

Review

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PERSONAL BRANDING AND INFLUENCER MARKETING IN SPORTS

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Abstract: Personal branding and influencer marketing have become key tools in modern sports, allowing athletes to build a recognizable identity and connect with their audience. In the era of digitalization, athletes utilize social media to promote themselves, their skills, and personal values, thereby creating authentic connections with fans and consumers. Personal branding involves the process of designing and building a unique image that reflects the athlete as a person, while influencer marketing leverages this recognition to promote products or services. Sports influencers, thanks to their impact, can shape consumer opinions and behaviors, which is particularly important in the sports products and services industry. This synergistic relationship between personal branding and influencer marketing enables athletes not only to increase their market value but also to create new opportunities for sponsorships and business collaborations. As a result, an effective branding strategy can significantly contribute to an athlete's success in the professional world, creating long-term benefits for both them and their sponsors. In conclusion, personal branding and influencer marketing represent powerful tools that allow athletes to maximize their presence in the digital world, thereby increasing their influence and reputation in the sports industry.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Influencer Marketing, Sports, Social Media, Sponsor-ships

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Introduction

Personal branding and personality marketing are becoming increasingly important in today's professional world, especially in industries where personal identity plays a crucial role. Personal branding refers to creating and managing one's image and reputation, while personality marketing involves strategies and tactics used to promote that identity to achieve specific goals, whether professional, business, or social.

Both concepts share a common goal – increasing recognition and positive perception of an individual. However, they differ in focus and approach: Personal branding focuses on building an authentic image of oneself. It emphasizes long-term reputation, values, and identity that a person wants to convey. This includes all aspects of a person's character – skills, expertise, communication, and behavior. Personality marketing is more action-oriented and focuses on activities that promote the individual as a "product." This involves utilizing marketing tools and channels (social media, advertisements, public appearances) to attract the attention of the target audience. In simpler terms, personal branding lays the foundation, while personality marketing uses that foundation for promotion and achieving specific results.

One of the most prominent examples of personal branding and personality marketing is Cristiano Ronaldo. Ronaldo built his personal brand through outstanding sports performance, professionalism, and authenticity. His brand symbolizes success, luxury, and perseverance. On the other hand, the marketing of his personality involves sponsorship deals, advertising campaigns, and his presence on social media (Radaković, et al, 2023; Tošić, 2023). For instance, Ronaldo uses his Instagram profile, with over 500 million followers, to promote brands like Nike, Clear, and Herbalife, while also strengthening his own brand through inspirational messages and sharing moments from his personal life.

This combination of authentic personal branding and effective personality marketing has made him one of the most valuable and recognizable sports brands in the world.

Influencer marketing is a promotional strategy where brands collaborate with individuals who have a significant following on social media to deliver marketing messages to their audience. In sports, this type of marketing is becoming increasingly important, as sports influencers, such as professional athletes, coaches, or enthusiasts, have a strong connection with their followers and can significantly influence their purchasing decisions.

Sports is an industry driven by emotions, loyalty, and passion. For this reason, influencers in sports are ideal partners for brands (Dašić, 2021), as they can authentically promote sports-related products and services, such as equipment, supplements, or

sporting events. Their ability to personalize marketing messages allows brands to reach their target audience in a natural and non-intrusive way.

Sports influencers are most commonly active on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter, where they promote brands through posts, video content, and live streams (Ratković, Dašić, 2023). The key to the success of such campaigns lies in authenticity and interaction with the audience, which increases the likelihood that followers will trust the message (Krsmanović Veličković, 2019; Penezić, 2021).

One successful example of influencer marketing in sports is Nike's campaign featuring professional basketball player LeBron James. Nike leverages LeBron's massive following on Instagram and Twitter to promote its products, particularly the "LeBron" sneaker line. LeBron frequently shares videos and photos of himself wearing the latest sneaker models, highlighting their performance and design. Additionally, he uses his content to inspire his audience to strive for success, further associating the products with positive emotions and brand values. Such campaigns not only boost product sales but also reinforce the brand's image in the minds of consumers as synonymous with quality and success.

Personal branding of athletes

Can a human being become a brand? Absolutely. An individual who successfully builds upon their competence in a specific field of societal engagement through appropriate communication and financial valorization can become a brand. Human brands function in the same way as product or service brands. They convey values and perceptions—fun, sexy, revolutionary, likable, and so on—that influence specific target markets. Like product and service brands, human brands have their lifecycle and must be carefully managed in a manner consistent with morals and ethics, and adjusted as needed (Dašić & Jeličić, 2016).

Daniel Lair and a group of authors argue that within the personal branding movement, people and their careers are marketed as brands, accompanied by promises of performance, specialized design, and a clear path to success. Since personal branding offers a strikingly open invitation for self-commodification, this phenomenon calls for careful analysis and examination. The authors suggest that there is a correlation between parallel trends in contemporary communication and the employment climate, concluding that personal branding emerges as an extreme form of an appropriate market response (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005).

Today, without exception, branding is present across all professions, with financial gains serving as a marker of successful or unsuccessful branding (Dašić, et al., 2021).

Let us take athletes, footballers, and basketball players as examples. Why is it that out of eleven players (or five in basketball), only a few are more prominent and recognizable in the media and public eye? The answer lies in branding (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The Worlds Highest-Paid Athletes*



Izvor: Statista

The world’s 10 highest-paid athletes earned an unprecedented \$1.38 billion between May 2023 and May 2024, setting a new record, with the surge of Saudi investments playing a key role in elevating athlete earnings this year. According to Forbes’ annual ranking, for the first time in history, all 10 of the top-paid athletes earned more than \$100 million. Notably, four of the top eight athletes, including the first and second places, received their largest earnings from organizations backed by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF).

Cristiano Ronaldo remained the highest-paid athlete globally, earning an estimated \$260 million over the past 12 months, both from his football career and other ventures. This figure is largely attributed to his \$200 million annual salary from Al Nassr, whe-

re he serves as the prominent figure in the PIF-supported Saudi Pro League. Spanish golfer Jon Rahm claimed second place, having signed a \$350 million multi-year contract with LIV Golf, which is also supported by the PIF, in December 2023. Rahm, who had previously criticized LIV, accepted an upfront payment of half the deal, as estimated by Forbes.

This year's ranking underscores the growing influence of Saudi Arabia in professional sports and highlights the global appeal of football (soccer), a sport known for producing international superstars at an unparalleled rate. Of last year's highest-paid athletes, five were football players, with three of them playing in the Saudi Pro League. Notably, Kylian Mbappé is the only one among them still playing at the highest level, while the other four are nearing the end of their illustrious careers, accepting one final lucrative contract away from Europe's top five leagues.

In a temple in Bangkok, a shiny golden statue of David Beckham is placed right at the feet of Buddha, alongside some other lesser deities. The worship of Beckham is nothing compared to the adoration of Hello Kitty, the heroine of the Japanese comic series of the same name, which in Japan holds an almost religious brand status. David Beckham, one of the most recognizable athletes worldwide, has earned substantial income from various sources during and after his football career.

Beckham is among the highest-paid individuals for sponsored posts on social media. Reports indicate he earns approximately \$300,000 per sponsored Instagram post. During his playing career, Beckham generated significant revenue from the sale of jerseys and sports footwear. Estimates suggest that by 2013, he had generated approximately £1 billion (about \$1.24 billion) in merchandise sales. Beckham has had lucrative deals with numerous brands. His lifetime deal with Adidas, signed in 2003, is estimated to be worth around \$160 million. During his professional football career, Beckham earned substantial sums. For example, during his five-year stint with LA Galaxy, he earned a total of approximately \$255 million, including salary, bonuses, and a share of club revenue. Overall, Beckham's net worth is estimated to be around \$450 million, a result of his football career, endorsements, and business ventures (Murray, 2018; Smith, 2024).

Novak Djokovic, one of the most successful tennis players globally, has amassed substantial earnings from various sources throughout his career. Below is a breakdown of his income: While specific figures for Djokovic's earnings solely from social media are not publicly disclosed, his substantial following enhances his endorsement value. In 2021, he utilized a paid social media post to announce a partnership with luxury watchmaker Hublot. Djokovic earns a significant portion of his income through endorsements. In 2024, Forbes reported that he earned \$25 million from endorsements, with notable partnerships including Lacoste and Hublot. As of 2024, Djokovic has earned

approximately \$12.2 million in on-court winnings. Throughout his career, he has accumulated over \$143 million in prize money from singles and doubles competitions. Estimates of Djokovic's net worth vary, with figures around \$240 million. Novak Djokovic's financial success is attributed to his exceptional tennis career, lucrative endorsement deals, and strategic promotions, solidifying his status as one of the wealthiest athletes globally (Thompson, 2024) .

Cristiano Ronaldo exemplifies how effective personal branding on social media can lead to financial success. With over 600 million followers on Instagram as of 2024, Ronaldo earns approximately \$2 million per sponsored post, making him the highest-paid celebrity on the platform (Forbes, 2024). His posts, which often feature glimpses of his family life, training routines, and endorsements, are carefully curated to align with his brand as a disciplined and family-oriented athlete.

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms have become indispensable tools for athletes aiming to build and enhance their personal brands. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter offer athletes direct channels to engage with fans, share personal narratives, and showcase their values beyond their athletic achievements. Effective personal branding on social media not only elevates an athlete's public image but also opens avenues for lucrative endorsement deals and sponsorships.

Personal branding enables athletes to craft a unique identity that resonates with their audience. Authenticity plays a pivotal role in this process, as fans are more likely to connect with athletes who present genuine and relatable content. Research from the University of Kansas highlights that authenticity is central to building an athlete's brand, with personal life aspects significantly influencing public perception (University of Kansas, 2023).

To build a successful personal brand, athletes should identify their unique value proposition, produce consistent and captivating content, and engage with their followers to build a community. Responding to comments and direct messages, and showing appreciation for followers' support, fosters loyalty and strengthens relationships (SportsEdTV, n.d.).

Olivia Dunne, an American gymnast, exemplifies the power of personal branding on social media. With over 8 million followers on TikTok and 5 million on Instagram, Dunne has leveraged her online presence to secure endorsement deals with brands like Vuori and American Eagle Outfitters. Her estimated NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) valuation reached \$3.3 million in May 2023, underscoring the financial potential of effective personal branding (Wikipedia, 2023).

While social media offers significant opportunities, it also presents challenges. Athletes must navigate the fine line between sharing personal content and maintaining privacy. Additionally, the pressure to consistently produce engaging content can be demanding, potentially detracting from their athletic focus. Therefore, strategic planning and, in some cases, professional assistance are essential to manage an athlete's brand effectively (Forbes, 2023).

Personal branding on social media has become a crucial aspect of an athlete's career. By maintaining authenticity, engaging with followers, and strategically managing their online presence, athletes can build a loyal fan base and unlock substantial commercial opportunities. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the significance of personal branding in sports is poised to grow, offering athletes new avenues to connect with audiences and monetize their influence.

New multimedia platforms serve as powerful tools for individuals aiming to leave a strong imprint of their image on the public (Dašić, G., 2023). Through media, an individual projects their image to the public with the goal of becoming known and recognizable (Dašić, et al., 2024). The quantitative dimension of media presence is a key indicator of popularity. However, numerous cases have shown that a person can become famous overnight due to their participation in a significant or intriguing event that is broadcast to the public through the media. A successful individual manages to create positive interaction with their environment or a broader audience thanks to the psychological mechanism of identification.

Influencer Marketing in Sports

In today's digital age, sports have evolved beyond being merely a game—they now represent platforms for connection, inspiration, and commercialization. One of the key trends shaping the modern sports market is influencer marketing. This advertising strategy leverages the power of social media and the popularity of sports influencers to promote brands, products, and services. Sports influencers, whether they are professional athletes, coaches, fitness enthusiasts, or sports aficionados with large followings, possess the ability to impact the behavior, decisions, and lifestyles of their followers (Sascha et al., 2013).

The popularity of influencer marketing in sports stems from the increasing demand for authentic, direct, and engaging ways of communicating with target audiences (Dašić, 2023b). Research shows that 61% of consumers trust influencer recommendations, while 49% rely on sports influencers' suggestions when making decisions about purchasing sports equipment and services (Statista, 2023). The global value of the influencer marketing market was estimated at \$21.1 billion in 2023, with significant growth observed in the sports segment (Statista Research Department, 2024).

The influence of the sports community, combined with the power of social media, makes this type of marketing indispensable for brands seeking to position themselves in a dynamic marketplace. Through an exploration of key trends, strategies, and practical examples, this paper provides insights into how influencer marketing is shaping the sports ecosystem.

Sports influencers have become central players in the marketing strategies of many brands. Their ability to directly influence their followers through authentic content makes them an effective tool for fostering brand loyalty. According to research by Nielsen (2023), sports influencers can increase consumers' emotional connection with a brand by up to 20%, further solidifying their value in the world of digital marketing. Sports influencers often establish long-term relationships with their audience, enabling them to promote brands through personalized and engaging approaches, thereby fostering trust and loyalty toward the products or services they endorse.

Sports influencers play a significant role in shaping the market through campaigns that connect consumers with brands via digital platforms. Their influence on social media allows brands to build long-term and authentic relationships with consumers. One notable example of a successful campaign is the partnership between Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic and the brand Asics. By promoting his signature Asics tennis shoe models on Instagram and Twitter, Djokovic significantly increased the brand's sales and recognition, especially among his global fan base. Through authentic posts reflecting his sports philosophy and dedication, Djokovic helped Asics establish an emotional connection with consumers, resulting in increased loyalty and product sales (SportsPro, 2023).

Influencer marketing has become one of the most popular and effective forms of online marketing. With millions of internet users browsing social media platforms for entertainment, inspiration, and product recommendations daily, it is no surprise that marketers are harnessing the power of social media's most recognizable faces for promotion. The global influencer marketing market value stood at 21.1 billion U.S. dollars as of 2023, having more than tripled since 2019. As influencer endorsement continues to mature as an industry, the size and value of influencer marketing platforms also continue to expand every year, making collaborations between brands and creators more profitable than ever. 69% of consumers state that they trust the recommendations that influencers give them for new products or services. Consumers are becoming more savvy when it comes to marketing that brands publish. However, consumers often build a large amount of trust in the influencers that they follow - especially if they've followed that individual for a long time. 69% of consumers say they trust the recommendations that influencers make to them - making a great way for brands to get in front of consumers and be taken seriously (Top 20 Influencer, 2024)

Influencer marketing in sports has become an essential component of modern marketing strategies, allowing brands to engage directly with their target audiences through trusted and influential figures (Su, et al., 2020). Athletes, as sports influencers, possess the unique ability to build strong, authentic connections with their fans, which can be leveraged to promote products and services effectively. This marketing approach not only helps brands increase their visibility and reach but also fosters consumer loyalty and emotional connections with the products they endorse. As social media continues to evolve, the influence of sports figures will only grow, offering brands new opportunities to create impactful, long-lasting campaigns. The future of influencer marketing in sports is promising, as it will continue to bridge the gap between athletes, brands, and consumers in innovative ways.

Conclusions

Personal branding and influencer marketing in sports represent powerful tools that allow athletes to shape their identity and increase their visibility in the digital environment. Through the process of personal branding, athletes create a unique image that reflects their skills, values, and personality, while influencer marketing leverages that recognition to promote products and services.

The role of social media is crucial in this process, enabling athletes to communicate directly and authentically with fans and consumers. This synergy between personal branding and influencer marketing brings significant benefits, including an increase in an athlete's market value, attracting sponsorships, and opening new business opportunities.

Sports influencers play a key role in modern marketing strategies, acting as a bridge between brands and consumers. Their ability to communicate directly with large audiences on social media allows brands to build authentic, long-term relationships with consumers, thereby increasing loyalty to the products or services they promote. Successful campaign examples, such as Cristiano Ronaldo's partnership with Nike and Novak Djokovic's collaboration with Asics, demonstrate how sports influencers can significantly contribute to brand recognition, image, and sales growth. These campaigns not only strengthen brands but also foster an emotional connection with consumers, which is crucial for achieving long-term success in the market. Given the growing influence of social media, the role of sports influencers in marketing campaigns will continue to expand, providing brands with the opportunity to reach a global audience in an authentic and engaging way.

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