Understanding Athlete Branding: A Scoping Review

Natasha Brison, Texas A&M University
Zahra Sharifzadeh, Texas A&M University

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Branding is a strategic marketing process which is implemented to distinguish products or services from those of competitors (Aaker, 1991). Although Kotler and Levy (1969) conceptualized people also could be brands, Thomson (2006) first defined a human brand as a “well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (p. 104). Expanding on Thomson’s definition, sport scholars have identified athletes as brands due their distinctive names, appearances, and personalities (Arai et al., 2014; Walsh & Williams, 2017). By managing these unique attributes, athletes can earn extensive revenues (Lobpries et al., 2018). However, to leverage the potential equity associated with being a brand, athletes first must establish a brand identity (Kotler & Keller, 2008).

Ghodeswar (2008) proposed four elements to create a brand identity (PCDL model): positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering brand performance, and leveraging brand equity. Although an abundance of literature on human branding has led to multiple reviews within different disciplines, researchers have yet to engage in a scoping review on athlete branding. Conducting a scoping review provides researchers with insight into the volume or body of literature on a given topic (Armstrong et al., 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study is to perform a scoping review of athlete branding literature. The goal is to synthesize and summarize the literature to identify the key concepts and potential research gaps. Therefore, researchers propose the following questions:

RQ1: What are the main themes that have been studied with respect to athlete brands?
RQ2: What are the knowledge gaps that could provide opportunities for future research?
RQ3: To what extent can the PCDL model of product branding be applied to the athlete branding literature?

To address the research questions, researchers utilized Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework for conducting a scoping review, which after identifying research questions, researchers need to ascertain and select the pertinent studies, chart the data, then summarize and report the results. To determine appropriate articles, researchers conducted a search using the following keywords: brand* and athlete* from three electronic databases: Business Source Complete, EBSCO, and SPORTDiscus. Only peer-reviewed articles published in English between January 1, 1990 and March 31, 2020 were included. Given the focus on athlete branding, researchers excluded articles related to athlete endorsements. Of the relevant articles (n = 966), 45 were eligible for study inclusion.

Detailed analysis of the articles is currently in process. Yet, an initial examination of the articles reveals studies primarily focused on professional athletes using qualitative methods of investigation, and Goffman’s (1959) Self-Presentation Theory guided most of the studies. Regarding the PCDL model, social media, not surprisingly, was the predominant platform used by athletes to communicate brand messages, and Twitter was the most studied platform. Notably, only 3 out of the 45 articles centered on college athletes, and only one article researched high school athletes. Given the new opportunities for college athletes to earn revenue from their name, image, and likeness, further research is needed to understand athlete branding from these additional perspectives.