

1 **Athlete Brand Identity, Image and Congruence: A Systematic Literature Review**

2 **Abstract**

3 Research interest on human brands in sport is rapidly developing and a need for clarity and
4 strategic direction exists. This study involved an in-depth systematic literature review on the brands
5 of athletes to propose a strategic direction for future research. **Sixty-three** articles published in **27**
6 different academic journals from 1999 to **2019** met the study’s criteria. The analysis revealed that
7 research on athlete brands has focused on athletes’ brand image from a consumer perspective.
8 Limited studies investigated strategic athlete brand building and the importance of brand identity
9 creation from the brand manager (i.e., athlete) perspective. The study findings highlight the
10 importance of brand congruence as the synergy between athlete brand identity and athlete brand
11 image. Yet, studies exploring congruence between brand identity and brand image are neglected.
12 This paper offers the groundwork and strategic direction to guide future research on athlete brand
13 management and has the potential to be the catalyst for innovative research projects.

14
15 **Keywords:** athlete brand management; brand identity; brand image; brand congruence;
16 systematic literature review.

Introduction

The evolution of social media has given athletes the chance to create their own brand and communicate with their audience directly and instantly. Traditionally, communication between athlete(s) and consumers included a transmitter (e.g., reporter) who filtered messages sent to sports consumers. However, social media has eliminated gatekeepers of this traditional communication model and provide athletes with the opportunity to send their own, unfiltered messages to their audience (Pate et al., 2014). In this technologically advanced environment, athletes' use of social media networking sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) has fostered the creation of their personal brand and brought them 'closer' to consumers (Emmons and Mocarski, 2014).

While traditional brands relate to characteristics associated with a particular good or service, sports brands, including human athlete brands, consist of associations ascribed to particular athletes (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015). Arai et al. (2014) applied Thomson's (2006) explanation of human brands to define the *athlete brand* as the "public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market" (p. 98). Williams et al. (2015) advanced this athlete brand definition by including unique identifiers, brand associations, and value creation. They defined an athlete brand "as a set of associations (e.g., name, personality) of any particular athlete who identifies and distinguishes themselves in the marketplace and promises a functional and emotional experience to consumers" (p. 78). Due to their popularity and celebrity status, athletes have the ability to influence perception and decision making of consumers concerning a product, service, or organisation (Lohneiss and Hill, 2014; Till, 2001).

Athletes have become more proactive in developing personal brand strategies to leverage their brands (Arai et al., 2013). Cortsen (2013) argued that athlete brands are used to enhance athlete recognition, establish reputation and credibility, add authenticity and trustworthiness to their personality and distinguish themselves in a very competitive environment. A decisive factor for

1 athlete brand **success** is the perceived image of the athlete that develops in the minds of consumers.
2 This brand image reflects associations sent by the athlete (Keller, 1993). To develop accurate
3 images of athlete brands in consumers' minds, the athlete (or the brand manager) must first *establish*
4 and then *communicate* his/her brand identity (desired image) through a clear strategy of what they
5 would like their brand to stand for (De Chernatony, 1999). De Chernatony (1999) suggested that to
6 develop powerful brands the desired image sent by a brand manager must match the perceived
7 image received by consumers. This match between desired and perceived image is termed *brand*
8 *congruence*. Studies on brand congruence have focused on the match between brand
9 personality/consumer self-concept (e.g., Aaker, 1999), athlete/sponsor (e.g., Erdogan, 1999),
10 sponsor/event (e.g., Ferrand and Pages, 1999) or event/destination (e.g., Hallmann and Breuer,
11 2010). The congruence between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image remains unexplored.

12 The increasing value and immense importance of athlete branding to athletes and their
13 stakeholders (e.g., sponsors and fans) have led to both academic and industry developments. First,
14 from an academic perspective, there **has been an increase in** research focusing on sport brands, such
15 as brand personality of individual athletes and teams (e.g., Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Carlson et
16 al., 2009), athlete brand image (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014), or brand image and loyalty
17 in team sports (Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2008). A recent shift in the research domain is also
18 evident with regards to the exposure of athletes through social media and an emphasis is placed on
19 understanding athlete brands to optimise the benefits of branding for all stakeholders involved (e.g.,
20 Geurin, 2017). As the challenges and opportunities to manage athlete brands advance, so has
21 research in this field. However, prior research has typically focused on only one element of the
22 athlete/consumer communication process (i.e., brand identity or brand image), overlooking the
23 importance of brand congruence.

24 Second, from a practical viewpoint, the process of managing and selling an athlete's brand is
25 crucial to attract endorsement deals (Arai et al., 2013). Expectedly, building a successful personal

1 brand has become the main marketing objective for athletes in high performance sports, especially
2 at the pre-elite level where athletes may experience higher demands for financial assistance to meet
3 their training regimes (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). Opportunities for athletes to attract
4 sponsorship income can also assist in alleviating pressures on governments to fund athlete training
5 and development. Hence, the significant and emerging role of personal branding to athletes deserves
6 a thorough investigation.

7 The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth and systematic literature review of
8 existing research on the athlete brands to propose strategic directions for future empirical research
9 in this field. In particular, this study's theoretical value resonates on the identification of the
10 potential synergy between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image for improved brand
11 congruence. Understanding this synergy fills a knowledge gap for both academics as well as
12 practitioners, and envisions the creation of an athlete brand congruence scale.

13 **Definitions and Understanding of Key Terms**

14 **Brand Identity and Brand Image**

15 Brands are a co-product of their two key stakeholders; brand managers and consumers. A brand
16 builds the interface between the manager's activities and consumers' interpretations (De
17 Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). The relationship and process of communication between
18 the brand manager and consumer is analogous with Schramm's model of mass communication.
19 Schramm (1971) suggested that communication requires an information source to encode and send
20 a message that the receiving party decodes. This process is not limited to communication between
21 humans as it also applies to brands. Figuratively speaking, the brand message is created and wrapped
22 by the brand manager and unwrapped by consumers (Nandan, 2005). Every brand holds a certain
23 identity that conveys an image that must be communicated effectively to the target audience
24 (Srivastava, 2011). Hence, to further conceptualise branding, it is essential to understand brand
25 identity, brand image, and their relationship.

1 The creation and management of brand identity are the foundations of any branding process
2 (Aaker 1996). Yet, despite long established definitions of brand identity and brand image, these
3 terms are often used interchangeably (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Maurya and Mishra, 2012;
4 Nandan, 2005). The distinction between the two concepts is that brand identity is created by the
5 source (e.g., brand manager), whereas brand image is created within the minds of the target audience
6 and represents consumer perceptions (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Linking those
7 two concepts to the communication process, identity is the sender's reality, while image presents
8 the receiver's perception (Nandan, 2005).

9 According to Kapferer (1997), *brand identity* is based on six central components: physique,
10 personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image. Brand identity refers to the character,
11 aims and values that present a sense of distinctiveness and allow differentiating among brands. It
12 helps to reinforce and communicate a meaning behind a brand for consumers (De Chernatony and
13 Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). The establishment of a clear and consistent brand identity is achieved when
14 brand attributes are communicated to and understood by customers (Ghodeswar, 2008). However,
15 since the brand manager establishes identity, it relates to the desired positioning of the brand, and
16 not how it is actually perceived. *Brand image*, on the other hand, is everything that people associate
17 with a certain brand (Newman, 1957), and represents subjective perceptions and existing
18 associations held in the memory of consumers about a brand (Keller, 1993; Patterson, 1999).

19 An athlete's brand image is reflected in the sport consumer perceptions of the athlete brand
20 attributes, as consumers develop and hold unique associations in memory when thinking about that
21 athlete's brand (Arai et al., 2014). Hence, athletes too are brands in their own right and their
22 branding is no longer limited to their on-field performance as they are recognised as "valuable off-
23 field commercial properties" (Chadwick and Burton, 2008, p.309). The recognition of athletes as
24 brands coupled with the ease of communication through social media suggests the need for strategic

1 management of an athlete's brand to develop their most effective possible personal brand (Geurin-
2 Eagleman and Burch, 2015).

3 In summary, the two main boundaries of the brand construct are the brand manager's activities
4 and consumer perceptions (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Hence, the key to
5 differentiating between brand identity and brand image resonates within the *inherent perspective*;
6 brand identity is communicated by the brand manager to consumers, and brand image is the
7 information consumers receive from the brand manager.

8 **Brand Congruence**

9 *Congruence* in marketing refers to the consistency of the message between content and source
10 (Lynch and Schuler, 1994). Brand congruence is the consistency or match between the information
11 sent by the brand manager and the information received by the consumer (Madhavaram et al., 2005).
12 The higher the congruence of the message the more effective it becomes in terms of processing
13 message content (McKay-Nesbitt and Yoon, 2015). **Labrecque et al. (2011) acknowledged that**
14 **mismatches between someone's branding goals and judgement by others represent branding**
15 **failures.** According to De Chernatony (1999), a balanced approach to brand building exists when
16 brand managers assess the congruence between brand identity and brand image perceptions over
17 time and strive to reduce any existing gaps. To assess congruence and improve brand identity,
18 consumers' feedback is monitored for the likelihood of positive attitudes and loyalty towards a
19 brand (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). This process enables the creation of more
20 powerful brands.

21 This mutual relationship between brand and consumer implies that there is a need for blending
22 the consumer with the brand manager perspectives and for examining brand congruence when
23 assessing the performance of brands. Athletes must develop brand associations and marketing
24 strategies that promote high levels of congruence to create a strong personal brand identity.
25 Developing strong personal brand identity through optimising brand congruence allows clear

1 differentiation from other athletes, builds brand loyalty, creates value for the consumer (Minkiewicz
2 et al., 2007; Nandan, 2005), gains consumer trust and increases purchase intentions (Ghodeswar,
3 2008), and positively influences customer satisfaction. By monitoring consumers' images of the
4 athlete brand, brand identity can be either rectified or reinforced.

5 **Athlete Branding on Social Media**

6 Personal branding has become increasingly important since social media platforms (e.g.,
7 Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn) have initiated a new era of communication
8 (Labrecque et al., 2011). The development of mobile technologies and social media platforms has
9 also transformed sports and sports business (Green, 2016). Social media platforms provide athletes
10 with the opportunity to showcase their brand and effectively build their brand image without relying
11 on mainstream media coverage (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015). These platforms are
12 particularly useful for personal branding as they are cost efficient, transparent and have
13 instantaneous global reach (Green, 2016). While engaging in social media does not directly generate
14 income for athletes, having a large follower base can lead to positive outcomes such as increased
15 sponsorship opportunities (Karg and Lock, 2014). Hence, using social media platforms and
16 engaging with fans to share personalised content provides athletes with a powerful tool to create
17 their personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015), and has become an essential practice for
18 many of them. However, this development also means that people are no longer in complete control
19 of content related to them as social media allow anyone to add content (Anagnostopoulos et al.,
20 2018). This makes the ownership of online information ambiguous and difficult to control and may
21 lead to misdirected and insufficient branding (Labrecque et al., 2011). It is therefore essential for
22 athletes to provide clear, unique and timely content to build strong brands and engage with fans and
23 followers to form strong connections and a positive image towards their brand (Green, 2016).
24 According to Hodge and Walker (2015), professional athletes have to be aware of the importance

1 of personal branding and should learn early on in their career how to develop brand identities and
2 effectively use social media platforms to build their brand.

3 Considering the rapid growth of research on athlete brands, it is prudent to investigate those
4 studies to unveil the status of scientific knowledge and to recognise potential research gaps. More
5 specifically, this study focuses on athlete brand identity, image and congruence. To that extent, the
6 purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic quantitative literature review and propose strategic
7 directions for future research in the field of athlete brand management. Additionally, it was
8 fundamental to this review to examine existing measures of athlete brand identity and image to
9 establish an empirical analysis to develop robust tools to measure and assess the athlete brand. The
10 following research questions guided the study: (1) What *research advancements* have been made
11 in the field of athlete brand identity and athlete brand image? (2) What *theories, frameworks or*
12 *models* have been used to explain the athlete brand? (3) What *scales* have been developed and used
13 to evaluate athlete brands?

14 **Methods**

15 A systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) was employed as a specific methodology
16 to locate existing studies, select and evaluate contributions, analyse and synthesize data and report
17 the identified evidence. The SQLR reduces bias, identifies important research gaps, clarifies
18 assumptions, allows precise conclusions and contributes towards shaping future directions to
19 advance areas of research (Chalip, 2006; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009; Pickering and Byrne, 2014).

20 **Conceptual Boundaries and Location of Articles**

21 To identify and locate appropriate articles for inclusion in the SQLR the authors clearly
22 identified conceptual boundaries and entered them as key search terms in electronic databases
23 (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). The conceptual search terms entered were: ("*brand image*" OR
24 "*brand identity*" OR "*brand personality*" OR "*personal brand*" OR "*human brand*" OR "*self-*
25 "*presentation*") AND (*athlete* OR *celebrity* OR "*sport team*" OR "*sports team*"). Only peer-reviewed

1 articles were included in the study. Searches among electronic databases revealed six databases
2 (EBSCOhost, Emerald, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Scopus and Web of Science) consistently reported
3 higher quantities of articles relevant to the study. After the completion of the database search,
4 database alerts were installed to ensure the latest published articles could be included post the search
5 date. Literature identified were screened and assessed based on titles and abstracts. This method of
6 screening is consistent with Pickering and Byrne (2014) as it leads to a collection of articles that
7 represent the research topic in more manageable quantities. Articles gathered were evaluated for
8 inclusion in, or exclusion from the study based on limiters (see Table 1).

9 [Table 1 near here]

10 **Search Process**

11 Figure 1 provides a flow diagram that illustrates the phases of the search and review process.
12 The initial search identified 539 articles. Inspection of articles revealed 164 duplicate articles and
13 329 that did not meet inclusion criteria. These articles were removed from the study.

14 [Figure 1 near here]

15 Crosschecking references from original research papers found two further papers not identified
16 but met inclusion criteria. After this process was complete, 63 articles were identified as eligible
17 and formed the basis of this SQLR.

18 **Analysis**

19 Each of the 63 articles were allocated a code based on parameters relevant to the research
20 questions. The coded information included bibliographic details (e.g., author and institutional
21 affiliation, year of publication, journal and title), key topics (e.g., research perspective, thematic
22 area and purpose of the study) and methodological details (e.g., conceptual approach, subjects, data
23 collection and analysis). This information was documented using Microsoft Excel which enabled
24 systematic and quantitative analyses and simplified comparisons (Pickering and Byrne, 2014). To

1 ensure consistency and validity of the coding process, members of the research team crosschecked
2 data from articles.

3 **Results**

4 The SQLR revealed two research streams, nine sub-streams and a range of conceptual methods
5 and theoretical approaches highlighting research advancements. Brand identity and brand image
6 emerged as the two key research streams. Sub-streams within brand identity included; team brand
7 identity, athlete brand identity and personal branding, self-presentation, and brand personality. Sub-
8 streams within brand image included; team brand image, athlete brand image, brand associations
9 and co-branding, endorser image, and brand personality. Scant research was found on **athlete brand**
10 congruence.

11 **Research Streams and Areas of Interest**

12 Results revealed two research streams i.e., *brand manager* or *consumer perspective*, which are
13 consistent with De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley’s (1998) notion of brand construct. In the brand
14 manager (brand identity) research stream, four sub-streams emerged; team brand identity, athlete
15 brand identity, personal branding, self-presentation **on social media** and brand personality. The
16 consumer perspective (brand image) research stream revealed five emerging sub-streams that
17 included; team brand image, athlete brand image, brand associations (and co-branding), endorser
18 image and brand personality. Table 2 outlines all sub-streams and details their corresponding
19 articles. Articles equally concerned with brand identity and brand image were assigned more than
20 once to a sub-stream (see note in Table 2).

21 [Table 2 near here]

22 Of the identified articles, **37** included studies that focussed on brand image and **29** investigated
23 brand identity. Three articles examined the athlete brand construct from brand identity and brand
24 image perspectives. Within the brand identity stream, athlete brand identity and personal branding
25 (**37%**) was the most researched area. **Of the 63 articles examined, 11 articles** (16%) explored athlete

1 brand identity and personal branding. **Seven of those articles employed** a case study approach
2 involving specific athletes, which has limitations regarding the generalisability of study outcomes.
3 The brand image stream had brand personality (32%) as its most investigated topic. Inspection of
4 frequency of studies on brand personality showed contrasting results between the brand manager
5 and consumer perspectives. **Thirteen (19%)** articles on brand personality from the consumer
6 perspective were identified while only one study considered brand personality from a brand
7 manager's standpoint.

8 The focus on team versus individual athlete brand research is almost equally distributed, with
9 **25** articles focusing on teams and 31 articles focusing on individual athletes (or individual team
10 sport athletes). Three articles included both team and individual athletes. Four articles included
11 individual athletes as part of research on personal brands of celebrities. The next section
12 concentrates on the key topic areas investigated and examines conceptual approaches and scales.

13 **Stream: Brand Identity**

14 ***Team Brand Identity.*** Results revealed **seven** studies employed a qualitative case analysis
15 approach with **three** studies using mixed methods. No studies applied a quantitative research
16 paradigm. Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) investigated branding strategies of French soccer teams
17 whereas Hill and Vincent (2006) used the case of Manchester United to draw conclusions on the
18 professional sports team brand. Similarly, Richelieu and Pons (2006) compared two professional
19 teams of different sports to examine distinctions in their strategies to build brand identity and
20 leverage brand equity. Richelieu et al. (2008) and Richelieu et al. (2011) based their analyses on
21 European soccer teams at different levels of competition and recognition. Richelieu et al. (2011)
22 distinguished internal and external factors that contributed to brand identity depending on the team's
23 calibre, ambition and financial means. Later, Richelieu and Lessard (2014) identified on-field
24 performance, authenticity/integrity and strategic management of the brand as the essential factors
25 that team managers should capitalise in order to rebuild team brand identity.

1 **Three** studies in this sub-stream used a mixed methods approach. Richelieu and Pons (2011)
2 investigated the strategic development of a Canadian hockey club. They emphasised the importance
3 of a long-term brand strategy and developed a framework for managers to evaluate how their
4 branding strategy is structured and how fans perceived it. Similarly, Abosag et al. (2012)
5 interviewed club employees and players to uncover the values of the club from an insider
6 perspective before surveying fans' perceptions towards the clubs. They found that fans with strong
7 emotional attachment to their club are supportive of brand extensions. **Parganas et al. (2015)**
8 **examined Twitter posts of a professional football team brand with regards to product-related and**
9 **non-product-related brand attributes. They found that fans reacted more often to product-related**
10 **attributes and concluded that Twitter posts can be used to manage a club's brand.**

11 ***Athlete Brand Identity and Personal Branding.*** **Seven of the 11** identified articles used a case
12 study approach to investigate personal branding strategies of individual athletes. For example, the
13 unique case of David Beckham's personal brand was examined in two articles (i.e., Chadwick and
14 Burton, 2008; Vincent et al., 2009). However, researchers only used secondary information to draw
15 conclusions on athlete brand identity. Wilson and Liu (2012) found that an athlete's commercial
16 success and their ability to generate revenue are more important than athletic success concerning
17 future career prospects. In line with this, Staskeviciute-Butiene et al. (2014) provided a literature
18 review examining personal brands of athletes with a special interest on former athletes' career
19 transitions. Further, Cortsen (2013) investigated the brand of golfer Annika Sörenstam and
20 identified that personal branding of athletes is a dynamic phenomenon that requires a well-
21 coordinated process between all stakeholders. Similarly, Hodge and Walker (2015) suggested that
22 professional athletes build their brand not only through athletic success but also through
23 differentiation and relationships with corporate partners and sponsors. Hence, professional athletes
24 are able to control their brands; however, sports organisations have to assist them by providing
25 education and pathways on how to develop successful brand identities (Hodge and Walker, 2015).

1 Kristiansen and Williams (2015) highlighted the importance of examining the brand manager
2 perspective of an athlete's brand and investigated the strategies of one professional athlete and
3 management team to create brand awareness and positive brand associations. Further, Lobpries et
4 al. (2018) focused their examination of personal brands on female elite athletes and perceived
5 barriers that hinder their ability to develop successful personal brands. Findings revealed that the
6 socialization of women, the adherence to gender norms as well as lack of strong management and
7 media coverage limited the brand strategy of female elite athletes and hindered their ability to
8 leverage their brand identity.

9 The results in this research sub-stream show the emergence of interest in the area of self-
10 presentation and social media. Specifically, Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) provided a link between
11 personal branding and the sub-stream of self-presentation. Based on a qualitative examination of
12 tweets, they investigated ways in which athletes can successfully use social media tools to become
13 sport brands. Similarly, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) established how visual self-
14 presentation on social media can be used as a marketing and communications tool to build the
15 athlete brand. Furthermore, Green (2016) investigated athletes' use of social media sites to develop
16 their personal brand and found that building a strong online personality can create distinction from
17 other players and offer qualities that are attractive to potential sponsors.

18 ***Self-Presentation on Social Media.*** The analysis of self-presentation studies showed particular
19 interest in personal branding and is often used as a concept to investigate people's behaviour on
20 social media. Consequently, athletes' use of social media, in particular, Twitter and Instagram, has
21 attracted considerable research interest over the last years. In 2012, Lebel and Danylchuck
22 established that athletes use digital self-presentation as an extension of the athlete brand. Hull (2014)
23 found that athletes have different self-presentation strategies and engage with fans by giving them
24 a glimpse into their lives while also maintaining a public persona that is attractive to sponsors. Pate
25 et al. (2014) emphasised the importance of educating athletes on their social media messages in the

1 absence of filters. Similarly, Emmons and MocarSKI (2014) addressed the importance of social
2 media as a visual aspect of a professional athlete's brand. They found that gender stereotypes are a
3 factor in self-presentation and acknowledged that social media use provides opportunities to oppose
4 those stereotypes. Interestingly, Smith and Sanderson (2015) investigated differences and
5 similarities between male and female athletes' visual self-presentation and confirmed previously
6 established gender norms. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) also focused on athletes' visual self-
7 presentation on Instagram and provided an understanding of how social media can be used as a
8 marketing and communications tool to build personal brands. The **three** most recent studies on self-
9 presentation in this research area investigated female athletes' use of digital media. Specifically,
10 Barnett (2017) discovered that women portray themselves in an apologetic identity, which may be
11 required to build a commercial identity that is interesting for sponsors. Further, Geurin (2017)
12 identified that audiences can play a significant role in female athletes' self-presentation behaviour,
13 which may lead to athletes holding back from presenting their authentic self or being pressured into
14 posting certain things of themselves, such as sexual images. **Sauder and BlaszkA (2018) investigated**
15 **communication strategies of the U.S. women's national soccer team players and compared their**
16 **Twitter usage before, during and after the 2015 World Cup. Although there were intuitive and**
17 **organic changes in the self-presentation strategies of the athletes, they found that athletes are more**
18 **prone to communicate immediate experiences rather than planning out long-term strategies.**
19 **Accordingly, they did not sufficiently leverage the World Cup to promote their personal brand**
20 **(Sauder and BlaszkA, 2018).**

21 ***Brand Personality.*** Heere's (2010) study on perceived brand personality associations is the
22 only available article that measured brand personality from the brand manager and the consumer
23 perspective. Heere (2010) took into account that the personality traits associated with brands have
24 to be divided among the interest groups, and therefore allowed for a discrepancy between the two
25 viewpoints. Instead of using predetermined scales that often lacked validity outside of their original

1 settings, Heere (2010) allowed managers to develop their own intended sets of personality
2 associations that were included as items in a subsequent spectator survey.

3 **Stream: Brand Image**

4 *Team Brand Image.* The results showed that researchers often explored the construct of brand
5 image with a focus on sport teams and clubs. In 1999, Ferrand and Pages conducted the first study
6 uncovering the value of brand image to sport organisations (soccer clubs). They established that
7 there is a need for an attractive and distinctive brand image within a club's positioning strategy to
8 achieve a competitive advantage. Bauer et al. (2005) and Bauer et al. (2008) surveyed German
9 soccer fans to identify suggestions on ways to improve team brand image and overall branding
10 strategies. They found a direct positive relationship between brand image and loyalty and concluded
11 that customer-oriented brand image has an immense effect on loyalty in German soccer. This has
12 been resonated by Richelieu and Pons (2011). Building on these works, Abosag et al. (2012)
13 conceptualised the relationships between fans' emotional attachment, fans' brand perception and
14 their support for brand extensions of the sport team. They confirmed that if fans have a strong
15 emotional attachment to their club, they have a stronger perception of the club as a brand and are
16 supportive of brand extensions. **The two latest studies in this research area investigated professional**
17 **team brands regarding their use of Twitter and Instagram as part of their marketing strategy. Fans**
18 **engage predominantly with Twitter posts that include product related brand attributes (Parganas et**
19 **al., 2015). Instagram, too, is a powerful tool to engage with fans by enlivening team brands with**
20 **pictures and short videos (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Hence, these social media platforms can**
21 **be used to manage team brand image and strengthen the relationship and engagement between fans**
22 **and the club, which ultimately leads to increased sponsor interest and revenue for the club.**

23 *Athlete Brand Image.* It is noteworthy that research interest in athlete brand image commenced
24 in 2012, **which is coinciding with the increased importance of social media as a personal branding**
25 **platform.** Parmentier and Fischer (2012) analysed the main factors that contribute to building the

1 brand of two famous soccer players, both players considered as owning an athlete brand but of
2 different strength and success. Their findings suggested that the athlete brand consists of
3 professional image and mainstream media persona, and both factors contribute to the equity of the
4 athlete brand. Further, Sassenberg et al. (2012) conceptualised a model for the Sport Celebrity Brand
5 Image (SCBI) identifying the most important brand attributes and benefits of sport celebrities.
6 However, the model has never been empirically tested. Soon after these works, Arai et al. (2014)
7 developed a structural Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), which was the precursor to a scale
8 that was designed to measure athlete brand image; the Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI; Arai
9 et al., 2013). These two articles linked endorsement studies with brand management literature and
10 used team brand associations to distil dimensions and elements that enabled the assessment of
11 individual athlete brand image. The MABI conceptualises athlete brand image with three primary
12 dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle; these three
13 dimensions were tested and confirmed in a quantitative study (Arai et al., 2013). In 2014, Lebel and
14 Danylchuk offer the only study that investigated self-presentation from a consumer perspective.
15 Specifically, they examined which self-presentation strategies were perceived as most important to
16 the athlete's digital image. They discovered that fans may not be as interested as anticipated in the
17 details of the athlete's personal life outside of sport. Moulard et al. (2015) used celebrity athletes as
18 research objects and examined the authenticity of human brands and their appeal over time and for
19 different age groups. They found that when evaluating authenticity of human brands, younger
20 consumers place more value on rarity, whereas older consumers rely more on stability of the
21 celebrity. In 2017, Walsh and Williams surveyed how consumers react to potential athlete brand
22 extensions and compared sport related versus non-sport related products. Athlete prestige is
23 important for brand extensions that fit with the athlete's image. If there is a low perceived fit, athlete
24 attachment is essential (Walsh and Williams, 2017). **Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) investigated the
25 relationship between consumer culture, female athletic representation and online fan engagement**

1 by examining the Instagram posts of five famous athletes. The posts that received the most
2 engagement (i.e., likes and comments) are those that align closely to the qualities women are
3 expected to possess. However, there is a significant difference in the way male and female
4 consumers respond to these posts. Female responses tend to celebrate idealised femininity and
5 embrace the posts as body inspiration while male consumers demonstrate a sexualised perception
6 of the posts and envision men as sporting authority rather than women. In one of the most recent
7 studies, Taniyev and Gordon (2019) explored the brand image of retired athletes and found that the
8 nostalgic associations consumers hold toward former superstar athletes add another dimension to
9 their personal brand. According to Väätäinen and Dickenson (2019), athletes only need a subset of
10 brand image attributes to increase psychological commitment of consumers. In particular, brand
11 managers should focus on distinct competition styles and complement this style with other attributes
12 athletes are most associated. Additionally, Hofmann et al. (in press) found that an athlete's
13 performance-based attributes (e.g., competence and quality) drive the effect of popularity-based
14 attributes (e.g., media effectiveness and temper) on brand image. The higher the performance of the
15 athlete brand, the higher the recognisability and the athlete's popularity-based brand image.

16 ***Brand Associations (and Co-branding)***. Brand associations are closely related to brand image
17 as they are perceptions in the memory of consumers that are linked to a specific brand (Aaker,
18 1991). Gladden and Funk (2002) provided the first examination of brand associations in team sports.
19 They developed and tested the Team Association Model (TAM), which consists of 16 distinct
20 constructs that underlie sport brand associations. In response to the limitations of the construct
21 validity of TAM, Ross et al. (2006) conceptualised the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS)
22 which examines the associations that individuals hold regarding their favourite sports team. Soon
23 after Ross et al. (2007) tested this scale within the intercollegiate sport setting and confirmed that
24 TBAS is applicable to non-professional sports. In 2010, Frederick and Patil examined marketing
25 strategies of professional football teams and found that the longer the duration of a co-branding

1 association, the greater the impact on the team's brand image. Heere (2010) combined the concepts
2 of brand association and brand personality and examined the ways netball spectators perceived team
3 brands. The resulting brand associations were either game or event related. In the most recent study,
4 Walsh and Williams (2017) identified that consumers see a better fit between athletes and sport
5 related products and services. They recommended athletes to associate themselves with brand
6 extensions related to sports or employ a marketing strategy with a sport related theme if the product
7 itself has no relevance to sport.

8 ***Endorser Image.*** Even though the overall concept of endorsement was the focus of numerous
9 studies, results showed that most investigations were conducted from the perspective of the
10 endorsed brands, neglecting brand image effects from the view of the endorsers. However, articles
11 (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014) have built on prior research based on endorser image.
12 Authors argued that this line of research is applicable to athlete brand image as athlete self-branding
13 activities align with endorsement activities. Till (2001) provided the only study that explicitly
14 explored the image of athlete endorsers and found that the endorsed product affects the image of
15 the endorser. In a later study, Choi and Rifon (2007) measured the brand image of celebrity
16 endorsers. Even though this study examined celebrities in general, the research subjects consisted
17 solely of famous international athletes. According to their findings, the four distinct dimensions of
18 celebrity image are genuineness, competence, excitement and sociality. Further, Roy and Moorthi
19 (2012) investigated the effects of endorser personality on brand personality and found that a reverse
20 meaning transfer may create favourable or unfavourable consequences to the endorser image. **Most**
21 **recently, Kunkel et al. (2019) found that that there is a spill-over effect from advertisement appeals**
22 **to the endorser. Hence, when deciding to endorse a brand it is important for an athlete to select a**
23 **well-matched appeal as advertising influences the consumer perceptions of athlete endorsers**
24 **(Kunkel et al., 2019).**

1 **Brand Personality.** Brand personality is part of the brand identity construct and plays an
2 important role in personal brand building (e.g., Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005). However, it is
3 mostly studied from a consumer perspective and hence associated with brand image. Many scholars
4 acknowledge the importance of brand personality as part of their athlete or team branding research
5 (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Hodge and Walker, 2015; Staskeviciute-Butiene et
6 al., 2014). Carlson et al. (2009) focussed on brand personality to investigate the relationship
7 between a sport team brand and consumer identification concerning games watched and retail
8 spending. Building on this work, Carlson and Donovan (2013) incorporated individual athletes as
9 human brands that influence team-related outcomes and found that consumers viewed athletes as
10 human brands with unique personalities. Heere (2010) measured how spectators of sport teams
11 perceive brand personality associations and Roy and Moorthi (2012) investigated brand personality
12 with regards to celebrity endorsements. Lunardo et al. (2015) examined the extent to which brand
13 personality influences celebrities' (e.g., athletes) appeal and their appeal over time. Giroux et al.
14 (2017) discovered that congruence between brand personality and promotional marketing activities
15 positively affects the consumers' evaluation and brand equity of professional sport teams.

16 Developing scales to measure brand personality has been popular among scholars (Braunstein
17 and Ross, 2010; Heere, 2010; Schade et al., 2014). In a significant development in this area of
18 research, Tsiotsou (2012) developed a scale for measuring the personality of sport teams
19 (SPORTEAPE). This scale incorporates relevant dimensions and traits that consumers attribute to
20 their sport teams. Tsiotsou's scale was subsequently validated and extended to individual athletes
21 (i.e., Mitsis and Leckie, 2016). Further, Karjaluoto et al. (2016) used SPORTEAPE to examine the
22 influence of sport brand personality on loyalty with regards to the fan-team time length relationship
23 and discovered that brand personality affects attitudinal loyalty. In one of the most recent studies
24 that aimed to measure brand personality, Greenhalgh et al. (2017) expanded on Heere's (2010)
25 approach (who collected brand personality adjectives from team managers) and also included

1 administrators, fans and non-fans to gain a more holistic view of the organisation's brand. Further,
2 Stadler Blank et al. (2017) developed and validated the Sport Team Personality Scale (STPS) in a
3 professional sport team context. The authors compared the STPS with existing scales and explored
4 team identification as well as perceived similarities and differences between teams. They found that
5 the character factor (e.g., admiration and care) is more important for team identification than the
6 performance factor (e.g., success and talent).

7 **Conceptual Approaches and Scales in Athlete Brand Research**

8 The SQLR revealed a range of conceptual approaches and scales applied within athlete brand
9 research. Results showed a lack of distinction and clarity as terms such as theory, framework and
10 model were often used interchangeably. To distinguish the utilisation of theories, frameworks and
11 models, they were categorised by the nature of their application. Where authors discussed particular
12 theories, frameworks or models (e.g., description in literature review), and no evidence was
13 provided they were actually applied within the study, the article was categorised as '*Cited*'. If there
14 was evidence that the cited theories, frameworks or models were used to inform the research
15 direction and design (i.e., deliberation in results/discussion), it was categorised as '*Applied*'.
16 Further, the analysis of articles unveiled popular measurement items and scales used for quantitative
17 research in the field of athlete branding. See Appendix 1 and 2 for detailed proofs of categorisations
18 theories, frameworks/models and scales.

19 **Theories.** Results of the SQLR showed that 20 different theories were mentioned in the 63
20 articles. The theories used often derived from classic branding theories (e.g., from Aaker, 1991; De
21 Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 1993). Notably, seven of the nine articles that were classified to the sub-
22 stream of self-presentation applied Goffman's (1959) Theory of the Presentation of Self in
23 Everyday Life as the conceptual underpinning of their research. Goffman suggested that self-
24 presentation or impression management is an intentional and tangible component of identity. Self-
25 presentation can be separated into frontstage and backstage performances. On the frontstage, people

1 consciously present themselves in front of an anticipated audience and are concerned with the
2 impression they make, essentially fabricating their personal identity. On the contrary, backstage is
3 considered as the private space where people can be themselves and are showing their true identity
4 (Goffman, 1959). Further, Tajfel and Turner's (1985) Social Identity Theory was cited three times.
5 This theory suggests that part of a person's concept of self develops from the groups this person
6 belongs. Bauer et al. (2005) and Bauer et al. (2008) applied Gutman's (1982) Means-end Theory as
7 the basis for their brand association studies, which proposes that people consume products to obtain
8 functional or psychological value.

9 ***Frameworks/Models.*** Among the 63 articles, the authors referred to six frameworks and ten
10 models. As athlete brand research is still a relatively young and underdeveloped field, the results
11 show that theoretical concepts were often borrowed and adapted from other areas (e.g., marketing,
12 psychology). It is noteworthy that the majority of articles using a framework based their research
13 on Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Framework (cited by six and applied by
14 seven). Keller's framework suggests that positive brand equity depends on high levels of brand
15 awareness, brand familiarity and favourable brand associations in the minds of consumers (Arai et
16 al., 2014). Even when concepts of brand research were considered independently, authors often
17 employed Keller's framework as the foundation (i.e., Arai et al., 2014; Gladden and Funk, 2002).
18 Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model (TAM), which was derived from the CBBE,
19 and Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model were the most frequently used models (TAM: cited by
20 four, applied by three; Brand Equity Model: cited by five). Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility
21 Model (cited by two and applied by two) and McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model (cited
22 by two and applied by two) received repeated mentions. Ohanian (1991) identified perceived
23 attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise as valuable attributes and essential credibility
24 characteristics of the source (e.g., celebrity endorsers) of a message (Choi and Rifon, 2007).
25 McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model suggested that particular meanings attributed to a

1 celebrity are transferred to the endorsed product or brand and thus become associated with the brand
2 in the mind of consumers (Roy and Moorthi, 2012). Fifteen articles introduced individual
3 frameworks or models by their own admission (i.e., Abosag et al., 2012; Chadwick and Burton,
4 2008; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Tsotsou, 2012), most of which are yet to be tested and
5 validated.

6 **Scales.** Results showed that in 30 of the 63 identified articles the authors used scales for their
7 investigations. In many cases, the authors adapted, expanded, refined and/or significantly modified
8 existing scales. Twenty-three articles either developed completely new scales (e.g., Arai et al., 2013;
9 Gladden and Funk, 2002; Heere, 2010; Schade et al., 2014; Tsotsou, 2012), or integrated and
10 combined various scales to suit their particular study purpose (e.g., Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Choi
11 and Rifon, 2007). Only six articles applied and tested previously established scales without
12 modifications (e.g., Mitsis and Leckie, 2016; Ross et al., 2007). Most scales are used in the research
13 area of brand personality whereby 12 articles applied or amended items from Aaker's (1997) Brand
14 Personality Scale, despite recognising its limitations (i.e., Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Carlson and
15 Donovan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Lunardo et al., 2015; Roy and Moorthi,
16 2012). The Team Brand Association Scale (Ross et al., 2006) and the Sport Team Personality Scale
17 (Tsotsou, 2012) were each used twice.

18 **Statistical Trends of Research Articles**

19 **Research Outlets.** The 63 identified articles were published in 27 different journals (10 sport
20 related, 17 were not; see Table 3). Seven articles on athlete and team brand research were published
21 in Sport Marketing Quarterly and six in the International Journal of Sports Marketing and
22 Sponsorship and Journal of Sport Management respectively. The International Journal of Sport
23 Management and Marketing and the European Sport Management Quarterly published five articles
24 each. The remaining 34 articles spread across 22 different outlets, providing only three or less
25 publications in each journal (Table 3). This wide spread of articles across academic journals with

1 different emphases and topic areas is an indication that the research interest is not only limited to
2 sports, but also appeals to other research fields such as business, marketing and communications.

3 [Table 3 near here]

4 **Year of Publication.** Figure 2 outlines the years of publication of research studies and also
5 separates the topic areas of brand identity and brand image. The majority of articles (68%) were
6 published in 2012 or later, demonstrating the increased interest in athlete and team brand research
7 over the last seven years. Until 2011, research journals issued no more than three studies per year.

8 [Figure 2 near here]

9 In 2012, the number of publications increased to eight. Since then, research interest has
10 remained. This is consistent with technological developments and a shift towards self-branding
11 strategies through social media. Although Facebook remains the most popular site, the utilization
12 of other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn have significantly increased between
13 2012 and 2014 (Green, 2016). This trend is also represented in the academic interest in this topic.
14 Of the 43 articles published since 2012, 22 investigated the athlete or team brand with a focus on
15 social media. Notably, eight of those articles addressed the issue of gender differences (i.e., Geurin-
16 Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Lebel and Danylchuk 2012; Smith & Sanderson 2015) or specifically
17 explored female athlete and team brands (i.e., Barnett 2017, Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al. 2018,
18 Sauder and Blaszkka 2018, Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018).

19 **Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

20 The purpose of this study was to examine research on athlete brands to propose strategic
21 directions for future research. A systematic quantitative literature review guided the identification
22 of what *research advancements* have been made in the field, what *theories, frameworks or models*
23 *were used to explain and interpret* athlete brands and, what *scales have been developed or used to*
24 *evaluate athlete brands.* The findings help understand the various points of departures that
25 researchers have used, the ways the participants or subjects have been utilized and the type of

1 theories that have informed the field. Further, the review illustrates the varying applications of
2 existing scales within athlete brand research and provides a comprehensive picture of the diverse
3 conceptual approaches.

4 Six key conclusions emerged, which help draw several implications and strategic directions for
5 future research. First, even though there is a strong foundation of studies on athlete brand image,
6 there is lack of a consistent conceptual approach or more uniform use of scales and theories. Second,
7 brand identity has received less research attention and is predominantly investigated using
8 qualitative case studies. Third, brand personality from the athlete perspective is largely neglected.
9 Fourth, limited research has examined the athlete brand from the brand insider and the consumer
10 perspective. Fifth, none of the studies discussed congruence between athlete brand identity and
11 athlete brand image. Sixth, no framework exists that provides a conceptual understanding of athlete
12 brand constructs and their relationships.

13 All research identified in this SQLR infers that athlete brands conform to the same principles
14 as conventional brands and that consumers develop perceptions of athlete brands, just like they form
15 an image of a product. Hence, similar to product branding, successful athlete brands require strategic
16 and diligent management. Developing a strong brand can distinguish one athlete from another and
17 provide athletes with enduring qualities that makes their brand attractive to potential sponsors and
18 stakeholders (e.g., Green, 2016). The majority of investigations within the area of athlete branding
19 were conducted with a focus on brand image from a consumer perspective. This finding resonates
20 with most sport management research, which focuses on understanding consumer or fan behaviour
21 and investigates brand equity from an outside-in approach (Kristiansen and Williams, 2015;
22 Shilbury, 2011). Limited studies emphasise strategic brand building investigating the role and
23 importance of brand identity creation in athlete branding (Lobpries, 2014). Intuitively, this is
24 expected as the ultimate goal of successful brand management are consumer driven outcomes such
25 as brand loyalty, increased fan bases and viewership or other economic benefits (Bauer et al., 2008).

1 Therefore, the consumer perspective is an essential area of investigation and the results of studies
2 conducted from this perspective provide feedback on how the athlete brand is perceived in the minds
3 of its customers. However, it is only possible to analyse, adapt and improve branding strategies if
4 those results are compared to what the brand insider initially intended to communicate to the
5 receiver. Hence, making salient the importance of brand congruence within athlete branding.

6 Yet, to date, there are no articles within the area of athlete branding that discuss brand
7 congruence. This finding is surprising as a match between brand information sent by a brand
8 manager and information received by consumers is essential for successful brand management (e.g.,
9 De Chernatony, 1999). Only four articles purposely combined brand insider and consumer
10 perspectives (i.e., Abosag et al., 2012; Heere, 2010; Parganas et al. 2015; Richelieu and Pons, 2011).
11 However, these articles do not address the issue of brand congruence, despite recognising that a
12 combination of these two constructs could bring significant benefits to a sport brand by portraying
13 a consistent identity (Richelieu and Pons, 2011). By implication, and in order to balance knowledge
14 on overall brand aspects, future research on the athlete perspective could complement this area and
15 qualitative approaches could address how and why athlete brand identity informs successful brands.
16 Clearly, the role that brand congruence plays in developing effective communication to allow
17 development of strong athlete brands is critical. Yet, little is known about the congruence between
18 athlete brand identity and brand image. This shortage of congruence studies highlights the centrality
19 of athlete brand identity research in gaining a more cohesive picture of athlete brands and the need
20 to include congruence in future studies.

21 Understanding the brand message sent by athletes and the way consumers decode this message
22 to form positive or negative images of the athlete brand is crucial. Especially with the development
23 of social media, athletes are no longer known just for their athletic abilities, but for the identity they
24 portray and the image perceived by their fans (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Green (2016)
25 highlighted that athletes' use of social media platforms should be part of their strategic marketing

1 approach. Additionally, Hodge and Walker (2015) suggested that sport marketing firms should
2 invest in teaching athletes how to use social media platforms to develop their brand and to create
3 brand identities that maximise fan engagement. Teaching athletes to develop their brand by adopting
4 a strategic marketing approach is particularly important for athletes who may never make it to the
5 pinnacle of their sport and therefore unable to attract large sponsorships. For these athletes simply
6 relying on the occasional exceptional athletic result to get noticed by consumers is not enough.
7 Further, many of the articles that investigated social media use of athletes followed a case study
8 approach to explore brands of famous athletes. This is an interesting area of exploration; however,
9 it is not sufficient to exemplify personal branding with case studies if the goal is to draw conclusions
10 and generalisations that spread across the field. The focus on established elite/celebrity athletes in
11 those case studies does not provide realistic and applicable insight for personal brands of aspiring
12 athletes and it makes it hard to draw implications or ideas for branding strategies of athletes at the
13 pre-elite level.

14 The lack of consistency and balance across study foci within the identified articles can be
15 explained through the newness of the athlete brand research field. Similar features are observed
16 among trends of other emerging research fields and inconsistent results are not surprising but rather
17 to be expected when consideration is given to the logical life cycle of emerging areas of scholarship
18 (Sæbø et al., 2008). Indeed, the sport management field may still be in an embryonic state (Shilbury,
19 2011), which potentially explains why many articles rely on mainstream branding theories when
20 researching the athlete brand. The identified shortage of brand identity and lack of brand congruence
21 studies in sport is evidence for the need of growth of research in this area. Further, the analysis of
22 theories, frameworks and models utilised in the articles revealed a strong need for consistency and
23 strategic direction within the field of athlete brand research. One exception is the area of self-
24 presentation where most studies applied Goffman's theory to analyse and explain the personal brand
25 of athletes with respect to social media. The variations in the use of conceptual approaches identified

1 across the other sub-streams confirm that this area of interest is immature and still evolving (Sæbø
2 et al., 2008). This variation is also visible concerning the inconsistency of scales used to measure
3 the brand constructs of athletes. The analysis of the articles unveiled a popular application and
4 modification of brand personality scales and although many scales were adapted and evolved from
5 similar sources (e.g., Aaker's Brand Personality Scale) a consistent and generally accepted
6 measurement tool is yet to be developed. Interestingly, the term *brand personality* itself leads to
7 confusion as it is often associated with both brand image and brand identity, without a definite
8 affiliation to either. This inconsistent use of where brand personality fits within the field of athlete
9 branding has resulted in the loose use of the term, especially with regard to scale measurements.
10 Inconsistent use of brand personality highlights the risk of mixing distinctly different facets under
11 one concept (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Due to the variance in use of brand personality to either
12 brand image or brand identity, brand personality was included in both identified streams but defined
13 by either brand manager or consumer perspective. Brand personality from the consumer perspective
14 received significantly more research attention than the brand manager perspective. The brand
15 manager perspective warrants further investigation and in particular with a focus on brand
16 congruence. Further, the importance of social media has not been sufficiently incorporated in any
17 scale and some identified measures still require testing for validity in different settings and
18 subsequent investigations. Developing one valid and reliable scale to measure athlete brand identity,
19 image and congruence would offer several benefits, such as the consistency of results among diverse
20 contexts, increased generalisability and stronger potential to compare different studies.

21 It is not only important to analyse consumer perceptions of brands but at the same time it is
22 essential to investigate to what extent the sent information matches those perceptions (brand
23 congruence) as mismatches between the two represent branding failures (Labrecque et al., 2011).
24 Assessing brand congruence would allow stronger development of more viable branding strategies
25 and long-term brand equity. Athlete brand image was thoroughly investigated and defined by Arai

1 et al. (2014) and MABI is inclusive of three primary dimensions (athletic performance, attractive
2 appearance and marketable lifestyle). However, athlete brand identity has not been investigated in
3 similar fashion and requires further advancing. Although some of the dimensions and sub-
4 dimensions of the MABI are likely to also be relevant for the athlete's perspective, it is foreseeable
5 that different characteristics may be considered when investigating the viewpoint of athletes. Only
6 if the dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct are clearly defined, is it possible to
7 accurately compare those dimensions with athlete brand image and indicate the level of congruence
8 of the athlete brand. Future research needs to advance investigations that would further develop the
9 combined effects of brand identity and brand image on athlete brand congruence. Results of such
10 studies would underpin significant practical advice to marketing managers, athlete managers, or
11 high performance managers to educate athletes on branding strategies. Limited insights on how to
12 build and improve brand congruence restrict potential guidance that could help athletes to establish
13 a successful brand.

14 **Limitations and Conclusions**

15 The results of this research must be viewed in light of the limitations of a SQLR. The evidence
16 base in this review is limited to English language articles published in peer-reviewed journals.
17 Although the authors attempted to identify all available relevant sources concerning athlete
18 branding, it is important to note that the analysis was naturally limited by the applied keywords and
19 the information provided in the identified articles. However, due to the replicable nature of this
20 SQLR, opportunities exist to build on its findings.

21 In summary, the emerging trend of increased visibility and outreach of individuals, especially
22 through social media outlets, has led to the necessity to develop and manage personal brands.
23 However, next to analysing consumer perceptions of those personal brands it is also essential to
24 investigate to what extent the brand information intended to be sent by the brand owner matches
25 those consumer perceptions. The present investigation of the athlete brand construct and in

1 particular the introduction of brand congruence as the synergy between athlete brand identity and
2 athlete brand image form the main contribution of this study and inform the gap in the existing
3 research. Based on the findings we conclude that there is a hypothesis to be tested that the closer
4 the congruence of associations between sender and receiver and the fewer factors that interfere with
5 the communication process, the more effective the athlete brand. High brand congruence describes
6 whether the consumer's perception of the athlete brand is equal or similar to the athletes' perception
7 of their own brand. Similarly, low brand congruence could be a warning sign for unsuccessful brand
8 management and the need for change of strategy. Exploring athlete brand congruence **would**
9 **uncover the** differences between desired brand identity associations and those perceived by
10 consumers. Identifying these differences will be useful to improve development of associations to
11 enhance clearer communication. The identification of the research streams of athlete brand identity
12 and image lead the authors to define athlete brand management as *the process of achieving brand*
13 *congruence between the brand manager and consumer perspectives of the athlete brand*. The brand
14 manager perspective reflects the views of athletes or athlete representatives; the consumer
15 perspective is the examination of athlete brands from the lenses of external to the brand stakeholders
16 such as consumers, fans, and sponsors.

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