

UNDERSTANDING THE DIMENSIONS OF ATHLETE BRAND AUTHENTICITY

COMPRESIÓN DE LAS DIMENSIONES DE LA AUTENTICIDAD DE LA MARCA DE LOS DEPORTISTAS

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ABSTRACT

The management of an athlete brand is challenging due to the complex nature of athlete career and life. Striving to maintain brand authenticity will promote long-term sustainability of the brand. The purpose of the study is to determine possible factors that contribute to athlete brand authenticity and help athletes to develop their brand more authentically. To understand the concept of athlete brand authenticity, a systematic literature review was conducted on various electronic databases. The study opted the five-step stages of the framework for this systematic review. A total of 76 attributes were identified from past studies that analyzed the attributes of brand authenticity for various brands. After merging interrelated attributes, the final number of unique attributes was 23. These attributes were distributed among three major themes: on-field activities, off-field activities and marketing activities of an athlete. The study finds brand authenticity to be a multi-dimensional and complex process that endures for longer extensive periods of an athlete's career. The current study also highlights the complications related to an athlete brand that occur when establishing athlete brand authenticity. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to refine athlete brand authenticity further within the discussed domains.

Keywords: branding, athletes, sports management, athlete brand

RESUMEN

Como los deportistas son considerados una marca, la gestión de su marca es un desafío para el mercado. La autenticidad de la marca es una herramienta que se puede utilizar para garantizar que la marca se mantenga durante un período de tiempo más largo. Para comprender el concepto de autenticidad de la marca del deportista, se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura en varias bases de datos electrónicas. Se identificaron un total de 76 atributos a partir de estudios anteriores que analizaron los atributos de autenticidad de marca para varias marcas. Después de fusionar atributos interrelacionados, el número final de atributos únicos fue 23. Estos atributos se dividieron en tres grandes temas: actividades en el campo, actividades fuera del campo y actividades de marketing de un deportista. El estudio encuentra la complejidad relacionada con la autenticidad de la marca en que la autenticidad es un proceso multidimensional que perdura por períodos más largos. El estudio actual también destaca las complicaciones relacionadas con la marca de un deportista que ocurren al establecer la autenticidad de la marca del atleta debido a la naturaleza de la marca del atleta.

Palabras clave: marca, atletas, gestión deportiva, marca de atleta

INTRODUCTION

Athletes are considered a brand (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, [2018](#)), and the management of their brand is a challenge in the competitive market. An athlete's brand is considered fragile, hybrid, short-lived and complex compared to other brands (Cortsen, [2013](#)). Therefore, athletes and their managers adopt different techniques to endure in the market. One of these techniques is to achieve authenticity in the era of "fake news," "fake images" and "fake impressions;" as a result, personal brand authenticity is a highly valuable asset (Kucharska, Brunetti, Confente, & Mladenović, [2018](#)). Furthermore, authenticity not only helps celebrities on social media (Kowalczyk & Pounders, [2016](#)) but also increases brand equity, trustworthiness (Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Guldenberg, [2013](#)) and positive expectations (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, [2015](#)), which in turn increase the willingness of customers (i.e., fans) to buy products associated with the athlete (Carsana & Jolibert, [2018](#)). Likewise, authentic brands are remarkably robust (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, [2008](#)), and brand authenticity is an essential quality that any brand should have to endure in the market especially for athletes as their brand is considered fragile and short-lived. Although brand authenticity has been discussed in academia from various perspectives, there is still a lack of knowledge on the brand authenticity of athletes.

Establishing authenticity is an indication of the uniqueness of a brand, and therefore it could be a step towards the long-lasting success of a brand (Aaker, [1996](#)). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a conceptual framework that encompasses possible factors that contribute to athlete brand authenticity. This study aims to generate an understanding of the process of achieving authenticity among athlete brands by discussing its dimensions and attributes. To do so, a systematic review is conducted to explore constructs of authenticity discussed in the literature.

OPERATION DEFINITIONS

Athlete brand

A brand is a unique name, term, sign, symbol or design, or combination of these, which is used to help differentiate the product from the competition (Kotler, [1997](#)). Therefore, Arai, Ko, & Ross ([2014](#)) argue that every athlete is a brand because every athlete has distinctive qualities. An athlete brand, similar to other sporting brands, is discussed in the context of brand equity (Keller, [1993](#)). However, it is also argued in the context of human brands, as personal brands differ from brands for products or services (Hasaan & Kerem, [2017](#)). Carter ([2010](#)) argued that a personal brand is a brand that consists of peoples' opinions of an individual. Therefore, an athlete brand is constituted by peoples' opinions of an athlete (Hasaan et al., [2018](#)).

Brand authenticity

Authenticity means doing, saying, and professing the things that we in fact believe and practice (Toft, Sunny, & Taylor, [2020](#), p.7). In a branding context, authenticity refers to the extent to which a brand is considered unique, legitimate, truthful to its claims, and lacking falsity (Akbar & Wymer, [2016](#), p. 18). Also, brand authenticity is viewed as an ability of a brand to satisfy consumers' expectations of an authentic brand (Beverland et al., [2008](#)). Consequently, brand authenticity is created by consumers' perceptions (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, [2015](#)). Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster ([2008](#)) have argued that a brand is perceived as authentic when it fulfils the expectations that it promises. Thus, in the context of personal brands, authenticity is an individual's perceived degree of genuineness, uniqueness and originality (Liao & Ma, [2009](#)). Furthermore, brand authenticity is a valuable asset for any brand (Yannopoulou, Moufahim, & Bian, [2013](#)), as the authentic status of a brand connects it with its customers in a deeper way than conventional brands do (Pace, [2015](#)).

Some authors have categorized brand authenticity into two dimensions: internal authenticity and external authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, [2007](#); Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, [2018](#)). Internal

authenticity is achieved via internal consistency (i.e., a brand is true to itself) and external authenticity is achieved via external consistency (i.e., a brand is what it appears to be; Spiggle et al., [2018](#)). Moreover, authenticity has been categorized into three dimensions: objective, constructive and postmodern (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, [2015](#)). The objectivist perspective suggests that brand authenticity perceptions arise from an evidence-based reality (Morhart et al., [2015](#)). The constructivist perspective suggests that brand authenticity is dependent on the context, as authenticity is a subjective, socially and personally constructed perception of objects and cultures (Lu et al., [2015](#); Reisinger & Steiner, [2006](#)). Lastly, the postmodernist perspective suggests that consumers are likely to judge authenticity based on their emotional experiences of the brand (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, [2006](#)). In contrast, Stiehler & Tinson ([2015](#)) described three types of authenticity: pure authenticity (judgements of an item or experience), approximate authenticity (iconic referents that reflect the consumer's perception) and moral authenticity (brand's commitment to social programs). Most recently, Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn ([2017](#)) noted that brand authenticity is interpreted via two cues, namely the indexical and iconic cues (i.e., indexical cues provide perceived evidence to customers, while iconic cues are the perceived connection that provide evidence of authenticity to customers).

Athlete brand authenticity

Brand Authenticity is recognized as the essence or DNA of any brand (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, [2003](#)) including celebrities with brand status (i.e., personal brands) (Ilicic & Webster, [2016](#)). Personal brand authenticity consists of stability and rarity constructs (Kucharska et al., [2018](#)). Celebrity authenticity is defined as "the perception of fans that he/she behaves according to true self" (Moulard et al., [2015](#), p.175). In the literature, the term "true self" is used when a celebrity is perceived as genuine, original and unique or rare (Ilicic & Webster, [2016](#); Van Leeuwen, [2001](#)). Jensen & Luthans ([2006](#)) also note that celebrity brand authenticity is not only achieved by presenting a brand image that is true to the celebrity but also can be achieved if followers gain self-awareness and psychological strength from the celebrity. Furthermore, authenticity is the essence of the celebrity's relationship with the public, and it is based on the public's interpretation of their observations of the celebrity (Preece, [2015](#)). Therefore, authenticity is a part of the brand image that can be beneficial to celebrities who want to build a trustworthy relationship with fans (Tolson, [2001](#)). As a result, authenticity increases the brand equity (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, [2014](#)). In the context of sports, authenticity indicates the uniqueness of the sports entity (e.g., athletes; Kucharska et al., [2018](#)). For instance, Allen Iverson, a former National Basketball Association player, was able to achieve an authentic status due to

his distinctive playing style and aesthetic presentation (Andrews, Mower, & Silk, [2011](#)). Furthermore, an athlete's brand could be explained as the public-facing personality of an athlete (Hasaan & Kerem, [2017](#)). In this vein, athlete brand authenticity can be defined as a uniqueness, originality and character strength an athlete owns in people's opinion. Uniqueness represents an athlete's distinctiveness that differentiates him/her from others. Originality ensures that an athlete is not a product of media hype but a true talent. While character strength represents positive traits of an athlete's personality.

METHODS

The five-step stages of the framework for this systematic review (Khan, Kunz, Kleijnen, & Antes, [2003](#), p.118) was adopted in this study". The stages are:

Stage1: Framing a research question for a review

The research question should be specified in the form of clear, unambiguous and structured questions before beginning the review work. This study adopted the following question to review: *What is known from the existing literature about the brand authenticity and identifying factors that contribute to athlete brand authenticity?*

Stage 2: Identifying relevant work

The second stage involved the search of suitable studies. During this stage, the search for studies should be extensive. For that purpose, multiple resources were accessed.

Databases, search terms and inclusion criteria

An article search was conducted within the electronic databases EBSCO, ProQuest, Google Scholar and Wiley Online Library as these databases cover an extensive range of academic literature (Bask, Lipponen, & Tinnilä, [2012](#)), and useful in the retrieval of difficult to find information (Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis, & Pappas, [2008](#)). The following search terms were used: "brand authenticity," "human/celebrity brand authenticity," "athlete brand authenticity" and "sport brand authenticity." The research was carried out on July 13th, 2018 and covered the period from January 2000 to June 2018. First, a broad search was conducted to identify all relevant articles. Second, the literature was narrowed by selecting articles that had the terms "brand" and "authenticity" in the title, the title and abstract, and the title and text. Third, articles published in journals with higher impact factors were given preference. The higher impact factor publications were preferred because impact factor is used to measure their quality and impact (Bordons, Fernández, &

Gómez, [2002](#)). More than 200 documents (articles, books, book chapters, theses) were generated initially.

Search outcome and exclusion criteria

Theses and duplicate journal references due to searches in different electronic databases were removed first. After removing duplicate items, the lead author screened the remaining 144 titles and abstracts based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, subsequently selecting 114 studies for full-text reading in the first round of review. To understand certain concepts further, in-text citations found in these articles were used and new searches in the databases were conducted during the review. For example, to further understand “attribution theory,” mentioned in Kowalczyk & Pounders ([2016](#)), the in-text citation of Ryan & Deci ([2000](#)) was used and the term “attribution theory” was searched for in the databases mentioned previously.

Stage 3: Assessing the quality of studies

Study quality assessment is a very important factor to get better results. For that purpose, we adopted systematic review checklist of CASP.

Quality appraisal

The quality of the selected studies was evaluated independently by the two authors using the systematic review checklist of CASP, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme ([2017](#)). The CASP checklist consists of 10 criteria with the following options: “yes,” “can’t tell” and “no.” These criteria are based on three categories: Are the results of the study valid? What are the results? (Section B) Will the results help locally? These criteria addressed the various issues such as, review’s results, result validity, result continuity, and result application. The final list of 10 criteria is given below.

1. Did the review address a clearly focused question?
2. Did the authors look for the right type of papers?
3. Do you think all the important, relevant studies were included?
4. Did the review’s authors do enough to assess quality of the included studies?
5. If the results of the review have been combined, was it reasonable to do so?
6. What are the overall results of the review?
7. How precise are the results?
8. Can the results be applied to the local population?
9. Were all-important outcomes considered?

10. Are the benefits worth the harms and costs?

The final results showed no disagreement between the two authors' evaluations. Generally, the quality of all 114 studies was found to be good; none were excluded based on the quality appraisal.

Stage 4: Summarizing the evidence

This step is also called charting the data (Arksey & O' Malley, [2005](#)). This step involved 'charting' key items of information obtained from the review. Charting is defined as a technique for synthesizing and interpreting qualitative data (Ritchie & Spencer, [1994](#)). Following this technique, a total of 76 attributes were identified in 114 studies that addressed factors contributing to brand authenticity in various brands. After merging interrelated concepts, 24 items remained. Among the 24, one item ("method of production") was irrelevant to athlete branding and, therefore, was deleted from the final list. Thus, the final number of attributes in the study was 23 (see [Figure 1](#)).

Stage 5: Interpreting the findings

The last stage is about interpretation of the results. After considering the previous four steps carefully, a total of 114 studies and 23 items were used in the current study results and findings. An unbiased and objective interpretation of results was conducted to maintain the high standards of the study.

Proposed framework

To group these 23 constructs, athlete branding literature was used. In this context, on-field and off-field attributes were considered as playing an important role in the development and cultivation of an athlete's brand (Hasaan et al., [2018](#); Parmentier & Fischer, [2012](#)). Hasaan et al. ([2018](#)) further describe on-field attributes as behavior, team, achievements, style of play and skills; and off-field attributes as physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment. Arai et al. ([2014](#)) argued that an athlete's brand image can be conceptualized using three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Instead, Williams & Agyemang ([2014](#)) conceptualized athlete brand image using organization-related, market-related and athlete-related antecedents. This study has opted for Hasaan et al. ([2018](#)) athlete brand authenticity dimensions, which are the on-field and off-field concepts, as they encompass everything related to an athlete's life. Furthermore, a third dimension was added based on the athlete branding literature, which is the market-related activities of the athlete.

RESULTS

This study describes athlete brand authenticity using their on-field activities, off-field activities and marketing activities. However, as athlete branding is a complex and multilayered topic, athlete brand authenticity attributes can belong to more than one of these categories. For instance, athlete behavior is important both on-field and off-field and the aesthetic element exists in both the athlete's game and lifestyle.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete's on-field activities

An athlete's on-field attributes can be defined as an athlete's performance-related characteristics, such as their behaviour, team, achievements, style of play and skills (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018). In this context, this study found 14 attributes that are included in the athlete's brand authenticity as related to the athlete's on-field activities. These are rarity, stability, morality, originality, heritage, performance, credibility, integrity, icon, personality, behaviour, passion, customer's experience and aesthetics (see [Table 1](#) for further details).

Rarity refers to uniqueness. An athlete's unique talent, scarceness, exclusiveness and achievements distinguish them from others. Stability denotes an athlete's consistency in their performance. Morality is an athlete's moral behaviour and attitude when they are on the field. Originality denotes the genuineness that ensures that an athlete is a real performer and not a media hype. Heritage encompasses the efforts athletes make to follow the big names of the past. Performance is an essential factor for any athlete to become a brand and to become an authentic brand. If an athlete performs well, they will be able to win the fans' loyalty. Credibility means the athlete's trustworthiness among fans, ensuring they will do their best every time. Integrity refers to an athlete's honesty and truthfulness toward the sport or team they represent. Icon is the status that some athletes can achieve (e.g., best among best/ hall of fame). Personality in the context of an athlete's on-field activities is the athlete's confidence level, image among fans and other personality traits. Behaviour represents the athlete's attitude towards fellow and opposing athletes, referees and fans during the game. Passion is a key to authenticity, as more passionate athletes can receive more positive responses from fans. An athlete's performance creates the customer's experience. An athlete's positive contribution will create a positive customer experience and a negative contribution will create a negative customer experience. An athlete's style of play includes aesthetic elements that draw the attention of many fans.

Table 1.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete's on-field activities.

Item	Definition	Literature Support
Rarity	Unique, exclusive, distinctive, talented, specialized	Kucharska et al. (2018); Kucharska & Firgolska (2018); Liao & Ma (2009); Moulard et al. (2015)
Stability	Longevity, constancy, consistency	Kucharska et al. (2018); Moulard et al. (2015); Moulard et al. (2016)
Morality	Honesty, sincerity, candidness	Kucharska & Firgolska (2018); Guzman & Lélis (2017); Moulard et al. (2015)
Originality	Particularity, genuineness, realness	Liao & Ma (2009); Akbar & Wymer (2016); Rampersad (2009)
Heritage	Preserving brand heritage, the persistence of heritage and style, heritage and pedigree	Preece (2015); Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn (2017); Napoli et al. (2014)
Performance	Strong performance, cultural capital, commitment	Preece (2015); Alexander (2009); Liao & Ma (2009)
Credibility	Trustworthiness, trustfulness, reliability, goodwill	Morhart et al. (2015); Carsana & Jolibert (2018); Wymer & Akbar (2017)
Integrity	Purity, true self, respect, the responsibility of the brand	Morhart et al. (2015); Liao & Ma (2009); Carsana & Jolibert (2018)
Icon	Symbolism, brand legitimacy, sporting symbolism	Morhart et al. (2015); Carsana & Jolibert (2018); Fritz et al. (2017)
Personality	Authority, self-confidence, positive image	Choi et al. (2015); Rampersad (2009); Ilicic & Webster (2016)
Behaviour	Attitude, reaction, poise	Ilicic et al. (2016); Ilicic & Webster (2015); Kernis & Goldman (2006)
Passion	Working passion, enthusiasm, commitment	Fritz et al. (2017); Pattuglia et al. (2015); Preece (2015)
Customers' experience	Nostalgia, memory, positive memory	Pattuglia et al. (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Liao & Ma (2009)
Aesthetics	Love of craft, beauty, craftsmanship	Beverland (2009); Napoli et al. (2014); Wymer & Akbar (2017)

Source: the authors.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete's off-field activities

Athlete off-field attributes can be defined as an athlete's life beyond their sporting activity, such as their attractiveness, lifestyle, personal appeal or ethnicity (Hasaan et al., 2018). In this context, this study found 13 attributes that could be the source of athlete brand authenticity related to an athlete's off-field activities. These are morality, naturalness, impression, physical attributes,

customers' experience, heritage, integrity, icon, origin, personality, aesthetics, sustainability and behaviour (see [Table 2](#) for further details).

Morality in the context of an athlete's off-field activities is their family relations and moral character. Naturalness refers to their apolitical behavior. Impression is an athlete's presentation. Physical attributes of an athlete are their appeal, looks or image. Customer experience in the context of off-field activities refers to the perception and interaction of fans have of an athlete's life and personal actions. Heritage denotes the athlete's off-field activities that imitate past iconic athletes. Integrity refers to an athlete's honesty and truthfulness toward the society they represent. Icon is the social status that some athletes are able to achieve (e.g., being the country's pride). Origin is the place (e.g., city, country) that an athlete represents. Personality in the context of an athlete's off-field activities is the athlete's appeal and charisma. The athlete's style of living includes the aesthetic element that draws the attention of many fans. Sustainability denotes an athlete's efforts for social development. Behaviour is the athlete's attitudes toward others in real life.

Table 2.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete's off-field activities.

Item	Definition	Literature Support
Morality	Relational orientation, sincerity, candidness	Ilicic & Webster (2015); Ilicic et al. (2016); Kucharska & Firgolska (2018)
Naturalness	Quality of behaving or speaking, discretion, unbiasedness	Akbar & Wymer (2016); Bruhn et al. (2012); Ilicic et al. (2016)
Impression	Impression management, presentation of self	Preece (2015); Carroll (2015); Greenwell et al. (2017)
Physical attributes	Physical products (image, looks, appeal)	Grayson & Martinec (2004); Leigh et al. (2006); Liao & Ma (2009)
Customers' experience	Positive consumers' experience, sacredness, nostalgia, memory, community link	Pattuglia et al. (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Beverland (2009); Napoli et al. (2014)
Heritage	Preserving brand heritage, heritage and style persistence, heritage and pedigree	Preece (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Napoli et al. (2014)
Integrity	Purity, true self, respect, the responsibility of the brand	Morhart et al. (2015); Liao & Ma (2009); Carsana & Jolibert (2018)
Icon	Symbolism, brand legitimacy, social icon	Morhart et al. (2015); Carsana & Jolibert (2018); Fritz et al. (2017)
Origin	Relationship to place, adhering to one's roots	Alexander (2009); Choi et al. (2015); Beverland (2009)
Personality	Authority, easily recognized by people, self-confident	Rampersad (2009); Ilicic & Webster (2016); Choi et al. (2015)
Aesthetics	Love of craft, beauty, craftsmanship	Beverland (2009); Napoli et al. (2014); Wymer & Akbar (2017)
Sustainability	Caring about the environment, public affairs, taking social responsibility	Choi et al. (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Grayson & Martinec (2004)
Behaviour	Attitude, reaction, poise	Ilicic & Webster (2015); Kernis & Goldman (2006); Ilicic et al. (2016)

Source: the authors.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete's marketing activities

Athlete marketing activities can be defined as an athlete's effort to advertise themselves, through social media or impression management, for example. In this context, this study found seven attributes that could contribute to athlete brand authenticity of the athlete's marketing activities. These are naturalness, impression, commercialization, brand congruency, sustainability, visibility and brand clarity (see [Table 3](#) for further details).

Naturalness refers to an athlete’s apolitical behavior in the media. Impression is an athlete’s presentation: how they or their entourage present themselves in the media. Commercialization refers to the branding efforts of an athlete (e.g., market reach, marketing techniques). Brand congruency is the favorable attitude of customers toward brands that match their idea of self. Sustainability denotes the athlete’s efforts toward societal development and the coverage of this effort by the media. Visibility refers to the public awareness of the athlete, advertising, endorsement and other marketing factors. Brand clarity denotes the athlete’s communication style and the medium they use to address fans.

Table 3.

Athlete brand authenticity via the athlete’s marketing activities.

Item	Definition	Literature Support
Naturalness	Quality of behaving or speaking, discretion, unbiasedness	Akbar & Wymer (2016); Bruhn et al. (2012); Ilicic et al. (2016)
Impression	Impression management, presentation of self	Preece (2015); Carroll (2015); Greenwell et al. (2017)
Commercialization	Global market reach, social capital, marketing techniques	Preece (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Bruhn et al. (2012)
Brand congruency	Relevance, creation of links, finding self-image in brand	Fritz et al. (2017); Rampersad (2009); Eggers et al. (2013)
Sustainability	Caring about the environment, public affairs, taking social responsibility	Choi et al. (2015); Fritz et al. (2017); Grayson & Martinec (2004)
Visibility	Awareness, marketing, advertising, social media, sponsorship	Ilicic & Webster (2015); Kernis & Goldman (2006); Ilicic et al. (2016)
Brand clarity	Brand’s communication style, proper communication style and mediums	Fritz et al. (2017); Morhart et al. (2015); Guzman & Lélis (2017)

Source: the authors.

DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the factors affecting an athlete’s brand authenticity. To do this, it conducted an extensive literature review to find out all factors discussed in the literature that influence brand authenticity. The current study is an attempt to discuss all possible attributes of brand authenticity to provide a guideline for athletes to become an authentic brand. This study highlighted various attributes that need to be addressed to strive for athlete brand authenticity. It

not only attempted to identify attributes of athlete brand authenticity but also grouped them into three categories (on-field, off-field and marketing activities, see [Figure 1](#)), thereby simplifying the attributes and further aiding practitioners and academics.

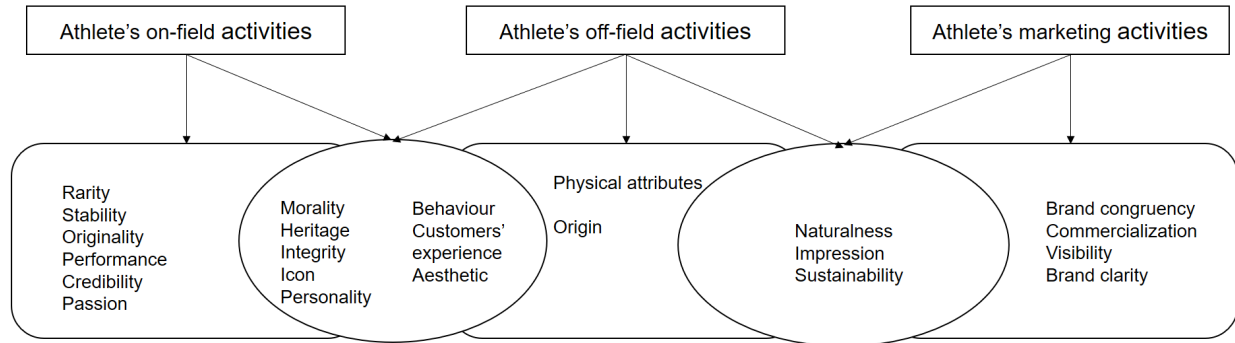


Figure 1. The proposed framework of athlete brand authenticity. Source: the authors.

The study explored 23 attributes that influenced athlete brand authenticity. Although these items were divided into three categories, many items belonged to more than one group. Thus, the categories show the sensitive nature of the athlete's brand. For instance, some athletes are considered to be fragile and complex, and they are often considered unstable products (Arai et al., [2014](#)). Past studies have identified two categories of athlete brand (on-field and off-field) and have discussed brand construction of athletes using these two dimensions (Arai et al., [2014](#); Hasaan et al., [2018](#)). However, the marketing of an athlete is also discussed in the literature (Greenwell et al., [2017](#); Parmentier & Fischer, [2012](#)). For instance, Yu ([2005](#)) mentioned that an athlete brand is dependent upon two different dimensions of an athlete's life – on-field success and off-field positive image – while Hasaan, Javani, Fisne, & Sato ([2020](#)) mentioned that business and marketing activities boost athlete branding. In this vein, Greenwell et al. ([2017](#)) noted that athlete marketing ensures the athlete's authenticity.

Rarity is the first pure on-field attribute, – which denotes uniqueness (Kucharska et al., [2018](#)). In the context of an athlete brand, rarity separates an athlete from others. For instance, Al-Imam ([2017](#)) described the rarity in sport as being the greatest of all time (GOAT). Few players can be considered great, and just a handful of players are ranked as the GOAT (Al-Imam, [2017](#)). Stability is the longevity of an athlete's career. Stambulova ([2010](#)) and Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman ([2015](#)) noted that an athletic career is seen as a life-long career. Thus, longer periods of playing increased the chance of athlete brand authenticity. Originality is the genuineness of an

athlete. Arai et al. (2014) mentioned that genuineness extended the credibility of an athlete's image. It is argued that media hype impacts a short-term influence, yet it affected athlete brand image (Frisby & Wanta, 2018). For instance, NBA forward Kris Humphries became the talk of the town overnight because of his marriage to Kim Kardashian, yet his popularity was high for only a short period (Pifer, Mak, Bae, & Zhang, 2015). Performance, an athletes' sporting form and capability, is one of the major factors in athlete branding (Arai et al., 2014). Better performance leads toward higher brand status, and the growth of athlete brands tends to be linked to strong performance (Cortsen, 2013; Hasaan, Biscaia, & Ross, 2021). Credibility means that fans trust athletes to perform their best every time. Na, Kunkel & Doyle (2020) mentioned that to build their brands effectively and to elicit engagement, athletes should engage in credible communications. In this sense, perceived credibility may enhance the athlete brand (Arai et al., 2014). Passion represents the enthusiasm of an athlete. Hasaan & Kerem (2017) mentioned that fans like more passionate athletes, and fans like to connect with and follow such athletes. In this vein, passion reveals an authentic self (Curran, Appleton, Hill, & Hall, 2013).

In the context of attributes that belong to both the on-field and off-field categories, morality corresponds to honesty and sincerity on the field. In this context, Cortsen (2013) declared that immoral activity by athletes could harm brand value and worth. MacPherson & Kerr (2021) elaborated that immoral activities caused fans to engage in public shaming of athletes, withdrawal of support, and caused physical, psychosocial and career-related consequences for the athletes. For instance, Maria Sharapova (tennis), who had a following of 26.9 million on social media, faced fans' wrath following her performance-enhancing drug use (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021). Meanwhile, off-field morality describes the moral character of an athlete. It is observed that consumers display low involvement behaviour with scandalized athletes (Sato, Ko, Park, & Tao, 2015). For instance, three top athletes – golfer Tiger Woods, National Football League quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, and the National Basketball Association's Kobe Bryant – were caught in and apologized for sex scandals, thus harming their huge fan following; they also faced media rage and loss of endorsements (Meng & Pan, 2013).

Heritage refers to the efforts athletes make to follow the big names of the past, preserving the legacy of team and sport. Some athletes achieve substantial prominence from their linkage to certain top players. For example, professional footballer Marko Marin was called the "German Messi" at the start of his professional career (Hasaan et al., 2018). Also, fans appreciated the values of sportsmanship and conformity to rules (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Furthermore, fans expected that athletes should show good manners and sportsmanship, to win without cheating through the use of drugs or deviousness and follow the sport's heritage (Lines, 2001). Off the field,

heritage means preserving the heritage of team and sport. This idea is also called the “human dimensions of sport heritage” (Ramshaw, [2011](#)). Athletes who ignored the legacy or culture of sport faced fan criticism and dislike. For instance, (then) Liverpool football club forward Luis Suárez was branded a disgrace for snubbing a handshake from Patrice Evra (Manchester United) during the pre-match ritual (TheGuardian, [2012](#)).

Integrity refers to an athlete’s honesty and truthfulness towards their sport. In this context, people have experienced some loss of faith regarding sport and athletes, as the moral standards of the past now hold less sway, and this erosion of standards is negatively affecting the integrity of sport (McLaren, [2011](#)). Furthermore, Fynes & Fisher ([2016](#)) noted that integrity of character is just as important in sport as it is in daily life. Off the field, integrity refers to an athlete’s honesty and truthfulness toward society. Meng & Pan ([2013](#)) indicated that truthfulness is useful, even when an athlete committed a blunder. When athletes accept their mistakes, fans accept their apologies and move forward (Miller & Laczniak, [2011](#)).

Icon means the status that some athletes can achieve. Hasaan et al. ([2021](#)) discussed the iconic status of an athlete in the context of the athletic life cycle, declaring that achieving this status extend the limits and lifetime of an athlete brand. For instance, Floyd Mayweather has a better professional record but is still unable to surpass Muhammad Ali’s brand status (Hasaan et al., [2021](#)). Icon is about symbolism in an athlete’s life outside of sports as well. For instance, Didier Drogba emerged as a peacemaker in the war-stricken country Ivory Coast, as his iconic image was highly regarded by rebel forces (Künzler & Poli, [2012](#)).

Personality is another attribute that addresses both the on-field and off-field activities of an athlete. For instance, personality, in terms of on-field activities, refers to an athlete’s confidence level and other on-field personality traits. To increase an athlete’s likelihood of success, personality is an important factor (Piepiora, Ciężczyk, & Krzesiński, [2017](#)). While off the field, personality refers to the personal appeal of an athlete. Arai et al. ([2014](#)) noted that athlete brand is related to the personality and image of a particular athlete as perceived by the public. For instance, Roger Federer is known for his modest image, while his great rival, Rafael Nadal, is known for his aggressive personality (Hasaan et al., [2021](#)).

Behaviour represents the athlete’s on-field attitude towards fellow and opposing athletes. Fans expected their favourite athlete to lead the team by demonstrating good behaviour (Daley & Wolfson, [2010](#)). In this scenario, Hasaan et al. ([2018](#)) mentioned that athlete behaviour has an influence, either positive or negative, on fans’ loyalty towards that athlete. Off-field behaviour is an athlete’s attitude in that context. Fans expect that their favourite athlete will lead by

demonstrating a sense of responsibility within society (Daley & Wolfson, [2010](#)). In this sense, good behaviour off the field strengthens the case of athlete brand authenticity.

In the athletic context, customer experience becomes fans' good memories and experience while watching the game. Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, and Biscaia ([2014](#)) mentioned that previous experiences at professional sporting events can affect fan engagement levels in the future (i.e. positive experiences increase the probability of engagement). For instance, where a professional athlete is playing exceptionally well, viewers achieve a state of mind where nothing else matters but the game and they are completely immersed in it (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, [2000](#)). Customer experience in the context of off-field activities refers to the perception and interaction of fans regarding an athlete's off-field attitude. Customer experience is so important that 89% of companies plan to compete primarily on the basis of customer experience (Keiningham et al., [2017](#)). For instance, Schubert & Seyffert ([2017](#)) noted that after-match communication (i.e. via social media) makes a better experience for sports fans; thus these fans possibly feel a greater attachment that increases engagement and trust as well as strengthening relationships.

Aesthetics refers to craftsmanship, or the style of play of an athlete. Kerr & Emery ([2011](#)) noted that a graceful style of play is considered a positive aspect for creating an athlete's brand. For instance, former French footballer Zinedine Zidane was called "the magician" because of his playing style (Hasaan et al., [2018](#)). Aesthetic signifies beauty and other visible elements of an athlete's life, such as lifestyle, wives and girlfriends (WAGs), cars and houses. Hasaan et al. ([2018](#)) mentioned that fans are often interested in the lifestyle choices of their favourite athletes, including the cars they drive and their husbands/wives or boyfriends/girlfriends. Aesthetic elements generally cast a positive light on athlete brands.

In the context of athlete off-field activities, out of 13 attributes only two were identified as pure off-field attributes that contributed to athlete brand authenticity: physical attributes and origin. Physical attributes of an athlete are looks, branding or co-branding products (i.e. jerseys, shoes, cards). Pope ([2011](#)) mentioned that a fan's link to an athlete can be derived from an athlete's look. For instance, Hasaan & Kerem ([2017](#)) mentioned that personal appeal is an important factor for fans in choosing their favourite athlete; for example, fans described Daniel Vettori (cricket) as cute and Cristiano Ronaldo (football) as attractive. Origin represents the ethnographic attributes of an athlete. Ethnicity is considered to be a primary attribute of athlete branding, as geographical proximity to fans often benefited athletes in quest of branding (Hasaan et al., [2018](#)).

Three attributes were identified that belong to the categories of both athlete off-field activities and athlete marketing activities. The list starts with naturalness. Naturalness refers to an athlete's

apolitical behaviour and lack of bias. Kaufman (2008) mentioned that when athletes become activists, they often face a hate-filled backlash of scorn and contempt from teammates, coaches, fans and sponsors. For instance, many athletes were criticized when they raised their voices against various social injustices (Bryant, 2019). While in terms of marketing activities, naturalness is the quality of speaking and behaving well in the media. For athletes, apolitical behaviour is preferable among fans; Batts & Andrews (2011) mentioned that an athlete's image is to be apolitical and benign. Also, Michael Lahoud, a former Sierra Leonean / American footballer, pointed out that athletes should be non-controversial when handling media, either social media or conventional media; otherwise, they might get into trouble (Kunkel, Scott, & Beaton, 2016).

Impression represents the presentation of an athlete. Hasaan & Kerem (2017) noted that the general impression of the athlete is important for the fans. Not only is impression management considered as an antecedent for an athlete brand (Hasaan et al., 2018), but the growth of athlete brands also tends to be linked with better impressions of an athlete (Agyemang & Williams, 2013). Impression is the presentation of an athlete in the media. The media presentation of an athlete is a very popular topic in academic content, as media plays an important role at every stage of the athlete life cycle (Hasaan et al., 2021). In this context, athlete branding and athlete capital is dependent on athlete media visibility and a better image (Driessens, 2013).

Sustainability denotes an athlete's social activism. The charity work of athletes is acknowledged as a positive impact on athlete image. For instance, charity promotion by Cristiano Ronaldo makes him different from his counterparts (Hasaan & Kerem, 2017). With respect to marketing activities, sustainability is an athlete's attitude towards a better environmental and social development. Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, & Juravich (2012) mentioned that charity and participation in social development is a part of sport now. For instance, today many sports stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Colin Kaepernick and Serena Williams are known for their charities.

Brand congruency is the first attribute in the context of athlete marketing activities, which represents fans linking athletes with brands. Devlin & Billings (2018) noted that congruency can be either functional or image-based. Functionality is related to brand utility, while image-based congruency pertains to reputation. In this sense, an athlete's reputation for a certain characteristic (e.g. anger, passion, hard work) creates a link between fans and the athlete. Fan connections to certain athletes are influenced by such attributes (Kunkel, Biscaia, Arai, & Agyemang, 2019). Commercialization refers to the branding efforts of an athlete. Marketing has been widely used to generate consumer attention and interest (Kwak, Lee, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018). Visibility is about fan awareness of an athlete. Hasaan et al. (2021) noted that athletes need visibility at every stage of their careers; a brand without visibility cannot compete in the market. That need is the reason

that athletes often act in ways that are called media stunts. Brand clarity denotes athlete communication style and medium. Athletes now focus more on social media use, as it offers their messages a chance of clarity and authenticity (Schubert & Seyffert, [2017](#)). In this vein, an athlete's proper and appropriate use of social media provides him or her the opportunity for brand clarity, as social media is considered to be an athlete brand attribute (Arai et al., [2014](#); Hasaan & Kerem, [2017](#)).

As denoted by the attributes, athlete brand authenticity is complex, as athletes' physical abilities and performance usually decrease over time. In contrast, the appeal of music and film or television stars may not decline as performance and popularity remain rather high and may even increase with experience (e.g., Robert De Niro, Bob Dylan; Lunardo, Gergaud, & Livat, [2015](#)). Therefore, only some players can create an authentic brand, while most athletes are never able to achieve this status. Therefore, managers and athletes must understand the connection between authenticity and athlete brand. In Argentina, for example, Diego Maradona is the most authentic athlete brand. Fans often compare Maradona (footballer) to General San Martín, a legendary liberator and war hero from colonial rule. Even when Maradona was banned from football, loyal fans saw the negative drug test as a plot against him and Argentina (Archetti, [2001](#)). Maradona's level of authenticity is why, according to some, Lionel Messi is unable to surpass the popularity and status of Maradona even though he is known as one of the best footballers in the world (Hasaan et al., [2018](#)). Similarly, the legendary Great Gama (Ghulam Muhammad Butt), an illiterate wrestler of United India who acquired national and international recognition as a fighter in the early twentieth century, is still popular in local culture after more than a century and more authentic than many popular sports' athletes (Kidambi, [2011](#)).

In conclusion, brand status can be achieved through various attributes and events (e.g., looks, wealth, publicity or even scandalous activity) but authenticity is a multi-dimensional process that endures for longer periods (Hollander, [2010](#)). Furthermore, Napoli et al. ([2014](#)) mentioned that customer-based brand authenticity is based on the long term brand trust and brand credibility. In turn, Moulard et al. ([2015](#)) suggested that celebrity brands become authentic because of their stability and rarity. In this sense, an athlete becomes authentic when they have a long-lasting list of achievements both on and off the field and noticeable brand marketing. The current study highlighted the complications related to the complex, short-lived (Arai et al., [2014](#)) and hybrid (Cortsen, [2013](#)) nature of an athlete's brand (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, [2014](#)). As an extension, the authenticity of an athlete's brand is also challenging and complex. For instance, an athlete has to focus on three dimensions: behaving distinctly on-field and off-field and focusing on marketing

activities. Thus, this study provides an opportunity to refine athlete brand authenticity further within the discussed domains.

Theoretical gap and practical implications

In our best knowledge, there is no study available that has specifically discussed the athlete brand authenticity. Although athlete branding is a well-published topic in academia, there are many dimensions of athlete branding yet to explore. Therefore, this study adopted a systematic review of brand authenticity (in general) to understand the concept of athlete brand authenticity. Results of this study could be a springboard for future studies.

Authenticity is considered an important factor to enhance brand equity (Eggers et al., [2013](#)), therefore, this study offered an important conclusion for brand managers and athletes that they can adopt to obtain brand authenticity. Following the constructs and dimensions, athlete brands can enhance their brand equity which ultimately can influence revenue and other forms of capital. Further, the discussion of micro level attributes offers a better understanding of the concept which can be useful in achieving athlete brand authenticity, as this study structures and simplifies various known aspects of this crucial concept in sports management.

CONCLUSION

This study discussed the most recognised attributes of athlete brand authenticity with the help of a literature review. A total of 76 brand authenticity attributes were identified. After the analysis, some of these attributes were aggregated, leaving 23 athlete brand authenticity attributes. To further elaborate, these items were categorised into three groups: the athlete's on-field activities (rarity, stability, morality, originality, heritage, performance, credibility, integrity, icon, personality, behavior, passion, customers' experience and aesthetics); off-field activities (morality, naturalness, impression, physical attributes, customers' experience, heritage, integrity, icon, origin, personality, aesthetics, sustainability and behavior); and marketing activities (naturalness, impression, commercialization, brand congruency, sustainability, visibility and brand clarity). As athlete branding is a complex and multilayered topic, the majority of these attributes fell into two categories. For instance, athlete behavior and personality are relevant to both the athlete's on-field activities and off-field activities. Furthermore, the impression represented is relevant to both the athlete's off-field activities and marketing activities. In contrast, some attributes strictly belong to a single category, such as performance, which is solely related to the athlete's on-field activities, athlete's origin, which is solely related to the athlete's off-field activities and brand clarity, which solely belongs to the athlete's marketing activities domain.

The current study highlighted the complications related to the complex, short-lived (Arai et al., 2014) and hybrid (Cortsen, 2013) nature of an athlete's brand (Mullin et al., 2014). As an extension, the authenticity of an athlete's brand is also challenging and complex. For instance, an athlete has to focus on three dimensions: behaving properly on-field and off-field and focusing on marketing activities. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to refine athlete brand authenticity further within the discussed domains.

It is important to mention that this study offered directions for future research. As this study is conceptual in nature, the future study could collect actual data to examine empirically the proposed model. Also, as athlete branding is very diverse culturally (Hasaan et al., 2020), future qualitative and quantitative studies could be developed to further explain the role of athlete brand authenticity attributes in certain countries and cultures. Thus, future studies must collect samples from multiple countries to understand the role of each athlete brand authenticity attribute in different sports or cultural settings.

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