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Insights from the inside: marketing agency practitioners' perspectives on developing athlete brands

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Abstract

Purpose – Building on existing research that has analysed the components of athlete brands externally, this study examines how athlete brands are being developed internally by marketing agency practitioners (MAPs), who are oftentimes the individuals leading the process.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data generated through interviews with MAPs ($N = 28$) from 16 different marketing and public relations UK agencies are utilised in this study, offering insights from the key individuals involved in the process.

Findings – The findings revealed a three-step co-creational approach to athlete brand development, consisting of (1) brand brainstorming, (2) brand pillaring and (3) brand training, led by clearly defined strategic goals.

Originality/value – Capturing this three-step process has not only theoretical implications by shedding light on a previously undisclosed process but also practical implications, forwarding a roadmap to guide the athlete brand development process.

Keywords Marketing outsourcing, Marketing agency, PR agency, Brand agency, Branding

Paper type Research paper

Branding consists of the strategy, process, and efforts to develop, build, establish, manage and measure a brand and its equity (Aaker, 1991; Ross, 2006). Extensive research on brand equity and customer-based brand equity has been conducted over the past 3 decades, beginning with Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), respectively. Even though these prominent authors adopted dissimilar approaches in their efforts to better comprehend brand equity, both highlighted the importance of understanding how brands are perceived from the consumer perspective. Due to their prominence in society and escalating commercial value, sports brands represent one of the most popular types of brands for sponsors and consumers alike. Likewise, academic researchers have sought to understand how sport brands, typically those at the league or team levels, can be developed to contribute to brand equity individually and collectively (Baker *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, an increased emphasis has been placed on understanding individual athlete brands (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014), as advances in technology like social media have empowered individuals to take control of their own "human brands" (Doyle *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, legislative changes such as those allowing student-athletes to monetise their Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) have accelerated the need for athletes to capitalise on the attention society places on sport and create their own valuable personal brands (Kunkel *et al.*, 2021). These changes and the vast commercial opportunities linked to individuals who possess strong brands make it critical to understand how to successfully build athlete brands.

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Despite the numerous contributions provided by the extant literature on athlete brands, the role of marketing agency professionals (MAPs) has not yet been fully explored. This is despite MAPs playing a key role in the formulation of, and subsequent implementation of, an increasing number of athletes' brand strategies since the mid-2000s (Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010, 2012). This is in part due to the inability of many athletes to balance dedicating their efforts to excel athletically, with their ambition to develop unique and distinct brands with commercial appeal (Mogaji *et al*., 2022). This conflict, alongside the increased professionalism of sport, has contributed to the demand from athletes to engage professionals to help them create and manage their brands – to aid in their capacity to focus on their athletic pursuits (Hu *et al*., 2023; Mason and Duquette, 2005). Much of the attention has been dedicated to the athlete's agent whom can be tasked with various responsibilities encompassing contract negotiations, providing legal advice, seeking sponsorship and endorsement deals, and in building the athlete's network to facilitate dual or post-career opportunities (c.f. Lipscomb and Titlebaum, 2001; Moeletsi, 2019; Shropshire *et al*., 2016). Alongside agents, MAPs – defined as individuals working in marketing agencies (e.g. Sportfive, CAA – Creative Artists Agency and IMG) are experts in branding and have been increasingly employed to help athletes devise, position and present their personal brands. While agents' responsibilities include several components which can encompass marketing, legal and financial aspects, to name a few, MAPs are engaged exclusively to focus on the athlete's brand and commercial development. Consequently, the purpose of this research was to better understand how MAPs approach the athlete brand development process.

Extant research has valuably identified the various components that contribute to athlete brands and the subsequent customer-based brand equity these brands possess. Such work has established that consumers evaluate athlete brands based upon the athlete's on- and off-field attributes (Arai *et al*., 2013, 2014), and how various information sources and related brands act as signals which shape how consumer perceptions are formed and develop (Hasaan *et al*., 2018). Building on this conceptual knowledge, more recent work has sought to understand how athletes approach brand management (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Na *et al*., 2020) and how consumers respond to specific brand management strategies employed by athletes (Doyle *et al*., 2022; Kunkel *et al*., 2022; Li *et al*., 2021). Whilst extant knowledge has contributed extensively to understanding how athletes can build their brands, it has thus far been developed from work focused on two stakeholders only – the consumer and the athlete. As Geurin (2017) notes, athletes have objectives and goals related to establishing their brands, yet lack adopting strategies to achieve these. Through the present research, we extend the literature on athlete brands by integrating the perspective of professionals, in this case, MAPs, who are marketing specialists tasked with building athlete brands. We specifically addressed the following research question:

RQ1. How do marketing agency practitioners seek to strategically build athlete brands?

Literature review

Athlete brand components

Athletes are regarded as visible and influential human brands, which, like other types of brands, should be managed strategically and developed in a way to boost their appeal to stakeholders (Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Mogaji *et al*., 2022). A central aspect of understanding athlete brands has therefore been identifying the components that combine to create their brands. Scholars agree that the athlete brand consists of how the athlete is presented in the context of not only their athletic pursuits but also their personal lives. As such, Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation has underpinned much of the work on athlete brands as it can account for how athletes are presented both professionally (termed front-stage presentations) and in private settings (termed back-stage presentations).

Arai *et al.*'s (2013, 2014) Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) built on Goffman's (1959) work by conceptualising how consumer perceptions of athlete brands are formed by their collective perceptions of an athlete's: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Athletic performance describes perceptions of an athlete's physical performance capabilities within their selected sport or sports, attractive appearance describes perceptions held towards the athlete's physical conditioning and attractiveness, and marketable lifestyle captures the evaluation of aspects linked to the athlete when they are not participating in athletic competition and those which capture broader characteristics of what they represent. Subsequent work has also established various other sport attributes, such as the specific sport the athlete plays or their playing number, act as functional associations (e.g. the athlete's sport or playing number) that also help consumers form perceptions towards athlete brands (Kunkel *et al.*, 2022). Consumer impressions of athlete brands are formed by their interpretation and judgement of both sport and non-sport content, the related brands which surround the athlete, and the related direct and mediated communications emanating from each (Doyle *et al.*, 2023). Such work establishes the dynamic process by which consumers evaluate athlete brands, underscoring the importance of better understanding how these brands are strategically presented and marketed. However, what is yet to be revealed is what processes govern the identification, selection, and implementation of an athlete's back-stage and front-stage presentations (e.g. Goffman, 1959) and how key components reflecting an athlete's performance, appearance and broader life are chosen to form the athlete's brand (e.g. Arai *et al.*, 2013). We propose to fill this gap by exploring the process employed by MAPs – who, unlike athletes, are experts in brand building – strategically work to build athlete brands.

Managing and developing athlete brands

Extant research has provided several contributions to knowledge surrounding how athlete brands are developed and subsequently managed. Such research has broadly concentrated on three broad areas. First, research centres on understanding how athletes can build their brands via media platforms, particularly via social media. This line of enquiry has documented how the characteristics, source and orientation of athlete posts can impact consumer engagement and attitudes (Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Su *et al.*, 2020). Relatedly, early work established athletes used Twitter primarily to post content about their personal lives and to answer questions from their fans (Hambrick *et al.*, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), while subsequent research documents how athletes' Instagram use is also largely personal in nature, but largely absent of strategy (Geurin, 2017; Smith and Sanderson, 2015) as well as the observed differences in the way that sportsmen and sportswomen use the platform (Ciegelski *et al.*, 2024). Overall, this line of work establishes how athletes can leverage their brands via direct communications and need to consider the type of content they share as part of this process.

Second, scholars have sought to understand the shared value that athletes can create by partnering with corporate and philanthropic brands, and the associated threats to value when athletes are linked to scandals. It is argued that athlete engagement in actions deemed positively by society will reflect positively on their brands and vice versa (Babiak *et al.*, 2012; Chien *et al.*, 2016). From a brand development perspective, longitudinal research has demonstrated that concerted and strategic efforts by athletes to promote their philanthropic and charitable efforts on social media can impact how consumers view their brands. Specifically, research documents how philanthropy can form an effective part of an athlete's brand-building strategy and favourably augment the set of associations consumers link to the athlete and their level of fandom (Kunkel *et al.*, 2022). Finally, studies have argued for the importance of athlete brand authenticity, achieved through a multi-dimensional, complex and long-term process, which is believed to lead to higher consumer identification (Bredikhina *et al.*, 2023). Collectively, this work demonstrates the importance of athletes developing favourably perceived brands extending beyond sport, and how this must be pursued consistently over time.

Third, a growing body of research centres on exploring how athlete brands are developed within a broader ecosystem of related brands surrounding the athlete (Su *et al*., 2020). These surrounding brands exist in both vertical and horizontal hierarchy and include both sport and non-sport related brands (Baker *et al*., 2022). These brands include an array of organisational-level entities (e.g. teams and sponsors) and individuals (e.g. teammates and family members) who act as sources of information helping consumers form their evaluations of the athlete (Doyle *et al*., 2023). This work establishes that athlete brands are not developed in isolation, but instead are part of a larger associative network of brands which they both impact and are impacted by. This bi-directional relationship is important in clarifying the value of understanding how athlete brands are created and managed. In their work focused on student-athletes, Kunkel *et al*. (2021) asserted that the NIL value associated with athlete brands is influenced by, but not wholly derived from, their team and institutional affiliations. Whilst the above research provides a significant foundation upon which athlete branding can be understood, opportunities remain to add to this knowledge. Extant work has thus far been generated from research focused solely on athlete or consumer perspectives, neglecting that of the MAP.

The role of MAPs

Athletes have become increasingly popular as human brands over the past few decades, fuelled by the increased commercialisation of sport and the proliferation of technologies which give athletes widespread attention (Doyle *et al*., 2022). However, Mogaji *et al*. (2022) note the need for athletes to balance their commitments towards their sport conflicts with the time required for athletes to carefully and strategically craft their brands. Many athletes lack both the time and knowledge to do so, leading to more athletes engaging the services of professionals to develop and subsequently manage their brands (Geurin, 2017). Much like how athletes employ accountants to assist with their finances, marketing practitioners with expertise in branding and a knowledge of the sports industry are best placed to help athletes devise and implement strategies for their personal brands (e.g. Arai *et al*., 2013; Taniyev *et al*., 2022). The use of marketing and public relations agencies by sport organisations appears to be a common and well-researched practice (Manoli and Hodgkinson, 2017; Manoli *et al*., 2024), yet one that has not been explored thus far for athletes and their use of marketing agencies for brand development. As such, and despite MAPs directing increased attention towards athlete services since the mid-2000s, little is known about the processes that guide the athlete brand development process (Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010). Academic literature has begun to understand the MAP approach to athlete brand development; however, this is limited to single-practitioner interviews (e.g. Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010; Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2012). Building on this work, we advance understanding related to how MAPs assist athletes with a specific focus on uncovering the processes that underpin the athlete brand development process.

Methods

Qualitative data gathered from 28 semi-structured interviews were utilised to address our research purpose. The interviewees were all MAPs, employed in marketing agencies based in the UK. The 16 agencies represented possess a wide portfolio of clients, coming from both sport and the wider entertainment industry. Before the data collection has begun, ethical approval was obtained by the lead author's University.

The participants were mostly male (N = 19, 67.9%), within the 40–50 age bracket (M = 44.3; SD = 2.93). The sample reported having between 5- and 18-years' experience working with athletes (M = 12.35; SD = 3.52). Most of the interviewees (N = 18) had been working in the sports industry before joining their agency, with the remainder having a general marketing or media background prior to working in sports. All participants interviewed had

experience in the development of a minimum of 10 athlete brands, ensuring the insights offered came from knowledgeable and experienced individuals. More information on the interviewees and data collected can be found in Table 1 below.

Criterion sampling (Suri, 2011) was used to identify the possible interviewees, with the selection criteria being the individual's experience in not only working with athletes for more than five years, but also their involvement in the development of athletes' brands. Only those individuals who met both criteria were selected and interviewed for this study. Recruitment first leveraged one of the author's professional networks of contacts within the sport marketing industry. Invitations to participate in the research were distributed via email to these contacts alongside further information about the study. After these initial interviews ($N = 9$) were conducted, snowballing was used to gain access to additional participants. This consisted of asking interviewees for referrals to appropriate colleagues from within the same agency or from alternate agencies and resulted in an additional 19 interviewees participating in the research. All interviews were conducted online, using a video call programme between May 2021 and April 2022 to comply with national health guidelines in the UK following the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic.

Following the semi-structured interview process, a set of core questions were created to help guide the discussion, while allowing the flexibility necessary to ensure that a natural flow existed in the interviews. The questions were developed following the review of the literature

Table 1. Data audit

Interviewee	Sex	Age	Years of employment with sport clients	Previous experience within sport	Length of interview
1	Male	42	12	Yes	64 min
2	Male	44	16	Yes	68 min
3	Male	48	18	Yes	69 min
4	Female	45	15	Yes	63 min
5	Male	44	10	Yes	68 min
6	Male	41	14	Yes	72 min
7	Male	50	16	Yes	63 min
8	Female	48	5	No	60 min
9	Female	47	15	No	71 min
10	Male	45	8	Yes	62 min
11	Male	45	9	Yes	55 min
12	Female	45	10	No	85 min
13	Male	46	8	No	76 min
14	Male	44	16	Yes	80 min
15	Male	42	15	Yes	61 min
16	Female	40	14	Yes	64 min
17	Female	40	12	No	63 min
18	Female	40	16	No	66 min
19	Female	48	15	Yes	59 min
20	Male	41	12	No	70 min
21	Male	40	16	Yes	68 min
22	Male	42	10	No	66 min
23	Male	42	9	No	65 min
24	Male	45	10	No	72 min
25	Male	44	18	Yes	74 min
26	Male	48	10	Yes	78 min
27	Male	47	9	Yes	82 min
28	Female	47	8	Yes	68 min

Source(s): Authors' own work

and the questions asked in similar studies on brand development and management in sport (e.g. Manoli, 2020). Mindful of social desirability effects, attention was paid for similar questions to be asked in different ways and for interviewees to be probed for justifications on their answers (Nederhof, 1985). A sample list of the interview questions asked is provided in Appendix, with similar questions covering all topics presented asked in all interviews conducted. Throughout the interviews several athletes were mentioned as examples by the MAPs, but due to the non-disclosure agreements signed between them and the MAPs, as well as to protect the interviewees' anonymity, the athletes' names were redacted from the study. It is worth noting however that the examples mentioned included athletes who participate in both team and individual sports (with an almost equal split), and whose sport would be considered high-revenue and highly commercialised, such as football and tennis.

Each interview was recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed shortly after completion. In total, 31 h and 52 min of audio data were collected with interviews ranging from 55 min to 85 min in length ($M = 68$). Transcription produced an average of 10 pages of single-spaced text per interview. The interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees to ensure their accuracy and to allow for any errors to be identified, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Candela, 2019). In this process of member checking, a small number of comments were received by the interviewees, suggesting mostly the replacement of particular words in the transcripts.

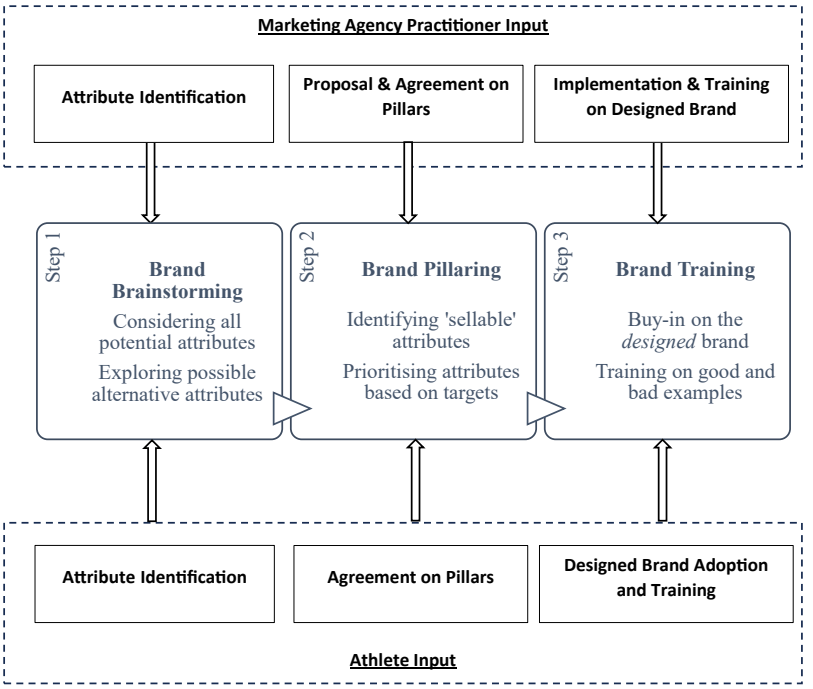
Data were analysed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. This thematic analysis using no *a priori* codes, involved a careful and meticulous examination of the transcripts, while annotating and coding the patterns and themes that emerged using different colours. The initial coding was conducted independently by the members of the research team who are experienced researchers, before it was discussed in meetings among them (Boyatzis, 1998). Regular discussions on the codes, sub-themes and themes that emerged took place, to allow for any disagreements to be raised and debated upon until an agreement was reached. In these meetings, intra (in different moments in time) and inter (between the coders) coding reliability was also calculated, with the percentage of agreement being above 90% (indicating a high reliability – Boyatzis, 1998). A thematic map was also designed as part of the thematic analysis, to help refine and organise the codes, sub-themes and wider themes that emerged from the data in a meaningful way, thus revealing the three-step process, which also represents the three wider themes that emerged from the data analysis. This map was then used in the presentation of the findings and in the uncovering and interpretation of the athlete brand development process as it is detailed below.

Findings – MAPs' perspective on the athlete brand development process

Findings demonstrated how a three-step process characterised the way that MAPs approached developing athlete brands. These steps – brand brainstorming, brand pillaring and brand training – reflect how MAPs strategically approach identifying, positioning and leveraging the commercially attractive components linked to athletes. The process described, while co-collaborative between the marketing practitioners and the athlete clients, requires specific input from both sides, with their roles and involvement changing in each step. Figure 1 illustrates the three-step process, which is further discussed below.

Step 1: Brand brainstorming

MAPs have begun the brand development process with their athlete client by first conducting a brainstorming session. The primary purpose of the session was to collectively identify important attributes linked to the athlete. This process was driven by the athlete – with guidance from the practitioner – so that the elements linked to the athlete's brand, which emerged here, were both comprehensive and authentic. Interviewee 9 described this approach in the following way:



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Athlete brand development process

> The first step is always to sit down with the athlete, ask them the right questions, let them talk and listen. Who they truly are matters. My job is to help them make this come through . . . In a way, we're sitting down and thinking and brainstorming. This is an important step, since we are getting their brand designed together and then planning how we can make it work.

As the quote shows, MAPs are actively involved in the development of the athlete's brand, and they assist the athlete to articulate and brainstorm attributes that align with their authentic selves. The brainstorming step was presented as an open discussion in which athletes were prompted to think outside the box when trying to propose relevant attributes, which were discussed in terms of relevance, salience and potential appeal to fans and sponsors. The role of the MAPs was prominent in terms of guiding the process and suggesting attributes that the athletes might not have considered, highlighting the process of co-creation that is evident in this step. Here, the MAPs began conceptualising what the athlete's *designed* brand (the terms we use from here) would become, with the input of the athlete and a focus on authentically connecting with fans and/or sponsors as the outcome.

> We sit down with the client and ask them to think of any possible thing that describes them, and they'd like to be known for. I then ask them to just say anything that comes to mind out loud and help guide them to things that are more favourable. I also suggest things from the research that I've done on them and then we identify what works. We discuss things and access them accordingly. (Interviewee 28)

All interviewees highlighted how important the athletes' involvement was in this process and how collaboration on developing the brand is important for the success and longevity of the brand. That is because, as they explained, aligning the newly *designed* brand with the actual personality of each athlete assists in presenting an accurate and consistent brand over time. This approach also ensured authenticity across the athletes' own social media accounts,

reducing the need for extensive training and corrective involvement from the MAPs, as the following quote shows.

> The trick is to make a brand as true to who they are as possible. If we get it right the first time, it's easier for everyone involved. For the athlete, it's easy to teach them how to be consistent, since they will stay true to who they are. For us, it tends to lead to fewer lessons and reminders if they truly grasp it early on. But not all brands are marketable the way they are. We are here to make them marketable. (Interviewee 4)

It was also argued that the collaborative nature of this process and indeed involving the athlete in every step of it through constant and open dialogue, ensures that any point of disagreement between the MAP and the client can be addressed immediately. This, as it was claimed, allows for any suggestions or recommendations made from the MAPs to be clarified in detail and supported adequately, leading to a more efficient and harmonious collaboration between the two parties.

Step 2: Brand pillaring

After identifying the key attributes associated with the athlete, the next step involved selecting those that would underpin the athlete's brand. These characteristics can be both attributes related to their playing career and aspects of their personal lives beyond the sport, which are nevertheless desirable and distinctive enough to attract the interest of the fans and potential sponsors. As the MAPs stressed, the selected characteristics need to be not only authentic, but also "interesting" and "marketable" and go beyond an athlete's existing playing success.

> Being good helps, but it's definitely not all. There's many more things to consider. Are they starting now or have they been around for long? How old are they? [Are they] female, a male athlete or are they LGBTQ? Where are they from? What's their background? Education? What is it that we can accentuate to make sure it resonates with the sponsors and the fans? (Interviewee 27)

As the quote shows, a brand's desirable and "marketable" characteristics can be found in various aspects of an athlete's background and personality, such as their socio-economic background, their upbringing, and even their gender and sexual orientation. As the interviewees argued, fans identify with the athletes they follow and tend to prefer distinctive brands that might share their own characteristics. As such, it was suggested that a unique brand that is based on underrepresented or less often encountered pillars, such as a difficult upbringing or a lower socio-economic background, might attract and sustain more interest from the fans. Ultimately, this interest might attract more or different sponsors that are also aiming to promote themselves in an alternative manner, aligning themselves with less popular yet more distinctive and desirable athletes' brands. As the MAPs explained:

> What we've seen in the past 10 years is that brands want to sponsor someone interesting and different, so we need to make our clients interesting and different. My job is to find these things that will make companies come to them, and make fans stick with them over time. So, yes, we'll talk about their career, but mostly I'll focus on who they are beyond that. I focus on family, social life, beliefs, upbringing. These are for me what makes them unique, and my job is to make them unique and interesting and basically attractive to fans and brands. (Interviewee 25)

It was argued that the need for interesting and unique pillars exists for all athletes, despite the sport in which they participate, with examples of both team and individual sports mentioned by the interviewees, alongside their belief that performance by itself is not enough to help engage fans and sponsors, even in the most popular sports. Through the numerous examples of athletes provided by the MAPs, it was evident that the main pillars on which the *designed* brand was built were what made it distinctive and "sellable", even when the athletes had not achieved significant playing success. This would then allow an athlete to maintain a distinctive, consistent and "sellable" brand, even when they are not achieving great playing success, while differentiating themselves from other athletes whose promoted brand is only based on their playing achievements.

When interviewees were prompted during the interviews to explain whether differences might exist in the development process of the brand of different athletes depending on the sport they play, their gender, age or other characteristics, they all insisted on following a similar process with all their clients, as the following quotes show.

> The process is tailored to each athlete we take on as a client, but to some extent. We'll explore together their brand, its pillars, what makes them unique and make sure we tailor our suggestions to them 100%. But you see, beyond that, there's not much we can do. We will always work to the best of our abilities with them, but the process is the same pretty much. (Interviewee 25)

> I found it interesting in the beginning how every athlete is different. Some take your advice and some, well, need more convincing. But at the end of the day, we are here to do the best we can. We will listen to them, and tailor our suggestions to who they are, but above all, we just do what we know works. It took me years to appreciate that following the same process with all clients is the best way forward. That's what works and that's why clients come to us. (Interviewee 4)

When asked what "interesting" and "marketable" brands or characteristics are, several responses were given, with often mentions of particular socio-demographic characteristics of athletes, as well as their economic and family background and social and family life, combined with the MAPs' ability to build a story around them. As it was argued:

> What is interesting and sellable for me is something that is different, something that might not be the first thought in your mind when you're thinking of a star athlete, something that we can build a story around. Let me put it this way, if you are a privately educated, upper class rugby or tennis player, then are you interesting to the wider fans or today's sponsors? Not really. But if you are instead a family man, who is also an outspoken activist, then you are interesting to fans and sponsors. My job is to build your brand around the latter, to make you interesting. (Interviewee 2)

> There's an easy way to answer this. A "bad boy" story is no longer selling. What is selling for me is a second-generation immigrant who is also going to uni. This is someone fans want to follow and brands want to be associated with. What I do with my clients is help build their brand around these characteristics that make them interesting and sellable – if I can use this term. (Interviewee 14)

While examples were offered at times on what is marketable and interesting in their eyes, as the above quotes also illustrate, it was made clear that this was a subjective evaluation based on MAP's experience and expert analysis of what would drive fans' interest and engagement, as well as sponsors' attention. When MAPs were further questioned on how these evaluations were made, or how marketable and interesting could be understood, it was argued that their experience, research and insider knowledge of the industry drives their expert evaluations. It is because of these characteristics and their hard work, as it was suggested, that their expertise was created, and despite the interviewers' efforts, no additional clarifications were offered on these terms.

> There is no simple answer to this question. See, in my eyes, I can see clearly what is interesting and what can sell, but I cannot give you a clear definition or any sort of parameters. After some years in the industry, you learn and can kind of see where things are going. You learn from others, you interact with sponsors, read fan surveys, study the industry yourself. And we are good in what we do, because we don't rest. The industry changes and we have to keep up with it. So we keep digging and keep learning and keep trying new things, and that's why we can easily see what sells and what doesn't. (Interviewee 18)

In terms of highlighting the brand pillars which will guide the athlete's branding strategy, the interviewees suggested that they rely heavily on their experience of working with athletes and sponsors, which is often complemented by additional market research on social media and corresponding metrics.

> We all have years of experience running campaigns, working with athletes and sponsors. We have learned the tricks and seen what works and what doesn't work. We keep up with social media and see what's trending and for how long. We study the metrics with athlete's posts and see what and when to

> post to maximise engagement. It is our job to study the market, learn what works and help our clients achieve it. (Interviewee 3)

All interviewees argued that the *designed* brand needs to be "distinctive" and "unique", emphasising that attention needs to be often drawn to "alternative" or "underrepresented" characteristics that an athlete has (such as their difficult upbringing, socio-economic status, sexual orientation or underrepresented physical features). The MAPs' perspective was that their experience and skills enable them to identify such characteristics and their potential to be marketed, whereas the athlete client may typically overlook these attributes or not consider them viable or relevant to their brand. Additionally, whilst the first step was more collaborative, in the second step, the marketing practitioners became more vocal in terms of proposing and at times insisting on selecting attributes for the brand pillars, with the athlete taking on a more secondary role.

Step 3: Brand training

After the selection of brand pillars, all interviewees suggested that the newly *designed* brand needs to be agreed upon with the athlete and their agent (if they have one). It was highlighted that all parties (MAP, athlete and agent) need to agree on the key features or characteristics that should be promoted in future communications, to ensure that the *designed* brand is communicated in a coherent way. This buy-in is required, since most of the athlete clients either manage their social media accounts themselves or have their agent – rather than the marketing agency involved in the brand's development – do so. Since the ongoing responsibility of managing the brand falls on the athlete or agent, the MAPs need to ensure that the *designed* brand is clearly understood and can therefore be clearly and coherently communicated in all future communications from the athlete.

> We develop something together and it needs to be something we all agree upon. We don't usually manage brands fully in-house. We have different packages, and most clients go for the design and refresh ones rather than the full design and manage one. So, we need to get them ready to do the managing themselves. We are always there to help, but only on an ad-hoc basis from that moment on. (Interviewee 23)

When MAPs were asked about any points of disagreement in this buy-in part or throughout the process, it was argued that since the whole process is based on long and detailed, continuous discussions, disagreements between the two parties rarely occur. The collaborative nature of the process, as it was argued earlier in the manuscript, is based on a continuous dialogue between the MAPs and their clients, and forms the basis for what was described to be a rather harmonious process. As it also was suggested, MAPs are eager to support any propositions made to their clients and discuss their suggestions in detail until an agreement is reached throughout each step of the process. The MAPs interviewed claimed that athletes respect their expertise and recommendations; however, it was also clarified that the athlete client is ultimately the one deciding on their brand and how it will be managed, and as such, it is up to them to follow the advice provided by the MAPs.

> I can honestly say that I've never had a bad experience with a client. They come to us because they want our help and we are paid to do just that. We're here to help them, give recommendations, be clear about what we think can work for them and justify it. It's all a discussion, which can be a quick or with some clients a longer dialogue until we're on the same page. But we always give our recommendations to them having their best interest in mind, and I think they know that and respect that the moment they walk through our door. At the end of the day, that's what they pay us for. (Interviewee 16)

Whilst MAPs maintain contact with their clients after the designed brand is co-created, the responsibility of managing it on an everyday basis falls on the athletes themselves. As such, after their buy-in on the brand pillars, MAPs described how a training process is offered, in which examples of how the *designed* brand can be promoted coherently are given. These examples can include potential posts on social media (e.g. celebration or important days in which posts are to be

made), particular vocabulary that can be used in future communications (e.g. specific words to demonstrate respect and understanding for a topic), as well as examples of vocabulary and posts that are to be avoided in any future online or offline communications on behalf of the athlete (e.g. expressions or comments that might be considered politically incorrect). This was illustrated by Interviewee 18 who stated: *"What we tend to do, especially with rising brands, is give them guidelines: what to post, what words to use, etcetera . . . But we are not running the brand together. We give guidance then they do the everyday stuff."*

As it became clear through the interviews, this step of the process consists of training and providing guidance on best practice brand management. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the training process described by the MAPs was rather rudimentary, involving several examples of what to do and what to avoid in future communications, offered to the athletes and their agents shortly after the *designed* brand was agreed upon. It was suggested that refreshers or corrective steps might be taken at a later point (e.g. if the athlete lost followers, a sponsor's contract or got involved in a scandal), but only when the athlete would request (and pay for) them. These further refreshers or assistance in realigning the *designed* brand were in fact, mentioned by the MAPs as additional services offered when an athlete might have lost a sponsorship agreement, saw a decline in their social media following or after their potential involvement in a scandal or crisis.

It was again suggested that the closer the *designed* brand is to the athlete's true personality, the easier it might be for them to manage it consistently, further emphasising the importance of the collaborative element in the overall brand development process and the skills required on behalf of the MAPs. In this final step of the process, the MAPs appear to be leading the process again, with the athlete clients holding nevertheless an important role in agreeing and ultimately being trained to manage their *designed* brand.

Discussion and implications

The purpose of this research was to better understand how MAPs approach the athlete brand development process, complementing work which has been conducted at the team brand level (Davies *et al*., 2023). Prior studies have demonstrated that athletes have defined goals for their brands, but typically do not apply a strategic approach to the development and management of their brands (Geurin, 2017). Similarly, most athletes lack formal marketing qualifications and the necessary expertise, and time, to adequately leverage their brands (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012). Thus, the findings of the present research expand knowledge by identifying the value-added role that MAPs can play in developing unique and attractive athlete brands. This is important given the increased attention and influence of athletes in the sports marketplace (Baker *et al*., 2022) and answers calls from scholars to better understand how athlete brands are created and positioned to others (Doyle *et al*., 2023).

Our work built on the sparse extant literature focused on MAPs, which has to date been generated from interviews with one practitioner only (see Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010, 2012). From interviews with 28 MAPs across 16 agencies, we specifically outline how a three-step collaborative process is followed, which focuses on identifying, selecting and promoting distinct and authentic attributes to base the athlete's brand persona on. Prior work examining outsourced marketing activities in sport has highlighted the importance of involving professionals (Davies *et al*., 2023) and engaging in collaboration in co-creating brands (e.g. Manoli and Hodgkinson, 2017). Similarly, we found the MAPs' expertise and skills are valued, however, the athlete clients' input and buy-in are required for the process to create an authentic *designed* brand which will be managed coherently after the process is concluded. Three main contributions and implications for practice are provided.

The first contribution stems from exploring the role of MAPs in athlete branding. Our findings demonstrate the key value-added role that MAPs can play in devising the strategies that guide athlete brand development practice, contributing to this burgeoning research area (Arai *et al*., 2013, 2014). Specifically, we demonstrated that this process consists

of three steps and outlines the collaborative, yet distinct, roles that the MAP and the athlete fulfil as the designed athlete brand is conceptualised, refined, and ultimately implemented. Findings demonstrated how MAPs can leverage their marketing expertise and industry knowledge to guide the development of the athlete's designed brand, depicting how third-party experts can add to the branding of others (e.g. Carlson and Donavan, 2013). The level of input of each side changes in each step, with the element of collaboration, however, remaining consistent throughout the process, due to its strategic role in achieving authenticity in the *designed* brand.

Past athlete branding research has focused either on understanding how athletes approach self-managing their brands (Geurin, 2017; Mogaji *et al*., 2022) or how consumers perceive and react to these brands. Thus, our work complements and builds on extant work by documenting how those responsible for creating the brand seek to develop it in a manner designed to create customer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Like observations within the professional team context (e.g. Davies *et al*., 2023), we found co-creation was an important part of this process, and that the pursuit of authenticity and uniqueness underpinned the development of the designed athlete brand. The importance of curating a *designed* brand that aligns authentically with the athlete as a person emphasises the importance of focusing on both the sport and non-sport components of the athlete's life (Kunkel *et al*., 2022) and the role of brand authenticity in increasing and maintaining fan identification (Bredikhina *et al*., 2023). Overall, the process described here illustrates the value of athletes partnering with professionals for brand management purposes and how such outsourcing may be beneficial in alleviating pressures to focus on both on- and off-field performance (Mogaji *et al*., 2022).

Second, findings illustrate how MAPs view athlete brands and seek to develop them with two key stakeholders – the fan and the sponsor – in mind. MAPs understood the importance of identifying numerous attributes linked to their athlete clients and how athlete brand equity is created from both on-field and off-field characteristics. This view supports the tenets of the MABI (Arai *et al*., 2013, 2014) and highlights how an athlete's private and public personas can be managed to influence how they are perceived (Goffman, 1959). The emphasis from the MAPs on identifying non-sport related attributes in Step 1 demonstrates the value these professionals can add in the early parts of developing an athlete's brand development strategy, opening opportunities that the athlete may not have otherwise considered (Kunkel *et al*., 2020), such as a focus on underrepresented or seemingly trivial attributes (O'Reilly and Braedley, 2008; Siemens *et al*., 2020). MAPs' leadership and commitment to pillar the athletes' brand on these characteristics, as illustrated in Step 2, further demonstrates the value-add of involving professionals, if possible, in this process. Our findings echo sentiments expressed in past research about the importance of engaging professionals for brand management purposes (Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2010, 2012), with our conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrating how a co-creational process involving MAPs and athletes is employed as a means to develop a marketable and unique athlete brand.

Findings can further empower athletes in their approach to brand management building on past work (Doyle *et al*., 2023; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016). The importance of emphasising unique and interesting attributes as a cornerstone of the brand aligns with past work documenting how athletes can differentiate themselves adjacent to important and impactful causes to become known as "More than an Athlete" appealing to consumers and sponsors alike (Na *et al*., 2020). This may be a particularly impactful strategy for sportswomen to adopt to counter biases in mainstream media coverage (Geurin, 2017; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018) and from within other third-party sources who demonstrate an overreliance on leveraging the attractive appearance domain (Delia, 2020). The findings of this study could therefore inform the brand management building processes of both individual and team sport athletes who are interested in making their brand more engaging, by aiming for uniqueness in the selected pillars. While the examples used by the interviewees of this study are athletes participating in highly commercial and high-revenue sports, athletes participating in less

commercialised sports could also implement such approaches to attempt to increase the attractiveness of their brands in the eyes of their fans and potential sponsors.

Third, findings provide insights into how the designed brand is implemented and managed. Whilst MAPs described a process of training and implementation, this was elementary and in need of further attention. Unlike practices employed in brand management of sport organisations (e.g. teams), the athletes and agents were only provided with simple brand guidelines, and little to no ongoing involvement was retained by the MAPs (Manoli, 2020). Potential assistance from the agency practitioners was available only when requested or in crisis situations (i.e. scandals or loss of fans or sponsors) and unlike other studies that have examined outsourcing marketing activities in sport (e.g. Manoli and Hodgkinson, 2017), the process observed here largely ceased at the point of implementation. A long-term relationship between the athlete and the agency was rarely formed, possibly due to ongoing costs or the additional commercial assistance athletes might be receiving from their agents (Hu *et al.*, 2023). Instead, a project-only relationship was created, limiting the outsourcing to the development aspect of the process, while excluding the management of the *designed* brand, and confining the training offered to the minimum. We found that whilst the process of brand development initially relied strongly on co-creation between the MAP and the athlete, and later also involved the agent, this collaborative approach did not extend to how the brand was managed. Capturing these issues in this study allows us to suggest that the strategic implications of this rudimentary training offered and the lack of long-term relationships between athletes and marketing practitioners remain yet to be identified and are thus worthy avenues for future research.

Limitations and further research

The present research has four primary limitations, which should be addressed in future research. First, the research was limited to understanding athlete branding using a sample of athletes who have the means and willingness to outsource the design of their brands only. While the expertise and skills of agency practitioners are highlighted through the study as a key element of the process, the roadmap provided could also be adopted by athletes to self-manage their brands. In this case, the findings can inform a diverse range of athletes (e.g. amateur, collegiate level and semi-professional) and assist them in strategically building distinct and valuable brands. However, further research is needed to understand the nuances that may exist in athlete brand building across contexts, sports, and sport levels.

Second, we collected self-reported data from agency practitioners, and as such, questions on response bias and recall can be raised. Nonetheless, and due to the aim of this study, interviews with key, knowledgeable and understudied agency practitioners were deemed necessary to explore their perspective on how athlete brands are developed and managed. To build on this study, future work is encouraged to conduct combined focus groups with MAPs and athletes to gather both perspectives. Integrating the perspective of the athlete's agent may also provide additional insights not revealed here. Similarly, scholars could work alongside an agent across experimental research to help guide their approach to managing an athlete's brand and document results over time.

Third, the study focused on agency practitioners based in a single setting. While our sample includes mostly internationally known athletes from diverse settings, the transferability of the findings to other contexts requires further scrutiny. Indeed, other countries and regions have different sport governance structures, cultural norms, and views on sport and athletes. Future research should examine how athlete brand development takes place in different contexts, across diverse sports, levels, and with varying degrees of funding support to complement and further enrich our understanding of the athlete brand development process and the steps taken by professionals tasked with athlete branding.

Finally, our sample of MAPs may also not reflect how all professionals would approach this process. The sample was vastly experienced, but this also meant that the average age of the

agent was relatively high. It is possible that younger marketing agents may adopt different and novel strategies, implementation methods and ideas for athlete brand positioning. It is also possible that a more diverse sample of participants in terms of experience might have also uncovered diverse practices in the brand development process, unlike the rather uniform three-step process uncovered in our study. Additionally, as two-thirds of the sample were male, further work is needed to understand the female marketing agent perspective and to determine if there are any differences in the way that male and female agents approach athlete brand development. Moreover, a limitation could have arisen from the time in which the data were collected (towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic), which might have influenced the emphasis the MAPs placed on, for example, non-performance related brand pillars. Further research could examine the brand development process at different points in time to better capture the process independently of such an influence. Finally, as we did not differentiate between genders at the athlete level, future research has an opportunity to do so and examine if sportsmen and sportswomen may benefit from diverse strategies.

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Appendix

Sample list of interview questions

1. Can you describe your role in the agency?
2. Can you tell me a few things about your background?

3. When did you join the agency?
4. What did you do before joining?
5. What does your role in the agency entail? Can you name a few tasks/projects you've worked on?
6. What type of clients do you work with in the agency?
7. Do you work with athletes?
8. What type of work do you do for them?
9. Have you been involved in the development of any athlete brands?
10. Can you walk me through the process of how you develop an athlete's brand?
11. Do you work together with the athletes for their brands?
12. How closely do you work together?
13. Can you walk me through the steps of the process of an athlete brand's development?
14. How do you start the process?
15. Are there any particular aspects you are focusing on?
16. What is guiding this athlete's brand development process?
17. Who is guiding the process?
18. Is it only you and the athlete involved in it?
19. Is it only you from the agency who is involved in it? If no, who else?
20. Is it only the athlete involved from their side? If no, who else?
21. What are you looking for when designing a brand?
22. When does the process end?
23. How many steps would you say there are within it?
24. Which one would you say is the most important step?
25. What do you do after the athlete's brand is developed?
26. Is there a follow up on how the brand is managed?
27. How do you know if an athlete's brand works?
28. How can you develop a strong brand?
29. Is there a brand training process?
30. Do clients come back to you for further assistance?
31. What more could you do to help them with their brands?
32. Is there any part of the athlete brand development process that you would like to talk more about?

Source(s): Authors' own work.

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