods et al., 2023). The correlation between modern technologies, upon which social networks are built, athletes, and personal branding forms an inseparable framework for the success of individuals seeking recognition. The causal links between an athlete's success and their image lie in how they manage their social media presence. Therefore, it can be argued that social networks serve as key tools for both personal branding and brand promotion, or in other words, for creating commercial appeal. Building a personal brand in the modern era, where technology and social platforms redefine communication, has become essential (Kunkel et al., 2022). A personal brand conveys identity by shaping the public image of an individual and serves as an essential tool for young people, enabling them to succeed in their respective careers. In today's society, where marketing efforts are driven by emotions, passion, and storytelling, individuals must establish and develop their personal brands through social platforms to foster long-term and strong relationships (Doyle et al., 2022).

Since social media has the potential to either positively or negatively impact career advancement and success, understanding the importance of proper management and use of social media is one of the key factors in personal branding. The presence of athletes on social networks is perceived both as an opportunity and as a necessity. Furthermore, personal branding on social media has become crucial as employers use social media during recruitment processes to obtain relevant information about candidates (Brown et al., 2022). Therefore, content management on social media should be regarded as a serious endeavor, essential for an individual's positioning in the modern market, while also serving as a potential tool that celebrities can leverage to enhance their public image.

Creating an online persona can set individuals apart and offer lasting, attractive characteristics for commercial and public organizations, while also opening new communication channels with sponsors who share common interests. Sharing personal life experiences and providing behind-the-scenes access (Armstrong et al., 2014; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2016; Frederick et al., 2014; Hull, 2014) reflect athletes' efforts to engage with their audience, fostering stronger relationships with fans. Gurin and Burch (2015) demonstrate that by failing to post images of themselves in athletic settings, athletes may miss opportunities to engage with fans and enhance their branding through visual representation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015).

Within social networks, the real-time and interactive nature of these platforms provides valuable insights into consumer perceptions and supporter responses to an athlete's persona, facilitated through exchanges and interactions (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2022). Brands are complex and multidimensional constructs with diverse cultural meanings, implying that brand exposure effects are unlikely to be limited to linear, one-dimensional pathways and may serve multiple, sometimes conflicting, objectives across different metrics. Participants highlighted the necessity of "ownership" and "control" over content across various platforms; however, athletes' public missteps are amplified by the popularity of social media and the increased scrutiny they face as public figures.

This study reinforces the idea that developing an online presence within social networks can help athletes distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive market, particularly when they share similar "sporting" characteristics with their peers or other athletes. This research enhances our understanding of how organizations seeking sponsorship engagements may identify distinctive social profiles that align with their brand characteristics. The findings support theoretical propositions that social networks can contribute to the development of individual brand equity, enabling athletes to build long-term and powerful relationships that become an integral part of their public identity. Essentially, communication can establish a brand identity that global brands may also seek to associate with, particularly in a contemporary society driven by emotions, passion, excitement, and loyalty—all central to the world of sports.

For professional athletes, it is crucial to allocate time for engaging with fans and followers by providing timely and unique content and responding to messages on various platforms. This research indicates that athletes' use of social media should be integrated into a strategic marketing approach.

Based on this study, it is recommended that future research evaluate the factors influencing the development of personal sports brands among professional league athletes using fuzzy hierarchical analysis methods. Additionally, the extent of social media tools' usage in professional sports can be examined in future studies through data mining techniques. This study was



limited to Olympic athletes; thus, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other groups. Furthermore, this study focused solely on social networks in the development of personal brands, whereas other factors, such as financial and social elements, may have different impacts on the personal brand development of athletes.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

Acknowledgments

Authors thank all participants who participate in this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding/Financial Support

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

References

- Abeza, G., & Sanderson, J. (2022). Theory and social media in sport studies. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 15(4), 284-292. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2022-0108>
- Amoko, G., & Bernard, O. (2018). Unleashing salesforce performance: The impacts of personal branding and technology in an emerging market. *Technology in Society*, 54, 20-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2018.01.013>
- Armstrong, C. G., Delia, E. B., & Giardina, M. D. (2014). Embracing the social in social media: an analysis of the social media marketing strategies of the Los Angeles Kings. *Communication and Sport*, 2(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479514532914>
- Brodie, R., Ilić, A., Jurić, B., & Hollebeek, L. (2013). Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: an exploratory analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(1), 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.029>
- Brown, S. M., Brison, N. T., Bennett, G., & Brown, K. M. (2022). Do fans care about the activist athlete? A closer look at athlete activism effect on brand image. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 15(4), 336-344. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2022-0101>
- Burton, N., & Chadwick, S. (2008). From Beckham to Ronaldo - assessing the nature of football players' brands. *Journal of Sponsorship*, 1(4), 307-317. https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Aged%3A15%3A4135359/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Aged%3A33650618&crl=c&link_origin=www.google.com
- Carroll, A., & Ahuvia, C. (2016). Some antecedents and outcomes of brand love. *Marketing Letters*, 7(2), 79-89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-006-4219-2>
- Chang, Y., Jae Ko, Y., Tasci, A., Arai, A., & Kim, T. (2014). Strategic match of athlete endorsement in global markets: an associative learning perspective. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 15(4), 40-58. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMS-15-04-2014-B005>
- Clavio, G., & Kian, T. M. (2010). Uses and gratifications of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(4), 485-500. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.485>
- Clavio, G., Walsh, P., & Coyle, P. (2013). The effects of gender on perceptions of team Twitter feeds. *Global Sport Business Journal*, 1(1), 1-14. <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=gsbj>
- Doyle, J. P., Su, Y., & Kunkel, T. (2022). Athlete branding via social media: Examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22(4), 506-526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1806897>
- Fenton, A., Keegan, B. J., & Parry, K. D. (2023). Understanding sporting social media brand communities, place and social capital: A netnography of football fans. *Communication & Sport*, 11(2), 313-333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479520986149>
- Filo, K., Lock, D., & Karg, A. (2015). Sport and social media research: a review. *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), 166-181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.11.001>
- Frederick, E., Lim, C. H., Clavio, G., Pedersen, P., & Burch, L. M. (2014). Choosing between the one-way or two-way street: an exploration of relationship promotion by professional athletes on Twitter. *Communication and Sport*, 2(1), 80-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479512466387>
- Geurin-Eagleman, A. N., & Burch, G. (2015). Utilizing social media as a marketing communication tool: an examination of mainstream and niche sport athletes' Facebook pages. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 16(2), 488-497. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.03.004>
- Green, M. R. (2016). The impact of social networks in the development of a personal sports brand. *Sport, Business and Management*, 6(3), 274-294. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-09-2015-0032>
- Hull, K. (2014). A hole in one (hundred forty characters): a case study examining PGA tour golfers' Twitter use during the masters. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 7(2), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1123/IJSC.2013-0130>
- Keller, K. L., & Lehmann, D. R. (2006). Brands and branding: research findings and future priorities. *Marketing Science*, 25(6), 740-759. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1050.0153>



- Kennedy, H., & Funk, D. C. (2023). Habitually scrolling: An examination into how sport consumers use social media. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 16(2), 187-201. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2023-0001>
- Kian, E. M., & Zimmerman, M. H. (2023). Social Media Scholarship in Sport Studies and College Athletes' Name, Image, and Likeness Opportunities. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 16(3), 321-327. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2023-0136>
- Kunkel, T., Doyle, J., & Na, S. (2022). Becoming more than an athlete: developing an athlete's personal brand using strategic philanthropy. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22(3), 358-378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1791208>
- McCarthy, J., Rowley, J., & Keegan, B. J. (2022). Social media marketing strategy in English football clubs. *Soccer & Society*, 23(4-5), 513-528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2059872>
- Nazemi, M., Azimzadeh, S. M., Talebpour, M., & Donovan, D. T. (2019). Designing a Model for the Development of Professional Iranian Athletes' Personal Brands Using a Grounded Theory Approach. *Brand Management Quarterly*, 6(18), 3-31. https://bmr.alzahra.ac.ir/article_5068.html
- Nichols, E., & Shapiro, S. L. (2023). The Impact of Authenticity on Celebrity Athlete Social Media Endorsement Messaging. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 32(3), 175-188. <https://doi.org/10.32731/smq.323.092023.01>
- Ozsoy, S. (2011). Use of new media by Turkish fans in sport communication: Facebook and Twitter. *Journal of Human Kinetics*, 28(2), 165-176. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10078-011-0033-x>
- Park, J., Williams, A. S., & Son, S. (2020). Social Media as a Personal Branding Tool: A Qualitative Study of Student-Athletes' Perceptions and Behaviors. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.02.01.04>
- Pegoraro, A. (2014). Twitter as disruptive innovation in sport communication. *Communication and Sport*, 2(2), 132-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479514527432>
- Richelieu, A., Lopez, S., & Desbordes, M. (2008). The internationalisation of a sports team brand: the case of European soccer teams. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 10(1), 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-10-01-2008-B006>
- Van Grinsven, B., & Das, E. (2016). Logo design in marketing communications: brand logo complexity moderates exposure effects on brand recognition and brand attitude. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 22(3), 256-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2013.866593>
- Witkemper, C., Lim, C. H., & Waldburger, A. (2012). Social media and sports marketing: examining the motivations and constraints of Twitter users. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21(3), 170-183. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284870271_Social_media_and_sports_marketing_Examining_the_motivations_and_constraints_of_Twitter_users
- Woods, J., Hartwell, M., Oldham, L., & House-Niamke, S. (2023). Centering the self, doing the sport, and being the brand: The self-branding of lifestyle athletes on Instagram. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 1(aop), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2022-0168>
- Yu, C. C. (2015). Athlete endorsement in the international sports industry: a case study of David Beckham. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 6(3), 45-55. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-06-03-2005-B007>

