

An Examination of Brand Management in High-Performance Sport

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An Examination of Brand Management in High-Performance Sport

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Abstract

The development of social media platforms had an immense global impact on the delivery and consumption of sports (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), which placed a new meaning to the role and importance of the personal brands of athletes. The change from one-way (e.g., news reports, commercials) to two-way communication between athletes and consumers enabled by social media has opened up a completely different marketing world for athlete branding (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). However, the global reach and potential of personal branding also increased the competition, which makes it more important than ever to differentiate and build a distinctive personal brand (Viřelar, 2019).

The creation and management of brand identity are the foundations of any branding process (Aaker, 1996). The clearer the brand identity the athlete communicates, the easier it is for the consumer to form a congruent brand image. However, most research on athlete brands is focussed on brand image (consumer perspective). This not only leaves a theoretical vacuum on the brand identity of athletes but also on the congruence between the two perspectives. The lack of understanding of brand identity and brand congruence is concerning as athletes face increased pressures to utilise social media as a personal branding tool. Consistent with calls to examine athlete branding by combining athlete and consumer viewpoints (cf., Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2017), this theoretical and practical knowledge gap presented an opportunity for research on the personal brands of athletes focussing on the insider perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this PhD thesis was threefold:

- (1) to investigate the current status of research on athlete brands and verify knowledge gaps in the existing literature;
- (2) to identify and explore the items and dimensions of athlete brand identity and develop a scale to measure the athlete brand from the athlete as well as the consumer perspective; and
- (3) to test the validity and practicability of the developed scale and introduce athlete brand congruence to measure comparisons between athlete and consumer perspectives of the athlete's personal brand.

Study 1 reports a systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) that was designed to identify and qualitatively evaluate all relevant athlete brand research. This review built the foundation of the thesis by identifying gaps within the existing literature. Sixty-three articles met the inclusion criteria of the SQLR, which followed processes

established by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) and Pickering and Byrne (2014). Results confirmed and substantiated the lack of research from the athlete's perspective (i.e., athlete brand identity) and supported the need for further investigation on athlete branding.

The focus of Study 2 was to identify the items and dimensions of athlete brand identity and to develop the athlete brand identity scale (ABIdS). This was achieved using a two-step, mixed-method process. First, a list of 112 items was collated from the literature identified in the SQLR. The relevance and importance of these items to the brand identity of athletes were then evaluated with the help of 10 athlete brand experts. Second, the remaining 74 items were tested on an athlete and consumer sample ($n=194$) in form of an online questionnaire. Factor analysis and Rasch analysis were conducted to further reduce the items, identify underlying common factors and assess item measurement properties to form a concise scale which best represented athlete brand identity. The result was the development of the ABIdS that consists of 33 items forming four athlete brand identity dimensions: *Athletic Integrity* (12 items), *Athletic Success* (9 items), *Fan Engagement* (7 items), and *Character Traits* (5 items).

Study 3 tested and evaluated the validity and practicability of the ABIdS. Consumers ($n=794$) evaluated the brands of five current Australian elite athletes using the ABIdS. These athletes also assessed their own brand using the same scale. Statistical analyses confirmed the validity and reliability of the scale. However, one item (*well-conditioned body*) was removed from the Athletic Success dimension to resolve statistical inconsistencies. Collecting data from athletes and consumers on the same scale enabled the analysis of athlete *brand congruence* based on Musante et al.'s (1999) fit measure. Low congruence scores reflected low cohesiveness between brand identity items sent and the way these items were processed as images by consumers. These low congruence scores were further investigated and the specific items responsible for the disparity between the two perceptions were identified.

From a practical standpoint, the ABIdS provides detailed information to brand insiders, such as athletes, sports marketers and high-performance sport managers, on the key elements required to develop a successful personal brand identity. These elements can be derived from the four dimensions of the scale and associated characteristics. Practical application and analysis of the ABIdS and the brand congruence measure delivers results that help athletes to develop targeted strategies to improve the status of their brand by providing guidance and pinpointing areas of improvement.

The results of this PhD fill the identified knowledge gap on athlete brand identity and its relationship to brand image in form of brand congruence. Identifying and defining the four dimensions of athlete brand identity and developing the ABIDS represents a theoretical advancement in the discipline of sports marketing due to the particular focus on the athlete perspective throughout the scale development process. In combination, the ABIDS and the athlete brand congruence measure provide effective assessments of athlete brands, which presents a new approach for future research in this domain. This PhD thesis also contributes to the theoretical concepts that guided the three studies by focussing on conscious brand identity creation as the driver of brand image (cf., Aaker, 1996). Based on Aaker's assumption, this thesis used a multidisciplinary approach to combine Goffman's (1959) self-identity framework (sociology) and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (social psychology) to rationalise the personal brands of athletes as intentionally managed, socially constructed and dynamic in nature. Extending the combination of these disciplines to examine athlete brands in the age of social media proved particularly relevant and presents opportunities to guide future research.

Overall, the knowledge gained through the three sequential studies in the context of this PhD thesis provides evidence that will help to positively influence the development of successful athlete brand strategies and advances the theoretical understanding of this research domain.

II Acknowledgements

This PhD was - in the truest sense of the word - a journey and I wouldn't have been able to travel on this road and get across the finish line without the support, guidance and encouragement of some very special people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my genuine gratitude to my supervisors, **Dr Brad Hill** and **Associate Professor Popi Sotiriadou**. In 2011 I sent an email to the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management looking for a supervisor for my Master's thesis, which is how I ended up meeting Brad. Looking back now, this has likely been the most fateful email of my life as without the odds of meeting Brad I may have never had the chance to return to Australia to complete a PhD. I will forever be thankful for Brad keeping me in mind when this PhD opportunity popped up and for Popi to place her trust in me, even though we had never met. I appreciate their relentless guidance and mentoring throughout the years. My PhD journey would not have existed without them. I also owe my deepest gratitude to **Dr Kirstin Hallmann**, who selflessly offered her full support, time and effort to my research.

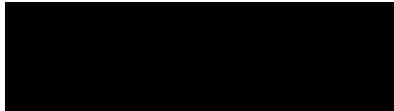
I gratefully acknowledge the funding sources and support that I received throughout my candidature from Griffith University, the Griffith Business School, the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, as well as the Queensland Academy of Sport (QAS). The research environment at Griffith in addition to the support provided by the QAS was exceptional and I consider myself tremendously lucky to have been one of their scholars.

Last, but certainly not least, I have to say thank-you to my wonderful family. **My parents**. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for their relentless encouragement throughout any of my endeavours. Knowing that I have them on my side rooting for me has made all the difference. **My husband**. His endless support and reassurance are what kept me going when I didn't see the silver lining. He selflessly allowed me to follow my dreams and I will forever be thankful for our Australian adventure that has shaped our lives forever. Thank you to both of **our families** for their love and encouragement that know no distance.

I am dedicating this PhD to my daughter who brought so much joy and love to our lives from the minute she was born. She is my life, my love, and my dreams for tomorrow.

III Statement of Original Authorship

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.



Annika Linsner

Date: 1 November 2020

IV Statement of Ethical Clearance

This research was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol granted by the Ethics Committee of Griffith University.

(GU Human Ethics Reference Number 2016/959)

V Publications

PhD Specific Publications

Accepted Journal Papers

Linsner, A., Hill, B., Hallmann, K., Sotiriadou, P. (2020). Developing an Athlete Brand Identity Scale Using Rasch Analysis. *Sport, Business, Management: an International Journal*, 10(4), 431-449.

Linsner, A., Sotiriadou, P., Hill, B., & Hallmann, K. (2020). Athlete Brand Identity, Image and Congruence: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*. DOI: 10.1504/IJSMM.2020.10032825

Journal Papers Currently Under Review

Linsner, A., Hallmann, K., Hill, B., & Sotiriadou, P. (TBD). Athlete Brand Congruence as a Measure to Evaluate Brand Identity and Image Fit. *Submitted for publication to a special issue of the Journal of Strategic Marketing (Strategic Brand Management In and Through Sport) on 25 October 2020.*

Conference Proceedings

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Lohneiss, A., Sotiriadou, P., Hill, B., & Hallmann, K. (September, 2017). Athletes' Brand Identity and Brand Image. Research Advancements and the Development of an Athlete Brand Identity Scale. Presented at the European Association for Sport Management Conference in Bern, Switzerland.

Lohneiss, A., Sotiriadou, P., & Hill, B. (November, 2016). Athlete/Team Brand Identity and Brand Image: A Systematic Literature Review. Presented at the Sport Management Association of Australia And New Zealand Conference in Auckland, New Zealand.

Other Publications

Journal Papers

Lohneiss, A. & Hill, B. (2014). The impact of processing athlete transgressions on brand image and purchase intent. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 14(2), 171-193.

Conference Proceedings

Lohneiss, A., Voge, C. & Greenhill, J. (November, 2017). Best Practice Methods in the Development of a Coaching Resource for Water Polo in Queensland. Presented at the Sport Management Association of Australia And New Zealand Conference in Gold Coast, Australia.

Lohneiss, A. & Hill, B. (November, 2011). Effects of Tiger Woods transgressions on Nike's brand image and purchase intent. Presented at the Sport Management Association of Australia And New Zealand Conference in Melbourne, Australia.

Haupt T., Sotiriadou P., Schöttl K., **Lohneiss A.**, & Werner, C. (September, 2017). Digital sports branding: A comparative study of critical success factors for digital branding strategies of high-end company brands versus celebrity athlete brands. Presented at the European Association for Sport Management Conference in Bern, Switzerland.

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VIII List of Abbreviations

ABIdS	Athlete Brand Identity Scale
AMOS	Analysis of moment structures
AVE	Average variance extracted
CFA	Confirmatory factor analysis
CFI	Comparative fit index
CR	Composite reliability
CTT	Classical test theory
DIF	Differential item functioning
FA	Factor analysis
HPSO	High-Performance Sports Organisation
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin
M	Mean
MABI	Model of Athlete Brand Image
PCA	Principal component analysis
PEA	Performance enhancing agent
PSI	Person Separation Index
RMSEA	Root mean square error of approximation
RQ	Research question
SABI	Scale of Athlete Brand Image
SD	Standard deviation
SEM	Structural equation model
SPORTEAPE	Sport Team Personality Scale
SQLR	Systematic quantitative literature review
SRMR	Standardized root mean square residual
TBD	To be determined

IX Acknowledgement of Papers included in this Thesis

ALL PAPERS INCLUDED ARE CO-AUTHORED

Section 9.1 of the Griffith University Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (“Criteria for Authorship”), in accordance with Section 5 of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, states:

To be named as an author, a researcher must have made a substantial scholarly contribution to the creative or scholarly work that constitutes the research output, and be able to take public responsibility for at least that part of the work they contributed. Attribution of authorship depends to some extent on the discipline and publisher policies, but in all cases, authorship must be based on substantial contributions in a combination of one or more of:

- conception and design of the research project
- analysis and interpretation of research data
- drafting or making significant parts of the creative or scholarly work or critically revising it so as to contribute significantly to the final output.

Section 9.3 of the Griffith University Code (“Responsibilities of Researchers”), in accordance with Section 5 of the Australian Code, states:

Researchers are expected to:

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- accept or decline offers of authorship promptly in writing.
- include in the list of authors only those who have accepted authorship
- appoint one author to be the executive author to record authorship and manage correspondence about the work with the publisher and other interested parties.
- acknowledge all those who have contributed to the research, facilities or materials but who do not qualify as authors, such as research assistants, technical staff, and advisors on cultural or community knowledge. Obtain written consent to name individuals.

Included in this thesis are papers in *Chapters 2, 3 and 4* which are co-authored with other researchers. My contribution to each co-authored paper is outlined at the front of the relevant chapter. The bibliographic details (if published or accepted for publication)/status (if prepared or submitted for publication) for these papers including all authors, are:

Chapter 2:

Linsner, A., Sotiriadou, P., Hill, B., & Hallmann, K. (2020). Athlete Brand Identity, Image and Congruence: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*. DOI: 10.1504/IJSMM.2020.10032825

Chapter 3:

Linsner, A., Hill, B., Hallmann, K., Sotiriadou, P. (2020). Developing an Athlete Brand Identity Scale Using Rasch Analysis. *Sport, Business, Management: an International Journal*, 10(4), 431-449.

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Linsner, A., Hallmann, K., Hill, B., Sotiriadou, P. Athlete Brand Congruence as a Measure to Evaluate Brand Identity and Image, *submitted for publication at the Journal of Strategic Marketing on 25 October 2020 (Reference Number: 206010946)*.

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Supervisor: Dr Brad Hill

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Supervisor: Associate Professor Popi Sotiriadou

Chapter 1 Introduction

Research on athlete brand management, for both individual athletes and athletes within teams, has experienced significant growth over the past decade (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). The advent of digital technologies that encompass two-way communication channels has opened up a completely different marketing world for athlete branding (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). In particular, the emergence and rapid development of new media has had considerable impact on both the delivery and the consumption of sport (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Traditionally, the communication between athlete and consumers included a transmitter (e.g., reporter) who filtered messages sent to sports consumers. However, social media has eliminated the gatekeepers of this traditional communication model and provide athletes with the opportunity to send their own, unfiltered messages to their audience (Pate, Hardin, & Ruihley, 2014). In this technological environment, athletes' use of social media networking sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) has fostered the creation of their personal brand and brought athletes closer to consumers (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014; Geurin, 2017).

Effective athlete brands can provide the athletes with additional income through endorsements or brand extensions (Agyemang & Williams, 2016). One example of a successful athlete brand is Danica Patrick, a pioneer athlete as the first full-time professional female NASCAR driver. According to Darlow (2018), her net worth exceeded \$60 million from high profile endorsements (e.g., Go Daddy, Nationwide Insurance). David Beckham is another prime example of successful brand management on and off the field, leading to endorsement deals from adidas or H&M. In fact, he achieved his largest endorsement earnings (USD75 million) two years after retiring from his athletic career (Darlow, 2018). However, there are many examples of adverse consequences due to poor brand management and it is important to consider that each social media post by an athlete can have substantial effects (positive or negative) on that athlete's overall brand image (Su et al., 2020). One of those negative examples is football player Laremy Tunsil, who was assumed to be a top three pick in the 2016 NFL Draft. However, minutes before the draft, a video of him smoking from a bong appeared on his Twitter account, which is estimated to have cost him over USD10 million as he was only drafted at the thirteenth pick as a result (Darlow, 2018) and severely damaged his brand image and marketability.

The increasing value and immense importance of athlete branding to athletes and their stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, fans, consumers) have initiated a research interest exclusively focusing on athlete brands, such as brand personality of individual athletes and teams (e.g., Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Carlson, Donovan, & Cumiskey, 2009), athlete brand image (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai et al., 2014), or brand image and loyalty in team sports (Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005; Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). In today's world the first experience consumers have with a brand is often via the internet. On the one hand, this means that consumers are closer to brand owners than ever before, on the other hand, there is less control over the brand message (Haig, 2011). Now, more than ever, particularly due to the exposure athletes are gaining through social media, an emphasis is placed on thoroughly understanding athlete brands in order to optimise the benefits of branding for all stakeholders involved. As the generated knowledge on athlete brand management is growing, strategically organising existing research insights and gaining research momentum is challenging due to the different human/athlete attributes and new dynamics shaped by technologies that have to be considered when investigating athlete brands. Consequently, clarity and direction were needed towards shaping more universally accepted theories, definitions, or frameworks on athlete brand management.

Strategic brand management is essential to ensure congruence between brand identity and brand image. Misunderstandings, or incongruencies, between internal branding goals and judgement by others indicate branding failures (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). There are many examples of such failures from prominent brands. In 1985 Coca-Cola changed their drink formula in an attempt to get a competitive advantage over Pepsi. Even though the new flavour proved to be a success in blind taste tests, customers were confused as this new flavour did not align with the established brand image of Coca-Cola (Haig, 2011). The new flavour triggered a change in the company's brand identity, which caused worrisome incongruencies with consumers' brand image. If incongruencies between a brand's identity and a brand's image become noticeable this should act as a trigger for change and by evaluating the reasons for this gap, brand managers can adapt and improve their strategies to improve the match between identity and brand reputation (image perception over time) (De Chernatony, 1999). Coca-Cola's brand management took action by discontinuing experiments with the new flavour and making sure consumers brand associations were realigned with the preestablished image (Haig, 2011). Evidently, closely monitoring the reputation of a brand against its brand identity

provides insights regarding the urgency and direction for improved brand management (De Chernatony, 1999).

Mogaji, Badejo, Charles and Millisits (2020) argued that every human being is a brand as they all possess an identity. However, conscious effort and awareness is required to build and establish the brand through strategic personal branding (Mogaji et al., 2020). Hence, strategic management is not only crucial for conventional brands but also for the personal brands of athletes to ensure congruence between an athlete's brand identity and desired brand image. However, despite its importance for the development of effective brand communication and strong athlete brands, little is known about congruence between athlete brand identity and brand image (Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2017). When it comes to athlete brands, the focus of studies conducted to date has been on brand image and consumer perspectives. The important athlete perspective has not received adequate research attention, nor has congruence between the two perspectives. One distinctive feature of athletes is that they are required to balance the need to build a personal brand with their athletic career (Mogaji et al., 2020). Athletes, particularly female and niche sport athletes, often face financial and institutional challenges. They have to balance their own needs and aspirations with the needs of their fans and supporters, while progressing their athletic career and making conscious efforts to develop an athlete brand (Mogaji et al., 2020). In this context the lack of research attention on athlete brand identity and brand congruence is even more problematic.

1.1 Research Background and Problem

Use of individual and company brand names had its origins in the 19th century (Room, 1998). However, it was not until 1960 that The American Marketing Association provided a definition of a *brand* as; a name, term, sign and/or symbol intended to identify a company's goods and services, and to differentiate them from those of their competitors. Even though this definition is broad it has been widely used among many marketing and brand theorists and in brand management strategies over different contexts (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Ghodeswar, 2008; Keller, 1993).

Within the sport context it was Shank in 1999 who offered one of the first definitions on *brands in sports*. Shank (1999) stated that a brand was any combination of name, design and symbol that sports organizations use for product differentiation. Shanks definition of sports brands reflected Aaker's (1997) noting that brands are complex having special characteristics that positively influence consumer perceptions, evaluations and preferences. While traditional

brands relate to characteristics associated with a particular good or service, sports brands often consist of associations ascribed to particular athletes linked to that brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015). Due to their popularity and celebrity status, athletes have the ability to influence perception and decision-making of consumers with regards to a product, service or organisation (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014; Till, 2001). Often companies greatly succeed by associating themselves with athletes. As an example, the multinational sports corporation Nike significantly benefits from its business relationships with star athletes Michael Jordan and Roger Federer. The association athletes have with sports corporations has led sport stars themselves becoming genuine and sought-after brands (Kapferer, 2008). According to Kapferer (2008), celebrity athletes become brands when their influence is no longer just originating from their sporting achievements but also from their off-field personality. A prime example for a recognizable brand identity is James Harden (NBA player). He is famous for his iconic beard, which significantly contributed to his sponsorship deal with Adidas worth US\$200 million (Darlow 2018). Kapferer (2008) remarked each athlete that becomes a brand should be aware of their own values, their personal identity, their audience, what they embody and what makes them recognizable. Bastos and Levy (2012) strengthened Kapferer's remark by illustrating the importance of understanding personality as a key factor in development of successful human brands as follows:

At the root of all branding activity is the human desire to be someone of consequence, to create a personal and social identity, to present oneself as both like other people (e.g. to belong) and unlike other people (e.g. to stand out), and to have a good reputation (p. 349).

Human brands are defined as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts” (Thomson 2006, p. 104). Human brands are professionally manageable, have certain attributes and portray meaning just like traditional products or services (Thomson, 2006). Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta (2010) established athlete endorsers and endorsed brands are an alliance of equals. Hence, athletes too are considered as brands in their own right. The value of athletes to themselves and marketers is no longer limited to their on-field performance as athletes off-field identity and behaviours are recognised as also important, if not more important in constructing an athlete's brand and their commercial success (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). Therefore, athlete brands need to be managed just like conventional brands (Kapferer, 2008). For example, star football (soccer) players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, have unique characteristics embodying qualities that cannot be replicated,

which distinguish them from other football players. These unique characteristics and qualities of athletes need careful managing in order to maximise market reach and commercial opportunities.

Chadwick and Burton (2008) defined the *football player brand* as “a unique, distinctive combination of unplanned and planned factors that mark out a player as being different to other players thus enabling the immediate identification of the player and the activities in which they are involved” (p. 310). However, human brands are not limited to football players as the use of new media has allowed athletes of any sport to become recognisable brands. 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, Kim, Agyemang and Martin (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). The combination of athletes as brands, ease of communication through social media and the potential for marketing and commercial opportunities reinforce the need for strategic management of an athlete’s brand to develop their most effective possible personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015). Becoming a human brand is no longer reserved for famous sport stars. Athletes at any level are now capable of developing their own brand identity and obtaining potential benefits for building and capturing a market audience.

According to Aaker (1996), the creation and management of brand identity is the foundation of any branding process. Brand identity is what differentiates brands from one another and represents the internal core values of a brand (De Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 2008). Brand image on the other hand is the sum total of impression and brand associations that consumer perceive regarding a particular brand (Srivastava, 2011). Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, and Zenker (2018) found that if the brand identity (desired image) is not in line with the consumer’s reality, people may develop negative brand associations and thereby harm the brand’s reputation. Conversely, a good match between brand identity and image strengthens the reputation of the brand (Braun et al., 2018). This relationship shows that brand identity precedes brand image (Keller, 2008). A strong link between brand identity and image leads to brand loyalty (Srivastava, 2011). Monitoring the brand image perceptions over time and

comparing this against brand identity goals provides insights of a brand's requirement for change and intervention (De Chernatony, 1999).

Initially, brand identity theories were established to examine conventional brands or corporate brands (De Chernatony, 1999). However, with the acceptance of humans as brands, these theories were also applied to human branding research (Thomson, 2006) and sport management scholars have adopted this perspective to examine athlete branding (Lobpries et al., 2017). Similar to corporate brand identity, human brands require a brand identity that differentiates them from others and is actively communicated to their target audience (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Athletes build their brand in order to enhance their recognition, establish their reputation and credibility, and distinguish themselves in a very competitive environment (Arai et al., 2013). Consumers form perceptions of athlete brands just like other types of brands (Na, Kunkel, & Doyle, 2020). This is particularly important since an established image can be the decisive factor for companies to associate themselves with the brand of an athlete; thus, providing a platform for receiving sponsorship and endorsement deals. The development of a successful athlete brand is arguably an athlete's most valuable asset (Su et al., 2020) and is essential for their off-field success (Arai et al., 2013).

Building a successful personal brand has become a main marketing strategy for athletes in high-performance sport, especially at the pre-elite level where athletes may experience higher demands for financial assistance in order to train (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, not all athletes face the same barriers. Sportswomen and niche sport athletes may face higher financial and institutional challenges that require money from endorsements and grants and could diminish their chances to build their personal athlete brand at a key time (Mogaji et al., 2020). In line with this, Su et al. (2020) suggested intentional personal branding strategies can be beneficial for athletes at the pre-elite level as this may help them to generate a stronger following during career transitions. Hence, the significant and emerging role of personal branding to athletes has attracted and is deserving of a thorough investigation.

Athlete brand research has received increased attention since 2012 and various studies have laid substantial foundations in this domain (e.g., Arai et al., 2014). Traditional models of brand management place most emphasis on matters external to the brand and pay insufficient attention to brand identity (De Chernatony, 1999). Most research on athlete branding has been conducted with a focus on brand image from a consumer perspective (e.g., Arai et al., 2014). Considerably fewer studies investigate brands from the athlete's perspective (brand identity) (e.g., Lobpries et al., 2017). Measuring brand identity is important because the success of a

brand depends on the consumer's perception or brand image of the brand at the time of decoding its identity facets (Roy & Banerjee, 2014). Therefore, effective management and communication of brand identity facets or elements enhances the opportunity for favourable brand image (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). Brand identity and image are interrelated and ensuring synchronization between them is a prerequisite for successful branding. This requirement for synchronization makes the need for examining brand identity even more important. Particularly, when research shows that one significant reason for brand failure is the existence of a gap between brand identity and resultant brand image (Roy & Banerjee, 2014). Lobpries et al. (2017) highlighted that comparing an athlete's brand identity with the brand image perceived by consumers could provide invaluable insights for managers and academics alike. However, there is a lack of research that focusses on athlete brand building and brand identity creation as most research has focused on the consumer perspective instead of enabling evaluations from the perspective of the athletes or comparisons between the two viewpoints (Lobpries et al., 2017).

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis contributes to the growing conversations and research on athlete branding and contributes to the literature as it advances an original understanding of the athlete brand identity construct. In particular, the overall problem that this research project addresses is:

How can athlete brands be measured and evaluated to assist athletes develop successful branding strategies?

More specifically, this thesis aims to identify key elements important to the development of a successful athlete brand identity and how consumers decode that identity within their minds to create a representative brand image. This thesis responds to this overall problem and research aims through three sequential studies. The first study is a systematic literature on athlete brands. The second study develops an athlete brand identity scale while the third study tests the scale to assess congruence between athlete brand identity and consumer brand image.

Study 1, the systematic literature review, responds to the following research questions:

- *RQ1a: What research advancements have been made in the field of athlete brand identity and athlete brand image?*
- *RQ1b: What theories, frameworks or models have been used to explain the athlete brand?*
- *RQ1c: What scales have been developed and used to evaluate athlete brands?*

Findings of Study 1 indicated that to date, the athlete brand has mainly been investigated from the consumer perspective (brand image). Limited research was available examining the personal brand of athletes from the perspective of the athletes themselves (brand identity). This gap in knowledge formed the second study which was guided by the following research questions:

- *RQ2a: What are the dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct?*
- *RQ2b: How can athlete brand identity be measured?*

After identifying the dimensions of athlete brand identity and developing a scale to investigate this construct (the Athlete Brand Identity Scale, ABIdS), the goal of the third and final study was to validate this scale and to introduce a brand congruence measure. A quantitative ecological validity study was conducted testing the utility, practicability and benefits of the developed measurement tool. Study 3 investigated the following research questions:

- *RQ3a: Is the Athlete Brand Identity scale a practical tool to measure the athlete brand?*
- *RQ3b: Can the ABIdS be used to detect differences between athlete and consumer opinions (i.e. brand congruence)?*

1.3 Research Paradigm

The philosophical orientation of this study utilised the pragmatism paradigm in order to address the aforementioned aims. Pragmatism emerged as a fairly recent concept compared to other worldviews, such as positivism and interpretivism (Creswell, 2009). Pragmatists view reality as both singular as well as multiple; they accept the existence of theories to explain the phenomenon of study but also acknowledge the importance to assess any individual input into the nature of this phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998), pragmatism recognises the importance of attending to the research problem and to use the best philosophical and methodological approach to respond to this particular problem. Hence, pragmatism is a practical approach that facilitates human problem solving depending on the research question (Powell, 2001). The pragmatist's view encourages a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, objective and subjective orientations, and a combination of deductive and inductive thinking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). However, there is no single paradigm or methodology that can be applied unanimously for all investigations within the field of sport management (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). The borders between the paradigms are blurred and methods can cross discipline

boundaries; hence, it is essential to always adopt the most appropriate and suitable paradigms and methodology (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Rather than letting the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological orientations drive the design of the research, research questions provide justification for the research approach (e.g., Creswell 2009; Gratton & Jones, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). This pragmatic approach offers a practical and more outcome-oriented research design and shifts focus away from the philosophical debate (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

1.4 Research Design

By implication the aforementioned pragmatic principles guided this research design driven by the overall goal to provide a conclusive answer to the research questions that are underpinning the study. Before determining the appropriate research approach, the research problem and questions were identified in the systematic literature review. This led to the realisation that there is a need to clarify athlete brand identity as a construct, to develop a tool to measure athlete brand identity and to determine any other factors that may influence the relationship between an athlete's brand identity and brand image (i.e., brand congruence). As a first step, a qualitative study based on prior research as well as the opinions of 10 athlete experts provided the best research approach to explore all items relevant for athlete brand identity. The outcome of the expert survey specified a list of items that could then be further explored with quantitative research, which was used to define the dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct and to develop the athlete brand identity scale (ABIdS). In the final step, the ABIdS was tested using a quantitative case study approach and the brand congruence measure was introduced. This sequential mixed-methods approach provided a thorough and complete level of analysis for this research project. The qualitative study to generate appropriate items provided a valuable link between the systematic literature review and the quantitative study as it offered specific input from the brand insider perspective (i.e., athlete experts) and helped to develop the ABIdS. Specifically, the constructs explored in the quantitative study were based on existing literature and refined with expert opinions to ensure that all constructs reflect the athlete brand identity. Figure 1 provides a summary of the applied mixed-method research design.

This course of action aligns with the pragmatic research paradigm as research aims, appropriate methods and the nature of the data to be collected were derived from the research questions. Details of the applied research methods are further explained in the following sections and thoroughly outlined in each individual study (Chapters 2-4).

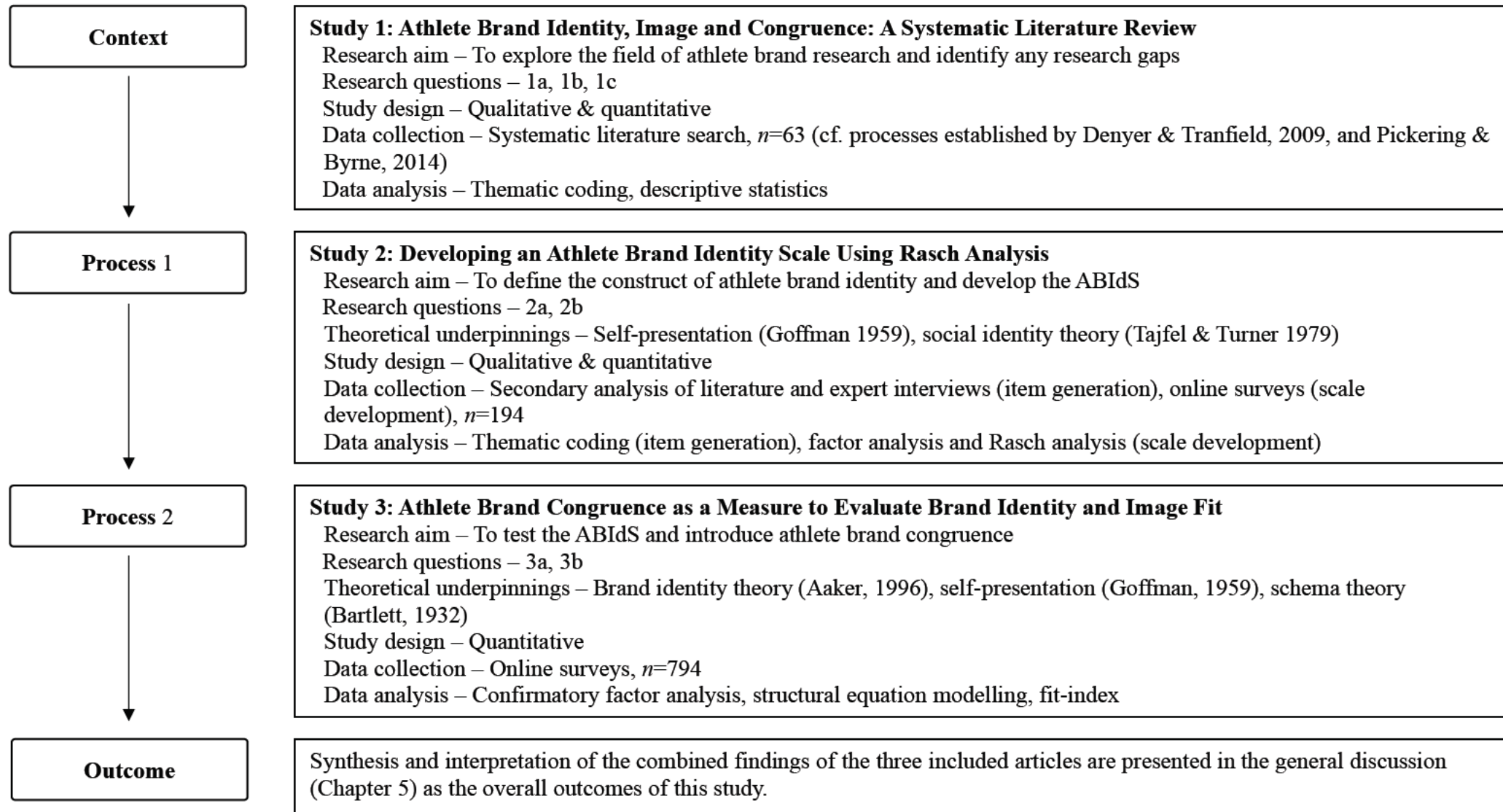


Figure 1 Summary of the applied mixed-method research design

1.4.1 Method

This thesis employed a three-study mixed-method research design to address the research questions and to develop and test the athlete brand identity scale as well as a brand congruence measure. Three studies were conducted sequentially with each study commencing at the completion of the one before it. Figure 1 shows the applied methods of this research project and provides an outline of the research design of each study.

Study 1 is a systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) that was conducted in order to identify and qualitatively evaluate all relevant athlete brand research since 1999. Specifically, the systematic literature review outlined in Chapter 2 built the foundation of this thesis by identifying gaps within existing athlete brand literature. Further, it discussed the important need from an academic and practitioner standpoint for addressing these gaps. The SQLR followed processes established by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) and Pickering and Byrne (2014). A total of 63 articles met the inclusion criteria. Results of this review identified a lack of research from the athlete's perspective (i.e., athlete brand identity). Given that consumers form positive or negative images of athlete brands by decoding messages sent by athletes, this lack of research on brand identity was surprising and represented the focus of the consecutive studies.

Study 2 concentrated on the identification of the dimensions of athlete brand identity and the development of the athlete brand identity scale. This involved a two-step process. First, a list of items was collated from related literature and evaluated with assistance from experts in the field of athlete branding (qualitative). Second, the remaining items were tested on an athlete and consumer sample in form of an online survey (quantitative). Factor analysis (FA) reduced the items and identified underlying common factors. Rasch analysis then assessed item measurement properties from those factors to form a concise scale which best represented athlete brand identity.

Study 3 involved testing and evaluating the validity and practicability of the athlete brand identity scale. To assess ecological validity, consumers responded to brand identities of five current elite Australian athletes. Also, the athletes and the consumers evaluated the status of the athletes' brands on the same scale. Statistical analysis evaluated results. Athlete brand congruence was established based on a fit index to compare athlete and consumer perspectives.

1.4.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

In line with the pragmatist research paradigm, theories and frameworks that underpin this research project were formed progressively in response to the identified research problems. In particular, the SQLR aided the identification of relevant theoretical ideas that were used as the starting point for developing the groundworks of this research project.

In the first instance it is essential to understand that brands are a co-product of their two key stakeholders; brand managers and consumers. The relationship and process of communication between the brand manager and consumer is analogous with Schramm's model of mass communication (1971). Schramm suggests that communication requires an information source to encode and send a message that is decoded by a receiving party. This process is not limited to communication between humans as it also applies to brands. Figuratively speaking, the brand message is created and wrapped by the brand manager and unwrapped by consumers (Nandan, 2005). Every brand holds a certain identity that conveys an image which must be communicated effectively to the target audience (Srivastava, 2011). Hence, to further conceptualise branding, it is essential to understand brand identity, brand image, and their relationship (i.e., brand congruence).

Aaker's (1996) brand identity theory, which originates from identity theory (Stryker, 1987), suggests that the most important step of the brand building process is to establish a distinct *brand identity*. According to Da Silveira, Lages and Simões (2013) brand identity initiates from the inside and is influenced by several external components, such as *brand image*. Humans can be considered brands too, and similar to conventional brands, the initial step in human branding is to establish a distinguishable brand identity and to actively communicate this brand identity to consumers (Ghodeswar, 2008). This communication process aligns closely with aforementioned model of mass communication (Schramm, 1971).

The mechanism that helps individuals to create and maintain a particular brand identity is based on Goffman's (1959) framework of self-presentation and impression management (Labrecque et al., 2011). This proves particularly relevant in times of social media as the primary and most essential tool for personal brand management. Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self in everyday life is a popular conceptual foundation of athlete brand research and personal branding, particularly in relation to social media. Goffman suggested that self-presentation or impression management is an intentional and tangible component of identity. Self-presentation can be separated into

frontstage and backstage performances. On the front-stage people consciously present themselves in front of an anticipated audience and are concerned with the impression they make, essentially fabricating their personal identity. On the contrary, backstage is considered as the private space where people can be themselves and are showing their true identity (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) portrays self-identity as a dynamic concept as it varies according to context and the role of the self. Hence, self-identity involves multiple identities, which are dependent on the different contexts and social roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and are socially constructed (Goffman, 1959). Due to their relevance to the construction of personal brand identities, these two related ideas were used as the theoretical underpinnings for Study 2.

The central objective of this research project was to establish a measurement tool that could aid athletes to assess their brand (Study 2) and to introduce and evaluate brand congruence (Study 3). *Congruence* in marketing refers to the consistency of the message between content and source (Lynch & Schuler, 1994). Brand congruence is the consistency or match between the information sent by the brand manager and the information received by the consumer (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005). It is a positive element as it assists consumers with processing brand communications (Fleck & Quester, 2007). High congruence between what a company intends to deliver, and consumers' actual perceptions of the brand represents the efficiency of marketing communication strategies (Lee, Kim, & Won, 2018). The higher the congruence of the message the more effective it becomes in terms of processing message content (McKay-Nesbitt & Yoon, 2015). Congruence is an essential factor for the personal brands of athletes as their brand image should be reasonably consistent with their developed identity (Arai et al., 2014).

To investigate congruence between athlete and consumer perceptions, Study 3 connected aforementioned theoretical framework of impression management (Goffman, 1959) with schema theory (Bartlett 1932). Goffman's (1959) approach proves particularly appropriate in modern times and is used by many researchers that investigate the personal brands of athlete brands in a social media context (e.g., Geurin 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). People are in control of their identity and how they want to be perceived by others. Bartlett's (1932) schema theory explains image formation as an indicator of how images exist in people's memory. Schema theory suggests that consumers' brand associations are influenced by direct experiences as well as predetermined opinions and knowledge of the brand's environment (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). These experiences and knowledge

represent cognitive structures of beliefs and are referred to as schemas (Bettman, 1979). This theory has mostly been applied to evaluate image formation and congruence between two objects (e.g., event image/brand image, Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). However, its principles are also relevant for assessing one object but from two different perspectives. Within this research, congruence is examined between athletes' desired image of their brand (brand identity) and consumers' perceived image of that brand (cf., De Chernatony, 1999). The perceived image matches the desired image when the image attributes communicated by brand owners are understood by consumers (Ghodeswar, 2008).

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The research project is divided into different sections that serve as the structure of this thesis. The three studies (two accepted for publication, one in review) form the core components of this thesis and are presented in their original journal article form in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Each study reports a unique review of literature and methods specific to the research problem under investigation within that study. Results and discussion are also provided in each of the three studies. The thesis concludes with an overarching discussion that synthesises the broader and interrelated findings and theoretical underpinnings among studies

Chapter 2 reports the systematic literature review (Study 1) that highlights existing athlete brand research. This study is accepted for publication in the *Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*. It describes the extent to which the athlete brand has been investigated in prior studies and the focus of those studies. Study 1 concludes with the identification of gaps in the literature and sets the foundation for the consecutive research questions and studies.

Chapter 3 showcases the second study, which describes the development of the athlete brand identity scale (ABIdS) and its construct dimensions. Results show successful identification of four dimensions of athlete brand identity measurement: athletic integrity, athletic success, fan engagement and character traits. The unique and significant aspect of the ABIdS is its capacity to incorporate the athlete's perspective as well as the consumer perspective into one measure. This study has been accepted for publication at the *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*.

Chapter 4 presents the third and final study, which tests the validity and practicability of the developed scale (i.e., ABIdS) on five Australian elite athletes and 794 consumers. Results endorse the ABIdS as a reliable instrument for evaluating athlete

brand identity from the consumer perspective and a valuable approach for relating athlete and consumer opinions. The study also introduces athlete brand congruence as an effective measure to evaluate and categorise athlete brands. Study 3 is currently under review at the *Journal of Strategic Marketing*.

Chapter 5 marks the final chapter of this thesis. It synthesises a discussion on the overarching findings of this research project within the context of the research problem. This chapter also discusses the theoretical and practical contributions of the thesis and concludes with suggestions for future research.

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Chapter 2 Systematic Quantitative Literature Review

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

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Contributors

Annika Linsner designed the systematic literature review and conducted the database searches with contributions from Brad Hill, Popi Sotiriadou and Kirstin Hallmann. All articles that matched the pre-established inclusion criteria were independently examined by Annika Linsner and Popi Sotiriadou. Annika Linsner led the conceptualisation and drafting of the manuscript with contributions by all authors. All authors have approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

All Authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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2.1 Abstract

Research interest around athlete and human branding has increased significantly over recent years however gaps are evident in terms of cohesive strategic direction and consensus around important issues. This study aims to address those gaps and determine a strategic direction for future research by providing an in-depth, systematic literature review of existing material on athlete branding.

A total of 63 articles published in 27 academic journals between 1999 and 2019 were analysed, revealing research on athlete branding had predominantly focused on brand image from the consumer perspective. Few studies investigated strategic athlete brand building and the importance of brand identity creation from the brand manager (athlete) perspective.

Study findings highlight the importance of brand congruence as the synergy between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image. This research establishes foundations to inform development of strategic direction, guide future research and be the catalyst for new and innovative projects around athlete brand management.

Keywords: athlete brand management; brand identity; brand image; brand congruence; systematic literature review.

2.2 Introduction

The evolution and uptake of social media has given athletes the opportunity to create their own brand and communicate with their audience directly and instantly. Traditionally, communication between athlete(s) and consumer(s) included intermediaries (team managers, media liaisons, reporters) who filtered messages sent to sports consumers. Social media eliminates the need for many of these roles, altering the traditional communication model and providing athletes with capacity to send messages directly to fans/consumers (Pate et al., 2014). In this technologically advanced environment, athletes' use of social media networking sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) has facilitated their ability to create and manage their personal brand and brought them 'closer' to consumers (Emmons and Mocarski, 2014).

Traditionally, branding has related to characteristics associated with a particular good or service, but sports brands (including human athlete brands) consist of attributes 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 athlete brand success is the perceived image of the athlete that develops in the minds of consumers. This brand image reflects associations sent by the athlete (Keller, 1993). To develop accurate images of athlete brands in consumers' minds, the athlete (or the brand manager) must first *establish* and then *communicate* his/her brand identity (desired image) through a clear strategy of what they would like their brand to stand for (De Chernatony, 1999). De Chernatony (1999)

suggested that to develop powerful brands the desired image sent by a brand manager must match the perceived image received by consumers. This match between desired and perceived image is termed *brand congruence*. Studies on brand congruence have focused on the match between brand personality/consumer self-concept (Aaker, 1999), athlete/sponsor (Erdogan, 1999), sponsor/event (Ferrand and Pages, 1999) or event/destination (Hallmann and Breuer, 2010). The congruence between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image, however, remains unexplored.

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

From a practical viewpoint, the process of managing and selling an athlete's brand is crucial for attracting endorsement deals (Arai et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, building a successful personal brand has become one of the main marketing objectives for athletes in high-performance sports, especially at the pre-elite level where they may experience significant financial pressure in order to maintain their training regimes (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). Increased potential for athletes to attract sponsorship income may also alleviate pressures on governments to fund athlete training and development. Hence, the significant opportunities emerging for athletes to establish, monitor and manage their personal brand warrant thorough investigation.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth and systematic literature review of existing research on athlete branding to propose strategic directions for future empirical research in this field. In particular, this study's theoretical value is based upon its attempt to identify the potential impacts of synergy between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image for improved brand congruence. Understanding the

significance of such synergy addresses a knowledge gap for both academics as well as practitioners and is an integral first step toward creation of an athlete brand congruence scale.

2.3 Definitions and Understanding of Key Terms

2.3.1 Brand Identity and Brand Image

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

The creation and management of brand identity are the foundations of any branding process (Aaker, 1996). Yet, despite widely recognised definitions of brand identity and brand image the two terms are frequently used interchangeably (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Maurya and Mishra, 2012; Nandan, 2005). The distinction between the two concepts is that brand identity is created by the source (e.g., brand manager), while brand image is formed within the minds of consumers (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Linking those two concepts to the communication process, identity is the sender's reality, while image presents the receiver's perception (Nandan, 2005).

According to Kapferer (1997), *brand identity* is based on six central components: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image. Brand identity also refers to the character, aims and values that present a sense of distinctiveness and allow differentiating among brands. It helps to reinforce and communicate a meaning behind a brand for consumers (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). The establishment of a clear and consistent brand identity is achieved when brand attributes are communicated to and understood by customers (Ghodeswar, 2008). However, since the brand manager

establishes identity, it relates to the desired positioning of the brand, and not to how it is actually perceived.

Brand image, on the other hand, is everything that people associate with a certain brand (Newman, 1957), and represents subjective perceptions and existing associations held in the memory of consumers about a brand (Keller, 1993; Patterson, 1999). Consumers develop and hold unique associations in memory when thinking about the brand of an athlete. Therefore, the brand image of the athlete is reflected in consumer perceptions of the brand's attributes (Arai et al., 2014). Hence, athletes are brands in their own right and their branding is no longer limited to their on-field performance as they are recognised as “valuable off-field commercial properties” (Chadwick and Burton, 2008, p.309). The recognition of athletes as brands coupled with the ease of communication through social media suggests athletes have increasing potential to become influencers of consumer/fan behaviour. It also suggests there is need for strategic management of an athlete's brand to develop their most effective possible personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015).

In summary, the two main boundaries of the brand construct are the brand manager's activities and consumer perceptions (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Hence, the key to differentiating between brand identity and brand image resonates within the *inherent perspective*. Put simply, while brand identity is the information that is encoded and communicated by the brand manager to consumers, brand image is how that information is decoded (received) by consumers and internalised within their perceptions.

2.3.2 Brand Congruence

Congruence in marketing refers to the consistency of the message between content and source (Lynch and Schuler, 1994). Brand congruence is the consistency or match between the information sent by the brand manager and the information received by the consumer (Madhavaram et al., 2005). The higher the congruence of the message the more effective it becomes in terms of processing message content (McKay-Nesbitt and Yoon, 2015). Labrecque et al. (2011) acknowledged that mismatches between someone's branding goals and judgement by others represent branding failures. According to De Chernatony (1999), a balanced approach to brand building exists when brand managers assess the congruence between brand identity and brand image perceptions over time and strive to reduce any existing gaps. To assess congruence and improve brand identity, consumer feedback is monitored for the likelihood of positive attitudes and loyalty

towards a brand (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). This process enables the creation of more powerful brands.

The symbiotic relationship between brand and consumer implies there is a need for combining the consumer with the brand manager perspectives and for examining brand congruence when assessing the performance of brands. Athletes must develop brand associations and marketing strategies that promote high levels of congruence to create a strong personal brand identity. Developing strong personal brand identity through optimising brand congruence allows clear differentiation from other athletes, builds brand loyalty, creates value for the consumer (Minkiewicz et al., 2007; Nandan, 2005), leads to increased brand trust and purchase intentions (Ghodeswar, 2008), and improves customer satisfaction. By monitoring consumers' images of the athlete brand, brand identity can be either rectified or reinforced.

2.3.3 Athlete Branding on Social Media

Personal branding has become increasingly important since social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn) have initiated a new era of communication (Labrecque et al., 2011). The development of mobile technologies and social media platforms has also transformed sports and sports business (Green, 2016). Social media platforms provide athletes with the opportunity to showcase their brand and effectively build their brand image without relying on mainstream media coverage (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015). These platforms are particularly useful for personal branding as they are cost efficient, transparent and have instantaneous global reach (Green, 2016). While engaging in social media does not directly generate income for athletes, having a large following can positively impact brand awareness and sponsorship opportunities (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Karg and Lock, 2014). Hence, using social media platforms and engaging with fans to share personalised content provides athletes with a powerful tool to create their personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015) and has become an important, regular practice for many. However, this development also means people are no longer in complete control of content related to them as social media allows anyone to add content (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). This makes the ownership of online information ambiguous and difficult to control and may lead to misdirected, inappropriate or inadequate branding (Labrecque et al., 2011). It is therefore essential for athletes to provide clear, unique and timely content to build strong brands and engage with fans and followers to form strong connections and a positive image of their brand (Green, 2016). According to Hodge and Walker (2015), professional

athletes have to be aware of the importance of personal branding and should learn early on in their career how to develop brand identities and effectively use social media platforms to build their brand.

Given the rapid growth of research into athlete branding, investigation and evaluation of the extent and credibility of the scientific knowledge supporting such research is warranted in order to identify potential research gaps. This study aims to carry out such an evaluation, with a particular focus on athlete brand identity, image and congruence. A systematic quantitative literature review was undertaken to inform proposals regarding strategic directions for future research in the field of athlete brand management. Examination of existing measures of athlete brand identity and image was fundamental to this process in order to establish an empirical analysis for developing robust tools to measure and assess the athlete brand.

The research questions which guided the study were:

- (1) What *research advancements* have been made in the field of athlete brand identity and athlete brand image?
- (2) What *theories, frameworks or models* have been used to explain the athlete brand?
- (3) What *scales* have been developed and used to evaluate athlete brands?

2.4 Methods

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

2.4.1 Conceptual Boundaries and Location of Articles

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

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

Table 1 *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Articles were included if they focused primarily on any (or a combination) of the following:	Articles were excluded if they focused primarily on any (or a combination) of the following:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding or image of celebrities and/or athletes and/or sports teams • Personal brands and human brands with athletes as subjects • Athlete or team brand image/identity/personality measures • Celebrity endorsement with a focus on athlete/celebrities/sports teams as brands • Case studies on athlete branding • Personal branding of athletes or teams on social media of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding or image of politics, travel, tourism, medicine, hospitality, fashion • Studies on corporate social responsibility • Celebrity endorsement with a focus on the endorsed brand or consumer perceptions

2.4.2 Search Process

Figure 2 provides a flow diagram illustrating the phases of the search and review process. The initial search identified 539 articles. Inspection of articles revealed 164 duplicate articles and 329 that did not meet inclusion criteria. These articles were removed from the study.

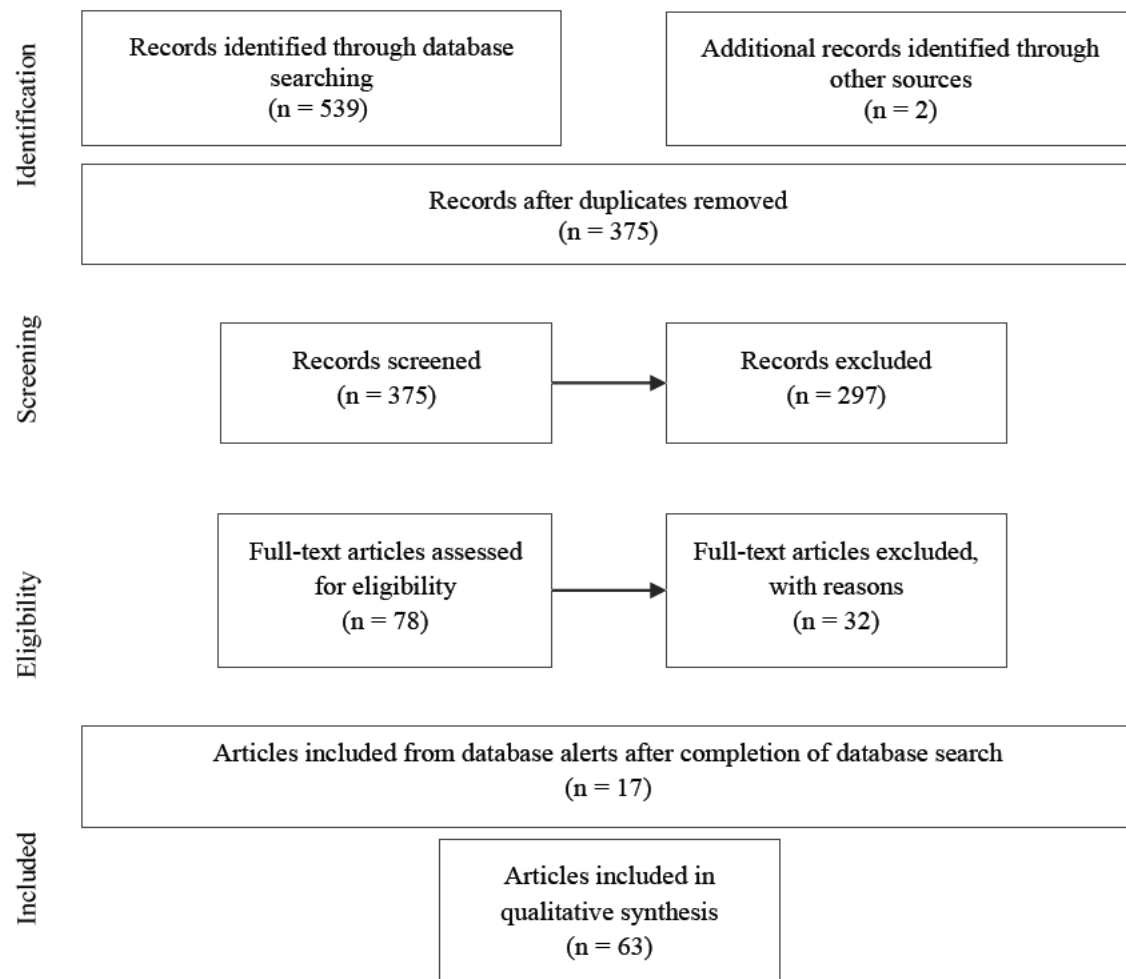


Figure 2 Flow diagram of literature search process

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

2.4.3 Analysis

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

2.5 Results

The SQLR revealed two research streams, nine sub-streams and a range of conceptual methods and theoretical approaches highlighting research advancements. Brand identity (*brand manager perspective*) and brand image (*consumer perspective*) emerged as the two key research streams, which are consistent with De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley’s (1998) notion of brand construct. Sub-streams within brand identity included; team brand identity, athlete brand identity and personal branding, self-presentation on social media, and brand personality. Sub-streams within brand image included; team brand image, athlete brand image, brand associations and co-branding, endorser image, and brand personality. Scant research was found on athlete brand congruence.

Table 2 outlines all sub-streams and details their corresponding articles. Articles equally concerned with brand identity and brand image were assigned more than once to a sub-stream (see note in Table 2)

Table 2 *Streams of Research Divided by Brand Manager and Consumer Perspectives*

Research Streams	Sub-Streams	Distribution % within research streams	Corresponding articles	No. of grouped articles*	Overall distribution %
Brand Identity				30	42%
Brand Manager Perspective	Team Brand Identity	30%	Abosag et al., 2012; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Hill and Vincent, 2006; Parganas et al., 2015; Richelieu and Lessard, 2014; Richelieu and Pons, 2006; 2011; Richelieu et al., 2008; Richelieu et al., 2011	9	13%
	Athlete Brand Identity & Personal Branding	37%	Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Cortsen, 2013; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Green, 2016; Hodge and Walker, 2015; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2018; Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012; Staskeviciute-Butiene et al., 2014; Vincent et al., 2009; Wilson and Liu, 2012	11	15%
	Self-Presentation on Social Media	30%	Barnett, 2017; Emmons and Mocarski, 2014; Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Hull, 2014; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Pate et al., 2014; Sauder and Blaszkka, 2018; Smith and Sanderson, 2015	9	13%
	Brand Personality	3%	Heere, 2010	1	1%
Brand Image				41	58%
Consumer Perspective	Team Brand Image	17%	Abosag et al., 2012; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2008; Ferrand and Pages, 1999; Parganas et al., 2015; Richelieu and Pons, 2011	7	10%
	Athlete Brand Image	27%	Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014; Hofmann et al. in press; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014; Moulard et al., 2015; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012; Sassenberg et al., 2012; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018; Taniyev and Gordon, 2019, Väätäinen and Dickenson, 2019; Walsh and Williams, 2017	11	15%
	Brand Associations (& Co-Branding)	15%	Frederick and Patil, 2010; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Heere, 2010; Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2007; Walsh and Williams, 2017	6	8%
	Endorser Image	10%	Choi and Rifon, 2007; Kunkel et al., 2019; Roy and Moorthi, 2012; Till, 2001	4	6%
	Brand Personality	32%	Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Carlson et al., 2009; Carlson and Donovan, 2013; Giroux et al., 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2017; Heere, 2010; Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Lunardo et al., 2015; Mitsis and Leckie, 2016; Roy and Moorthi, 2012; Schade et al., 2014; Stadler Blank et al., 2017; Tsiotsou, 2012	13	18%
Total				71	100%

* Of the 63 selected articles, 6 articles are grouped in two sub-streams, 1 article is grouped in three sub-streams.

Of the identified articles, 37 included studies that focussed on brand image and 29 investigated brand identity. Three articles examined the athlete brand construct from brand identity and brand image perspectives. Within the brand identity stream, athlete brand identity and personal branding (37 per cent) was the most heavily researched area. Of the 63 articles examined, 11 articles (16 per cent) explored athlete brand identity and personal branding. Seven of those articles employed a case study approach involving specific athletes, which has limitations regarding the generalisability of study outcomes. The brand image stream had brand personality (32 per cent) as its most investigated topic. Evaluation of studies on brand personality showed contrasting results between the brand manager and consumer perspectives. Thirteen (19 per cent) articles on brand personality from the consumer perspective were identified while only one study considered brand personality from a brand manager's standpoint.

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

2.5.1 Stream: Brand Identity

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

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

Athlete Brand Identity and Personal Branding - Seven of the 11 identified articles used a case study approach to investigate personal branding strategies of individual athletes. For example, the unique case of David Beckham's personal brand was examined in two articles (i.e., Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Vincent et al., 2009). However, researchers only used secondary information to draw conclusions on athlete brand identity. Wilson and Liu (2012) found that an athlete's commercial success and their ability to generate revenue were more important than athletic success in terms of future career prospects. In line with this, Staskeviciute-Butiene et al. (2014) provided a literature review examining personal brands of athletes with a special interest on former athletes' career transitions. Further, Cortsen (2013) investigated the brand of golfer Annika Sörenstam and identified that personal branding of athletes is a dynamic phenomenon that requires a well-coordinated process between all stakeholders. Similarly, Hodge and Walker (2015) suggested professional athletes build their brand not only through athletic success but also through differentiation and relationships with corporate partners and sponsors. Hence, professional athletes are able to control their brands - however, sports organisations have to assist them by providing education and pathways on how to develop successful brand identities (Hodge and Walker, 2015). Kristiansen and Williams (2015) highlighted the importance of examining the brand manager perspective of an athlete's brand and investigated the strategies of one professional athlete and management team to create brand awareness and positive brand associations. Further, Lobpries et al. (2018) focused their attention on the personal brands of female elite athletes and perceived barriers that hinder their ability to develop successful personal brands. Findings revealed that the socialisation of women, the adherence to gender norms as well as a lack of strong

management and media coverage limited the brand strategy of female elite athletes and hindered their ability to leverage their brand identity.

The results in this research sub-stream demonstrate emerging interest in the area of self-presentation and social media. Specifically, Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) provided a link between personal branding and the sub-stream of self-presentation. Based on a qualitative examination of tweets, they investigated ways in which athletes can successfully use social media tools to become sport brands. Similarly, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) established how visual self-presentation on social media can be used as a marketing and communications tool to build the athlete brand. Furthermore, Green (2016) investigated athletes' use of social media sites to develop their personal brand and found that building a strong online personality helps to differentiate from other players, which in turn may attract potential sponsors.

Self-Presentation on Social Media - The analysis of self-presentation studies showed particular interest in personal branding and how it is often used as a concept to investigate people's behaviour on social media. Consequently, athletes' use of social media (in particular Twitter and Instagram) has attracted considerable research interest over recent years. In 2012, Lebel and Danylchuk established that athletes use digital self-presentation as an extension of the athlete brand. Hull (2014) found that athletes have different self-presentation strategies and engage with fans by giving them a glimpse into their lives whilst also maintaining a public persona that is attractive to sponsors. Pate et al. (2014) emphasised the importance of educating athletes on their social media messages in the absence of filters. Similarly, Emmons and Mocarski (2014) addressed the importance of social media as a visual aspect of a professional athlete's brand. They found that gender stereotypes are a factor in self-presentation and acknowledged that social media use provides opportunities to oppose those stereotypes. Interestingly, Smith and Sanderson (2015) investigated differences and similarities between male and female athletes' visual self-presentation and confirmed previously established gender norms. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) also focused on athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram and provided an understanding of how social media can be used as a marketing and communications tool to build personal brands. The three most recent studies on self-presentation in this research area investigated female athletes' use of digital media. Specifically, Barnett (2017) discovered that women portray themselves in an apologetic identity, which may be required to build a commercial identity that is interesting for sponsors. Further, Geurin (2017) identified that audiences can play a significant role in

female athletes' self-presentation behaviour, which may lead to athletes holding back from presenting their authentic self or being pressured into posting certain things of themselves, such as sexual images. Sauder and Blaszk (2018) investigated communication strategies of the United States (US) women's national soccer team players and compared their Twitter usage before, during and after the 2015 World Cup. Although there were intuitive and organic changes in the self-presentation strategies of the athletes, they found that athletes were more prone to communicate immediate experiences rather than planning out long-term strategies. Accordingly, they did not sufficiently leverage the World Cup to promote their personal brand (Sauder and Blaszk, 2018).

Brand Personality - Heere's (2010) study on perceived brand personality associations is the only available article that measured brand personality from the brand manager and the consumer perspective. Heere (2010) took into account that the personality traits associated with brands have to be divided between the interest groups, and therefore allowed for discrepancy between the two viewpoints. Instead of using predetermined scales that often lacked validity outside their original settings, Heere (2010) allowed managers to develop their own intended sets of personality associations that were included as items in a subsequent spectator survey.

2.5.2 Stream: Brand Image

Team Brand Image - The results showed that researchers often explored the construct of brand image with a focus on sport teams and clubs. In 1999, Ferrand and Pages conducted the first study into the value of brand image to sport organisations (soccer clubs). They established that there is a need for an attractive and distinctive brand image within a club's positioning strategy to achieve a competitive advantage. Bauer et al. (2005) and Bauer et al. (2008) surveyed German soccer fans to generate ideas about ways to improve team brand image and overall branding strategies. They found a direct positive relationship between brand image and loyalty and concluded that customer-oriented brand image has an immense effect on loyalty in German soccer. This finding has been supported by Richelieu and Pons (2011). Building on these works, Abosag et al. (2012) conceptualised the relationships between the emotional attachment and brand perception of fans as well as their opinion of a team's brand extensions. Abosag et al. (2012) confirmed that if fans have a strong emotional attachment to their club, they have a stronger perception of the club as a brand and are supportive of brand extensions. The two latest studies in this research area investigated professional team brands in terms of

their use of Twitter and Instagram as part of their marketing strategy. Fans engage predominantly with Twitter posts that include product-related brand attributes (Parganas et al., 2015). Instagram, too, is a powerful tool for engaging with fans by enlivening team brands with pictures and short videos (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Hence, these social media platforms can be used to manage team brand image and strengthen the relationship and engagement between fans and the club, which ultimately leads to increased sponsor interest and revenue.

Athlete Brand Image - It is noteworthy that research interest in athlete brand image commenced in 2012, coinciding with the increased importance of social media as a personal branding platform. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) analysed the main factors that contributed to building the brand of two famous soccer players, both players considered 'owners' of an athlete brand albeit brands at different levels of strength and success. Their findings suggested that the athlete brand consists of a professional image as well as a mainstream media persona, which are both aspects of athlete brand equity. Further, Sassenberg et al. (2012) conceptualised a model for the Sport Celebrity Brand Image (SCBI) identifying the most important brand attributes and benefits of sport celebrities. However, the model has never been empirically tested. Soon after these works, Arai et al. (2014) developed a structural Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), which was the precursor to a scale that was designed to measure athlete brand image; the Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI; Arai et al., 2013). These two articles linked endorsement studies with brand management literature and used team brand associations to distil dimensions and elements that enabled the assessment of individual athlete brand image. The MABI conceptualises athlete brand image with three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle; these three dimensions were tested and confirmed in a quantitative study (Arai et al., 2013). In 2014, Lebel and Danylchuk offer the only study that investigated self-presentation from a consumer perspective. Specifically, they examined which self-presentation strategies were perceived as most important to the athlete's digital image. They discovered fans may not be as interested as first thought in the details of the athlete's personal life outside sport. Moulard et al. (2015) used celebrity athletes as research objects and examined the authenticity of human brands and their appeal over time and for different age groups. They found when evaluating the authenticity of human brands, younger consumers place more value on rarity, whereas older consumers rely more on the stability of the celebrity. In 2017, Walsh and Williams studied how consumers reacted to potential athlete brand extensions and compared sport related versus non-sport related products. Athlete prestige is important for brand

extensions that fit with the athlete's image. If there is a low perceived fit, athlete attachment is essential (Walsh and Williams, 2017). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) investigated the relationship between consumer culture, female athletic representation and online fan engagement by examining the Instagram posts of five famous athletes. The posts that received the most engagement (i.e., likes and comments) were those that aligned closely to the qualities women are expected to possess. However, there was a significant difference in the way male and female consumers responded to these posts. Female responses tended to celebrate idealised femininity and embrace the posts as body inspiration while male consumers demonstrated a sexualised perception of the posts and envision men as sporting authority rather than women. In one of the most recent studies, Taniyev and Gordon (2019) explored the brand image of retired athletes and found that the nostalgic associations consumers hold toward former superstar athletes add another dimension to their personal brand. According to Väättäinen and Dickenson (2019), athletes only need a subset of brand image attributes to increase the psychological commitment of consumers. In particular, they found that brand managers should focus on distinct competition styles and complement this style with other attributes athletes are most associated with. Additionally, Hofmann et al. (in press) found that an athlete's performance-based attributes (e.g., competence and quality) drive the effect of popularity-based attributes (e.g., media effectiveness and temper) on brand image. The higher the performance of the athlete brand, the higher the recognisability and the athlete's popularity-based brand image.

Brand Associations (and Co-Branding) - Brand associations are closely related to brand image as they are perceptions in the memory of consumers that are linked to a specific brand (Aaker, 1991). Gladden and Funk (2002) provided the first examination of brand associations in team sports. They developed and tested the Team Association Model (TAM), which consists of 16 distinct constructs that underlie sport brand associations. In response to the limitations of the construct validity of TAM, Ross et al. (2006) conceptualised the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) which examines the associations individuals hold regarding their favourite sports team. Soon after, Ross et al. (2007) tested this scale within the intercollegiate sport setting and confirmed that TBAS is applicable to non-professional sports. In 2010, Frederick and Patil examined marketing strategies of professional football teams and found that the longer the duration of a co-branding association, the greater the impact on the team's brand image. Heere (2010) combined the concepts of brand association and brand personality and examined the ways netball spectators perceived team brands. The resulting brand associations were either

game or event related. In the most recent study, Walsh and Williams (2017) identified that consumers see a better fit between athletes and sport related products and services. They recommended athletes associate themselves with brand extensions related to sports or employ a marketing strategy with a sport-related theme if the product itself has no relevance to sport.

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

Brand Personality - Brand personality is part of the brand identity construct and plays an important role in personal brand building (Couvellaere and Richelieu, 2005). However, it is mostly studied from a consumer perspective and hence associated with brand image. Many scholars acknowledge the importance of brand personality as part of their athlete or team branding research (Arai et al., 2013; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Hodge and Walker, 2015; Staskeviciute-Butiene et al., 2014). Carlson et al. (2009) focussed on brand personality to investigate the relationship between a sport team brand and consumer identification concerning games watched and retail spending. Building on this work, Carlson and Donovan (2013) incorporated individual athletes as human brands that influence team-related outcomes and found that consumers viewed athletes as human

brands with unique personalities. Heere (2010) measured how spectators of sport teams perceive brand personality associations and Roy and Moorthi (2012) investigated brand personality with regards to celebrity endorsements. Lunardo et al. (2015) examined the extent to which brand personality influences celebrities' (athletes') appeal as well as their appeal over time. Giroux et al. (2017) discovered that congruence between brand personality and promotional marketing activities positively affects consumers evaluations and brand equity of professional sport teams.

Developing scales to measure brand personality has been popular among scholars (Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Heere, 2010; Schade et al., 2014). In a significant development in this area of research, Tsiotsou (2012) developed a scale for measuring the personality of sport teams (SPORTEAPE). This scale incorporates relevant dimensions and traits that consumers attribute to their sport teams. Tsiotsou's scale was subsequently validated and extended to individual athletes (i.e., Mitsis and Leckie, 2016). Further, Karjaluoto et al. (2016) used SPORTEAPE to examine the influence of sport brand personality on loyalty with regards to the fan-team time length relationship and discovered that brand personality affects attitudinal loyalty. In one of the most recent studies that aimed to measure brand personality, Greenhalgh et al. (2017) expanded on Heere's (2010) approach (who collected brand personality adjectives from team managers) and also included administrators, fans and non-fans to gain a more holistic view of the organisation's brand. Further, Stadler Blank et al. (2017) developed and validated the Sport Team Personality Scale (STPS) in the context of professional sport teams. The authors compared the STPS with existing scales and explored team identification as well as perceived similarities and differences between teams. They found that character elements (e.g., admiration and care) are more important for team identification than performance elements (e.g., success and talent).

2.5.3 Conceptual Approaches and Scales in Athlete Brand Research

The SQLR revealed a range of conceptual approaches and scales applied within athlete brand research. Results showed a lack of distinction and clarity as terms such as theory, framework and model were often used interchangeably. To distinguish the utilisation of theories, frameworks and models, they were categorised by the nature of their application. Where authors discussed particular theories, frameworks or models (e.g., description in literature review), and no evidence was provided they were actually applied within the study, the article was categorised as '*Cited*'. If there was evidence that the cited theories, frameworks or models were used to inform the research direction and

design (i.e., deliberation in results/discussion), it was categorised as '*Applied*'. Further, the analysis of articles unveiled popular measurement items and scales used for quantitative research in the field of athlete branding. See Appendix 1 and 2 for detailed proofs of categorisations theories, frameworks/models and scales.

Theories - Results of the SQLR showed that 20 different theories were mentioned in the 63 articles. The theories used often derived from classic branding theories (e.g., from Aaker, 1991; De Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 1993). Notably, seven of the nine articles that were classified to the sub-stream of self-presentation applied Goffman's (1959) Theory of the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life as the conceptual underpinning of their research. Goffman suggested that self-presentation or impression management is an intentional and tangible component of identity. Self-presentation can be separated into frontstage and backstage performances. On the frontstage, people consciously present themselves in front of an anticipated audience and are concerned with the impression they make, essentially fabricating their personal identity. On the contrary, backstage is considered as the private space where people can be themselves and are showing their true identity (Goffman, 1959). Further, Tajfel and Turner's (1985) Social Identity Theory was cited three times. This theory suggests that a person's concept of self partly develops from the groups this person belongs to. Bauer et al. (2005) and Bauer et al. (2008) applied Gutman's (1982) Means-end Theory, which proposes that people consume products to obtain functional or psychological value, as the basis for their brand association studies.

Frameworks/Models - Among the 63 articles, the authors referred to six frameworks and ten models. As athlete brand research is still a relatively young and underdeveloped field, the results show that theoretical concepts were often borrowed and adapted from other areas (e.g., marketing, psychology). It is noteworthy that the majority of articles using a framework based their research on Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Framework (cited by six and applied by seven). Keller's framework suggests that positive brand equity depends on high levels of brand awareness, brand familiarity and favourable brand associations in the minds of consumers (Arai et al., 2014). Even when concepts of brand research were considered independently, authors often employed Keller's framework as the foundation (i.e., Arai et al., 2014; Gladden and Funk, 2002). Gladden and Funk's (2002) Team Association Model (TAM), which was derived from the CBBE, and Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model were the most frequently used models (TAM: cited by four, applied by three; Brand Equity Model: cited

by five). Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Model (cited by two and applied by two) and McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model (cited by two and applied by two) received repeated mentions. Ohanian (1991) identified perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise as valuable attributes and essential credibility characteristics of the source (e.g., celebrity endorsers) of a message (Choi and Rifon, 2007). McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model suggested that particular meanings attributed to a celebrity transfer to the endorsed brand or product and thus become associated with the brand in the mind of consumers (Roy and Moorthi, 2012). Fifteen articles introduced individual frameworks or models by their own admission (i.e., Abosag et al., 2012; Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Tsiotsou, 2012), most of which are yet to be tested and validated.

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

2.5.4 Statistical Trends of Research Articles

Research Outlet - The 63 identified articles were published in 27 different journals; 10 were sport related and 17 were not (see Table 3). Seven articles on athlete and team brand research were published in Sport Marketing Quarterly, six in the International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship and six in the Journal of Sport Management. The International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing and the European Sport Management Quarterly published five articles each. The remaining 34 articles were spread across 22 different outlets, with three or fewer publications in each journal (Table 3). This wide spread of articles across academic journals with different emphases and topic areas is an indication that the research interest is widely applicable and is relevant

not only to the field of sport but to fields such as business, marketing and communications.

Table 3 *Distribution of Articles by Academic Journals*

Academic Journal	Articles
Sport Marketing Quarterly	7
International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship	6
Journal of Sport Management	6
European Sport Management Quarterly	5
International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing	5
International Journal of Sport Communication	3
Journal of Sponsorship	3
Sport Management Review	3
Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal	3
European Journal of Marketing	2
Journal of Brand Strategy	2
Journal of Service Theory and Practice	2
Journal of Brand Management	2
Communication & Sport	1
International Journal of Organisational Behaviour	1
International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	1
Journal of Applied Sport Management	1
Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media	1
Journal of Business Research	1
Journal of Communication Inquiry	1
Journal of Consumer Culture	1
Journal of Marketing Management	1
Journal of Services Marketing	1
Psychology & Marketing	1
The Journal of Popular Culture	1
Transformations in Business & Economics	1
Visual Communication Quarterly	1
Total	63

Year of Publication – Figure 3 outlines the years of publication of research studies and also separates the topic areas of brand identity and brand image. The majority of articles (68 per cent) were published in 2012 or later, demonstrating the increased interest in athlete and team brand research over the last seven years. Until 2011, research journals issued no more than three studies per year.

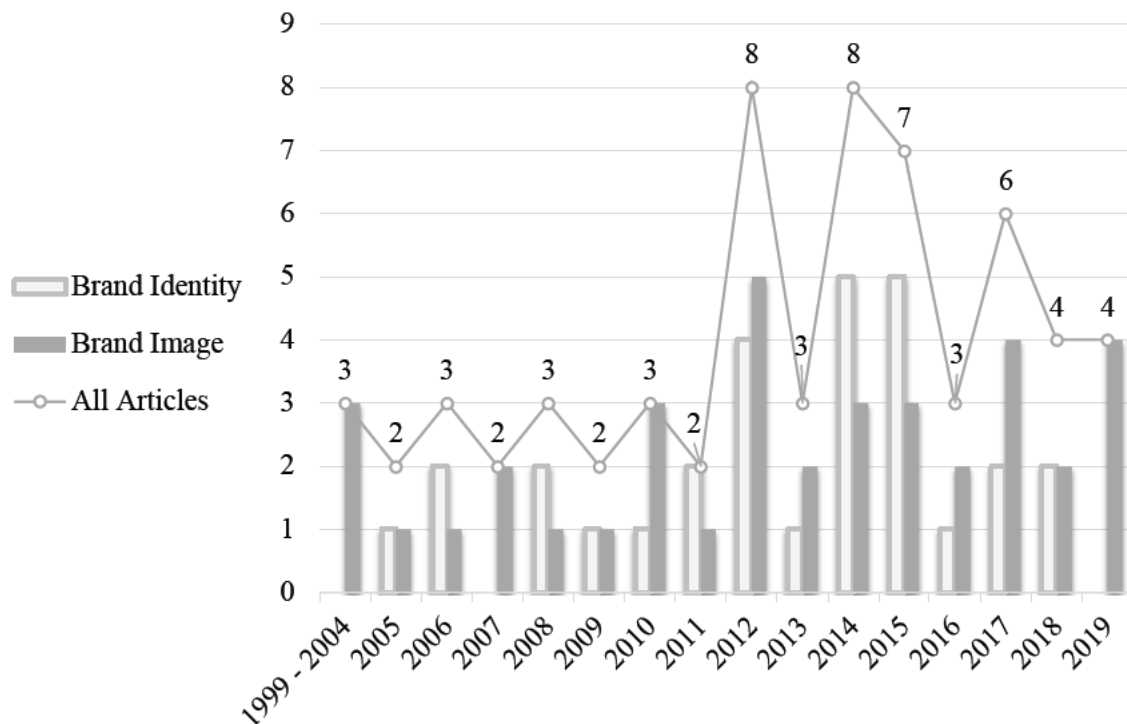


Figure 3 Frequencies and years of publication

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

2.6 Discussion and Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine research on athlete brands to propose strategic directions for future research. A systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) guided the identification of *research advancements* which have been made in the field, the *theories, frameworks or models* which were used to explain and interpret athlete brands and, the *scales* which have been developed or used to evaluate athlete brands. The findings help us to understand the various approaches researchers have used, the ways in

which participants or subjects have been utilised and the theories which have informed the field. Further, the review illustrates the varying applications of existing scales within athlete brand research and provides a comprehensive picture of the diverse conceptual approaches.

Six key conclusions emerged, from which several important implications can be drawn to guide strategic directions for future research. First, even though there is a strong foundation of studies on athlete brand image, there is no consistent conceptual approach or broad adoption of applicable scales and theories. Second, brand identity has received less research attention and is predominantly investigated using qualitative case studies. Third, brand personality from the athlete perspective is largely neglected. Fourth, limited research has considered the athlete brand construct from the perspective of brand insiders and consumers combined. Fifth, none of the studies discussed congruence between athlete brand identity and athlete brand image. Finally, no framework exists that provides a conceptual understanding of various athlete brand construct elements and their relationships with each other.

All research identified in this SQLR implies that athlete brands conform to the same principles as conventional brands and that consumers develop perceptions of athlete brands, just like they form an image of a product. Hence, similar to product branding, successful athlete brands require strategic and diligent management. Developing a strong brand can distinguish one athlete from another and provide athletes with enduring qualities that makes their brand attractive to potential sponsors and stakeholders (Green, 2016). Most studies into athlete branding were conducted with a focus on brand image from a consumer perspective. This finding resonates with most sport management research, which focuses on understanding consumer or fan behaviour and investigates brand equity from an outside-in approach (Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Shilbury, 2011). Few studies emphasise strategic brand building investigating the role and importance of brand identity creation in athlete branding (Lobpries, 2014). This is not surprising given the ultimate goal of successful brand management is consumer driven outcomes such as brand loyalty, increased fan bases and viewership or other economic benefits (Bauer et al., 2008). Investigating the consumer perspective is important and the results of studies conducted from this perspective provide feedback on how the athlete brand is perceived in the minds of its customers. However, it is likely that analysis and improvements in brand strategy will be more significant if results include brand insider

perspectives on things like their intended messaging. This suggests analysis of brand congruence within athlete branding is crucial.

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

Understanding the brand message sent by athletes and the way consumers decode this message to form positive or negative images of the athlete brand is crucial. With the development of social media, athletes are no longer known just for their athletic abilities, but for the identity they portray and the image perceived by their fans (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Green (2016) stated that athletes' use of social media platforms should be part of their strategic marketing approach. Hodge and Walker (2015) also suggested that sport marketing firms should invest in teaching athletes how to use social media platforms to develop their brand and to create brand identities that maximise fan engagement. Teaching athletes to develop their brand by adopting a strategic marketing approach is particularly important for athletes who may never make it to the pinnacle of their sport and therefore be unable to attract large sponsorships. For these athletes simply relying on the occasional exceptional athletic result being noticed by consumers is not enough. Many of the articles that investigated social media use by athletes followed a case study approach to explore brands of famous athletes. This is an interesting area of exploration; however, it is not sufficient to exemplify personal branding with case studies if the goal

is to draw conclusions and spread across the field. The focus on established elite/celebrity athletes in those case studies does not provide realistic and applicable insight for personal brands of aspiring athletes or for the broader sub-elite pool of athletes. This makes it difficult to draw implications or widely applicable branding strategies for the wider athlete population.

In general, the development of social media has also changed how conventional brands communicate with consumers. Companies may sponsor athletes to capitalise on their sporting success but the rationale behind such sponsorship is to provide the sponsor with access to the athlete's followers and to benefit from the influence that athlete has on their community. If this is the case, athletes essentially not only become brands but also *influencers* as they collaborate with companies to promote and review products and services in return for free products or payment (Stubb et al., 2019). By definition, influencers are "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al., 2011, p.90). Consumers follow social media influencers as trusted sources of information on brands and products (Stubb et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2018) suggested the key difference between conventional brand endorsers and influencers is the link to the organisation. Influencers are generally seen as independent, whereas endorsers have a publicly known relationship (e.g. sponsorship) with the brand (Smith et al., 2018). However, since many influencers also benefit from sponsorships by the brands they review and promote, there is a fine line between the two terms. Future studies within the sport marketing research domain should link and expand the concept of athlete endorsers to the role of athlete influencers by following the trend of increased importance of social media influencers for marketing purposes.

The lack of consistency and balance across study foci within the articles identified is understandable given the newness of the athlete brand research field. Similar features are observed in other emerging research fields and inconsistent results are not surprising at early stages in the life cycle of emerging areas of scholarship (Sæbø et al., 2008). Indeed, the sport management field may still be in an embryonic state (Shilbury, 2011), which potentially explains why many articles rely on mainstream branding theories when researching the athlete brand. The identified shortage of brand identity and lack of brand congruence studies in sport is evidence of the need for an increase in research in this area. Further, the analysis of theories, frameworks and models utilised in the articles revealed a strong need for consistency and strategic direction within the field of athlete brand

research. One exception is the area of self-presentation where most studies applied Goffman's theory to analyse and explain the personal brand of athletes with respect to social media. The variations in the use of conceptual approaches identified across the other sub-streams confirm that this area of interest is immature and still evolving (Sæbø et al., 2008). This variation is also evident with regard to the inconsistency of scales used to measure the brand constructs of athletes. The analysis of the articles revealed a popular application and modification of brand personality scales and although many scales were adapted and evolved from similar sources (e.g., Aaker's Brand Personality Scale) a consistent and generally accepted measurement tool is yet to be developed. Interestingly, the term *brand personality* itself leads to confusion as it is often associated with both brand image and brand identity, without a definite affiliation to either. This inconsistent interpretation of where brand personality fits within the field of athlete branding has resulted in the loose use of the term, especially with regard to scale measurements. Inconsistent application of the term 'brand personality' highlights the risk of mixing distinctly different aspects under one concept (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Due to the variance in use of the term brand personality to either brand image or brand identity, brand personality was included in both identified streams but defined by either brand manager or consumer perspective. Brand personality from the consumer perspective received significantly more research attention than the brand manager perspective. The brand manager perspective warrants further investigation with particular focus on brand congruence. Further, the importance of social media has not been adequately incorporated into any scale. Whilst there were some measurement tools identified further testing is required to establish validity in different settings and subsequent investigations. Developing one valid and reliable scale to measure athlete brand identity, image and congruence would offer several benefits, such as the consistency of results in diverse contexts, increased generalisability and stronger potential to compare different studies.

It is not only important to analyse consumer perceptions of brands but also the extent to which information transmitted (communicated) matches those perceptions (brand congruence) because incongruence between the two represents branding failures (Labrecque et al., 2011). Assessing brand congruence would allow stronger development of more viable branding strategies and long-term brand equity. Athlete brand image was thoroughly investigated and defined by Arai et al. (2014) and MABI is inclusive of three primary dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle). Athlete brand identity has not been investigated in a similar fashion and requires further advancing. Although some of the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the

MABI are likely to also be relevant for the athlete's perspective, it is anticipated that different characteristics may be considered when investigating the viewpoint of athletes.

A clear definition of the athlete brand identity construct is required before accurate comparisons can be drawn between brand identity and brand image. Such a definition will also facilitate measurement of the level of congruence between identity and image of the athlete brand. Future research is needed to advance understanding of the combined effects of brand identity and brand image on athlete brand congruence. Such research would provide a significant contribution to disciplinary progression and could have practical applications for marketing managers, athlete managers, high-performance managers and athletes themselves in relation to education on branding strategies.

2.7 Limitations and Conclusions

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

In summary, opportunities presented by social media offer individuals and their brands a new level of visibility and outreach. However, it has also increased the need for targeted development and management of personal brands. It is essential to understand consumer and brand owner perceptions of those personal brands and to have tools available to accurately measure how successfully the intended brand messages are being received by consumers. This study contributes to the field by addressing research gaps related to the investigation of the athlete brand construct and the introduction of brand congruence as the synergy between identity and image. Based on the findings the study concludes by hypothesising that the closer the congruence of associations between sender and receiver and the fewer factors that interfere with the communication process, the more effective the athlete brand will be. Further testing of this hypothesis is needed. High brand congruence describes whether the consumer's perception of the athlete brand is equal or similar to the athletes' perception of their own brand. Similarly, low brand congruence could be an indicator of unsuccessful brand management and the need for change. Exploring athlete brand congruence would highlight differences between desired brand identity associations and those perceived by consumers. Identification of the research

streams of athlete brand identity and image leads the authors to define athlete brand management as *the process of achieving brand congruence between the brand manager and consumer perspectives of the athlete brand*. The brand manager perspective reflects the views of athletes or athlete representatives while the consumer perspective is examination of athlete brand through lenses of external brand stakeholders such as consumers, fans, and sponsors.

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2.9 Appendices

Appendix 1. Use of Theories, Frameworks & Models

Theories	Developed by	Cited	Applied
Aging Stability Theory	Glenn, 1980		Moulard et al., 2015
Associative Learning Theory	Till and Shimp, 1998		Till, 2001
Attachment Theory	Bowlby, 1979		Abosag et al., 2012
Attribution Theory	Kelley, 1973		Moulard et al., 2015
Brand Identity Theory	De Chernatony, 1999		Lobpries et al., 2018
Categorization Theory	Rosch, 1975		Walsh and Williams, 2017
Classic Branding Theories	e.g. Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller, 2003; De Chernatony, 2001	Cortsen, 2013; Emmons and MocarSKI, 2014	
Impression Management	Leary and Kowalski, 1990	Geurin, 2017	
Means-End Theory	Gutman, 1982		Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2008
Schema Theory	Bettman, 1979	Kunkel et al., 2019	
Self-Concept	Sirgy, 1982	Choi and Rifon, 2007	
Self-Determination Theory	Ryan and Deci, 2000	Moulard et al., 2015	
Social Identity Theory	Tajfel and Turner, 1985	Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Hodge and Walker, 2015;	
Social Influence Theory	Kelman, 1961	Choi and Rifon, 2007	
Social Learning Theory	Dix et al., 2010	Mitsis and Leckie, 2016	
Social Role Theory	Eagly, 1987		Lobpries et al., 2018
Stakeholder Theory	Freeman and Reed, 1983	Wilson and Liu, 2012	Greenhalgh et al., 2017
Step-path theory	Raynor and Entin, 1983		Moulard et al., 2015
Theory of Animism	Gilmore, 1919	Schade et al., 2014	
Theory of the presentation of self in everyday life	Goffman, 1959	Barnett, 2017	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Geurin, 2017; Hull, 2014; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012, 2014; Pate et al., 2014; Smith and Sanderson, 2015

Frameworks			
Athlete Self-Presentation Strategies	Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012		Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014
Celebrity product endorsement framework	Seno and Lukas, 2007		Kunkel et al., 2019
Customer-Based Brand Equity Framework	Keller, 1993	Bauer et al., 2005; Giroux et al., 2017; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012; Richelieu and Lessard, 2014; Walsh and Williams, 2017	Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2008; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Sassenberg et al., 2012
Framework for building sports team's brand equity	Richelieu, 2004	Richelieu and Pons, 2006	Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005
Framework for the strategic construction and management of the brand	Richelieu and Pons, 2011	Richelieu and Lessard, 2014	
The functional building blocks of social media	Kietzman et al., 2011	Green, 2016	
Models			
Athlete Brand-Equity Model	Williams et al., 2015		Kristiansen and Williams, 2015
Brand Equity Model	Aaker, 1991	Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., 2014; Bauer et al., 2008; Ferrand and Pages, 1991; Gladden and Funk, 2002	
Brand Equity Pipeline Model	Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005	Richelieu and Pons, 2006	Richelieu et al., 2008
Brand Identity Model	Aaker, 1996	Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2007	Hill and Vincent, 2006
Meaning Transfer Model	McCracken, 1989	Choi and Rifon, 2007; Walsh and Williams, 2017	Kunkel et al., 2019; Roy and Moorthi, 2012
Model of Athlete Brand Image	Arai et al., 2014	Hodge and Walker, 2015	Arai et al., 2013; Väättäinen and Dickenson, 2019
Model of Team Identification	Carlson et al., 2009	Carlson and Donavan, 2013	
Source Credibility Model	Ohanian, 1990	Arai et al., 2014; Sassenberg et al., 2012	Arai et al., 2013 Choi and Rifon, 2007;
Sport Team Branding Model	Parganas et al., 2015		Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018
Team Association Model	Gladden and Funk, 2002	Arai et al., 2013, 2014; Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2007	Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2008; Parganas et al., 2015
Developed and mentioned own frameworks/models	Abosag et al., 2012; Arai et al., 2014; Chadwick and Burton, 2008; Cortsen, 2013; Green, 2016; Karjaluo et al., 2016; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Parganas et al., 2015; Richelieu et al., 2008; Sassenberg et al., 2012; Staskeviciute-Butiene et al., 2014; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018; Tsiotsou, 2012; Wilson and Liu, 2012		

Appendix 2. Use of Scales

Scales	Developed by	Applied/Amended by
Aaker's Brand Personality Scale (or adaptations)	Aaker, 1997	Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Carlson and Donovan, 2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Giroux et al., 2017; Lunardo et al., 2015; Mitsis and Leckie, 2016; Richelieu and Lessard, 2014; Roy and Moorthi, 2012; Schade et al., 2014; Tsiotsou, 2012
Brand Personality in Sport Scale of Athlete Brand Image Self-Concept Scale	Braunstein and Ross, 2010	Giroux et al., 2017
	Arai et al., 2013	Väättäinen and Dickenson, 2019
	Malhotra, 1981	Choi and Rifon, 2007
Sports Team Personality Scale	Tsiotsou, 2012	Karjaluoeto et al., 2016; Mitsis and Leckie, 2016
Team Brand Association Scale	Ross et al., 2006	Arai et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2007
Two Item Measure of Cognitive Identification	Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000	Carlson and Donovan, 2013
Developed/Adapted their own scales	Abosag et al., 2012; Arai et al., 2013; Bauer et al., 2005; Bauer et al., 2008; Braunstein and Ross, 2010; Carlson and Donovan, 2013; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Giroux et al., 2017; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Greenhalgh et al., 2017; Heere, 2010; Karjaluoeto et al., 2016; Kunkel et al., 2019; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014; Mitsis and Leckie, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2006; Schade et al., 2014; Stadler Blank et al., 2018; Till, 2001; Tsiotsou, 2012; Walsh and Williams, 2017	

Chapter 3 Athlete Brand Identity Scale Development

Developing an Athlete Brand Identity Scale Using Rasch Analysis

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Annika Linsner designed the scale development study with assistance from Brad Hill, Kirstin Hallmann and Popi Sotiriadou. Annika Linsner conducted the statistical analysis using the Rasch Measurement Model with contributions and reviews from Brad Hill and Kirstin Hallmann. Annika Linsner led the drafting of the manuscript and all authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

All Authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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3.1 Abstract

Purpose: This study identifies important dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct incorporating the athlete perspective. It also uses Rasch analysis to provide a practical tool (the *Athlete Brand Identity Scale*) to measure how closely an athlete's personal brand identity is aligned with their perceived brand image.

Methodology: Reference to existing athlete branding measurement tools and consultation with 10 athlete experts generated (74) items considered important to an athlete brand. Two different response scales were then used to test those items in wider surveys of athletes and consumers. This allowed for further scale development and measurement of congruence between an athlete's self-image and the brand image held by consumers (within the same survey). Factor analysis and Rasch analysis were carried out to refine the item pool and assess item measurement properties to establish a concise scale for determining athlete brand identity.

Findings: Results show successful identification of four dimensions of athlete brand identity measurement. These dimensions: *athletic integrity, athletic success, fan engagement* and *character traits*, informed development of the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS). The unique and significant aspect of the ABIdS is its capacity to incorporate the athlete's perspective into brand management.

Implications: The ABIdS can be utilised by early-career athletes to plan and prioritise branding efforts whilst established athletes can identify incongruence between self-image and consumer perceptions. Such gaps can be evaluated and branding activities modified accordingly. This will enable athletes to better access corporate support/sponsorship thereby reducing reliance on public funds.

Keywords: Athlete Branding, Brand Identity, Brand Image, Athlete Brand Identity Scale, Rasch Analysis, Scale Development.

3.2 Introduction

Research into athlete branding, such as the work of Arai, Ko and Kaplanidou (2013) and Arai, Ko and Ross (2014), has provided various models for conceptualising and measuring the athlete brand image. The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) developed by Arai *et al.* (2014) has three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. This model defined athlete brand image and was the foundation for a scale designed to measure the athlete brand image construct. However, the construct was focussed on athlete brand image from a consumer perspective with the perspective of the athlete largely ignored. This is not unexpected, given that sport management research is generally targeted towards understanding and analysing athlete branding behaviour by investigating the matter from an outside-in (consumer/fan) point of view. In fact, there are surprisingly few models currently available which incorporate, identify, analyse or measure brand identity and its relationship with brand image from the perspective of the athlete.

Consumers form images of an athlete's brand through various means, including by decoding the messages (verbal and non-verbal) which the athlete sends. This means that along with their sporting achievements, the brand identity portrayed by an athlete (both on and off the field) can significantly impact the brand image perceived by sports fans and consumers (Lobpries *et al.*, 2017). Increased use of social media means athletes today are more accessible, have higher levels of interaction with fans and therefore have greater potential to influence consumption of sport and goods (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012; Su *et al.*, 2020). This, in turn, increases their potential to act as brand ambassadors and influencers. But as Geurin (2017) notes, the emerging trends toward increased visibility and outreach mean greater understanding of the athlete brand is needed to ensure potential benefits are maximised for all stakeholders. Access to tools which can help athletes determine and measure the performance of their brand identity (the identity they seek to convey) will therefore assist them to develop more effective communication, branding and marketing strategies.

3.2.1 Purpose of the Study

The alternative to a consumer-focussed approach to understanding the athlete brand is the inside-out approach (Kristiansen and Williams, 2015; Lobpries *et al.*, 2017), where the identity of the athlete is central to strategy development and is the driver behind brand image management. This research adopts such an approach to identify the important dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct. It offers a tool which can be used to

understand and interpret an athlete brand identity and which also enables athletes to measure how closely their brand identity (how they seek to portray themselves) is aligned with their brand image (how consumers are viewing their brand).

It is anticipated that use of this tool will assist athletes establish an athlete brand identity which is congruent with their brand image. As a result, they will be better able to:

- develop clearer and more consistent messaging
- reduce consumer/fan confusion or disconnect
- identify marketing and sponsorship activities aligned to their athlete brand identity
- improve their public profile
- increase income via public speaking, leadership or ambassadorial roles
- increase income via brand endorsements and advertising
- reduce dependency on public funding
- reduce the need to seek employment that detracts from training and competition
- become people of influence in areas that are important to them.

It is important for an athlete to understand their identity so they can more accurately portray or modify verbal and non-verbal messages they send to consumers. More accurate communication portrayal better aligns and connects messages with fans, which helps build the athlete's brand. To achieve this main study purpose, the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS) was developed. Development of this scale provided an opportunity for a secondary study purpose, which was to introduce and test use of Rasch analysis in the sport marketing context. Scale development and validation within sport management are typically associated with exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses that use classical measurement theories and approaches (Salzberger and Sinkovics, 2006). Rasch analysis employs mathematical principles, can define constructs where construct properties are not known, and is robust on smaller sample sizes. It has demonstrated good utility for scale development within educational, psychological, and medical research fields (Ewing *et al.*, 2005), with studies suggesting advantages for applicability in marketing (Salzberger and Koller, 2013). However, application of Rasch analysis into scale development within the sport marketing field is yet to be tested.

3.3 Theoretical Background

People are able to control their identity (self-identity) by managing the impressions they leave on others (Goffman, 1959). How others regard a person depends on the effectiveness of that person's self-performance. However, the durability of retaining one particular identity is unrealistic due to the ongoing relationship between identity and image (Gioia *et al.*, 2000). In fact, scholars from various areas of research including sociology and social psychology regard identity as a dynamic concept (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). This is in line with Goffman's (1959) claim that identity is formed through social interactions with others, and is therefore dynamic in nature. Similarly, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) portrays self-identity as a dynamic concept as it varies according to context and the role of the self. Hence, self-identity involves multiple identities, which are dependent on the different contexts and social roles (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and are socially constructed (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's (1959) framework describes self-identity as a performance, where an individual seeks to manage the impressions others form of them by behaving and communicating in certain ways. Goffman goes on to explain, however, that the impression others form is based not only on the intentional cues one displays, but unintentional (often non-verbal) ones as well (Jacobsen & Kristianson, 2015). When applying this to brand identity, it is important to understand although brand identity may initiate from the brand, it can develop over time and be influenced mutually by several social constituents from the inside (e.g., manager) or the outside (e.g., consumer) of the brand (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). According to Da Silveira *et al.* (2013), the impressions and expressions of a brand should be balanced as this narrows the gap between brand identity and brand image. Traditional models of brand management place most emphasis on external issues (e.g., brand image) and pay insufficient attention to brand insiders and brand identity (De Chernatony, 1999).

3.3.1 Brand Identity and Human Brands

There are many important branding concepts related to brand identity (i.e., brand personality, brand image, brand reputation and brand positioning). This explains why current frameworks often reflect a blurred distinction between brand identity and brand image (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). The key to differentiating between the two lies within the inherent perspective; the brand insider communicates brand identity to consumers, whereas brand image refers to information external to the brand, which consumers receive from the brand manager (Nandan, 2005). Hence, brand identity is created by the source, whereas brand image is created within the minds of the target audience and represents

consumer perceptions (De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998). Brand identity enables improved positioning of the brand and also allows a strategic approach to managing it (De Chernatony, 2001). The success of a brand depends on its brand identity, use of an identity developing image, and ensuring this image transfers to its identity (Park *et al.*, 1986). This is supported by Roy and Banerjee (2014), who suggest the perception of brand identity at the time of decoding its identity facets shapes the image of the brand in the mind of potential consumers. Hence, both brand identity and brand image concepts are interrelated and require synchronisation. Ensuring synchronisation between brand identity and brand image is a prerequisite for successful brand marketing. Numerous brands have failed as a result of brand identity and brand image lacking alignment and consistency, creating a message gap and consumer confusion (Roy and Banerjee, 2014). The level of the overall synchronisation is termed congruence, and by assessing the congruence between brand identity and brand image, a marketer can shape a branding strategy to improve the effectiveness of communication messages (Haynes *et al.*, 1999). Roy and Banerjee (2014) noted there were few studies discussing congruence between brand identity and brand image and proposed a quantitative measure for the identity-image gap. However, despite providing useful vantage points, their approach is targeted towards corporate branding rather than for the personal brands of human beings.

The term personal branding relates to activities used to market and distinguish people in areas of immense competition, such as the labour market or politics (Kotler and Levy, 1969). The concept of personal brands originates from classic branding theory (e.g., Aaker, 1991; De Chernatony, 1999; Keller, 1993) and is an extension of conventional product or service brand forms (Lair *et al.*, 2005). Thomson (2006) defined the human brand as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts” (p.104). Celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey (entertainment), Madonna (music) and Michael Jordan (sports) are well-known examples of the power of personal branding (Lair *et al.*, 2005). However, personal branding is not just limited to celebrities. Arai *et al.* (2014) applied the concept of personal branding to athletes and defined 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). According to Williams *et al.* (2015) this can be advanced to any athlete that “identifies and distinguishes themselves in the marketplace and promises a functional and emotional experience to consumers” (p.78).

3.3.2 Athlete Brand Identity

The true value of athlete brands is often ambiguous as it depends on subjective consumer perceptions. There are numerous cases where the brand of an athlete is extremely popular despite varying levels of performance (Arai *et al.*, 2014). This shows successfully establishing and managing athlete brands can be an equally or more important factor in economic benefit than athletic success. According to Arai *et al.* (2014), “it is not only what athletes produce in terms of winning or losing, but how they package this winning or losing as a complete brand” (p.104). Identity differentiates individuals from one another. The initial step in human branding is to establish a particular brand identity and communicate this identity to a specific target market, which enables differentiation from other human brands (e.g., Ghodeswar, 2008; Lair *et al.*, 2005; Lobpries *et al.*, 2017). Since athletes not only achieve their celebrity status through outstanding athletic performances, but also by showcasing their lifestyle and engaging with consumers (Choi and Rifon, 2007), off-field communication behaviour may strongly influence consumers’ perceptions of an athlete’s brand and is therefore essential for athlete brand equity creation (Arai *et al.*, 2013). Hence, athlete brand identity may be formed by a combination of performance elements, character traits and communication behaviour.

When attempting to apply existing brand identity concepts to athlete brands, it is important to consider their human nature compared to conventional products or companies. Most existing models and frameworks, including De Chernatony’s (1999) Model of Brand Management, are based on corporate structures that include management, employees, assets and the like and are not applicable to athlete brands (Lobpries *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, some of the frameworks incorporate consumer-based constructs, such as image and reputation, while defining identity as being established by the brand owner (Coleman *et al.*, 2011; De Chernatony, 2006). Currently there is no consensus on the perspective used for measuring brand identity (Coleman *et al.*, 2011).

A person’s overall self-identity involves multiple identities (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). With sportspeople, one of those identities will be their athlete persona, particularly if they are considered to be elite. Goffman’s perception of self-identity as a dynamic construct means human brands are receptive to changes but have to preserve a stable sense of self (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). Hence, athletes are likely (and able) to shift their brand identity, however when they do their branding strategies will also require modification and image management to maintain congruence. Clear identity and strong

positioning are essential to the successful construction of brands (Richelieu and Pons, 2006). Athletes have to understand what is important for their brand identity and be aware of strengths and weaknesses. The Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI) established by Arai *et al.* (2013) appears to be a suitable scale for use by practitioners and brand managers to gain insight into the consumer perceptions of athlete brands. However, the SABI, as well as other scales related to athlete branding, ignore the perspective of the athlete, excluding this very important element in their brand image measurement tool.

3.3.3 The Rasch Measurement Model

Another unique aspect of this research is the use of Rasch analysis in the scale development process. Despite its extensive application in mathematical modelling, this practical approach has not previously been utilised in sports marketing. Briefly summarised, Rasch analysis is used when intangible items are sought to define a common construct, where the properties of the construct are unknown. The response patterns achieved from questionnaire items are tested against what is expected by the model, which is a probabilistic form of Guttman Scaling where a selection of statistics determines model fit (Tennant and Conaghan, 2007). The Rasch model can only be successfully applied if items are uni-dimensional (measuring the same underlying construct) and data show local independence (where the response to one item does not influence the response to another item). Additionally, the scale should not work differently between subgroups within the sample (e.g., gender). Items selected for the scale should be free of DIF (differential item functioning), fit the model expectations, and demonstrate uni-dimensionality (Tennant and Conaghan, 2007).

The Rasch model was deemed appropriate for this research because of its ability to assess the scale and questionnaire items as well as evaluate latent variables (Bond and Fox, 2015), its effectiveness on smaller samples (as it estimates only a single parameter) (McCreary *et al.*, 2013), and its ability to tolerate the inclusion of respondents with missing data (Ewing *et al.*, 2005). Conventional measurement approaches require large sample sizes to reduce the potential for single respondents to have a disproportionate impact on results (Martin *et al.*, 2016). Although larger sample sizes are beneficial for developing robust scales, DeVellis (2003) highlights many scales have successfully been advanced with comparatively modest sample sizes of 150 respondents. Further, Arrindell and van der Ende (1985) explore the stability of factors obtained from varying sample sizes and conclude stable factor structures can be achieved with ratios as low as 1.3 respondents per item. Salzberger and Sinkovics (2006) suggest where data fit the Rasch

model, the underlying variable is quantitative, and measurement has been achieved. Additionally, the Rasch algorithm tolerates missing data as it uses expected score information by comparing each observed item score to an expected score based on the overall scaling model (Prieto *et al.*, 2003). Further, studies that compared Rasch analysis and conventional methods associated to classical test theory (CTT) found results of Rasch analysis were similar or superior (Andrich, 2004; Salzberger and Sinkovics, 2006). However, according to Salzberger and Sinkovics (2006) there are fundamental philosophical differences that may lead to prominent differences in scale validation between the two approaches (e.g., Rasch measures and CFA measures cannot concurrently be linear). The Rasch procedure may offer a significant advantage when using the questionnaire at an individual level (Prieto *et al.*, 2003), which is the intention of this scale.

3.4 Method

First, measures were developed through an iterative process based on a systematic literature review and athlete expert evaluations ($n=10$) which presented the athlete's perspective. Data were then collected from athletes and consumers. It was important to collect data not only from athletes but also from a consumer group for later scale testing and measurement of congruence between athlete and consumer perceptions. Therefore, it was mandatory to include the self-image of athletes as well as the perceived image of consumers within the same survey. Finally, the data were analysed using Rasch.

3.4.1 Measures

A list of items considered relevant to the scale was collated using existing brand measurement models identified in a systematic literature review. This included for example the Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI; Arai *et al.*, 2013), the Brand Personality Scale (Aaker, 1997) and the Sport Team Personality Scale (SPORTEAPE; Tsiotsou, 2012). This resulted in a pool of 229 items. The research team screened all items for relevance, deleted duplicates, and consolidated those with the same meaning, leaving 112 remaining items. This was further reduced after consultations with 10 athlete experts. These experts were identified using personal networks of research team members and included two current elite athletes, two coaches, and six high-performance managers of whom four were former elite athletes. Each expert had an average of more than 10 years' experience within the field of athlete branding and as 'insiders' of the elite sport sector in order to ensure items were relevant and appropriate for practical application. As well as

evaluating the existing items, experts were given the opportunity to add items previously not identified in established brand measurement literature, and which they agreed were important for athlete brand identity. Using a conservative approach, all items that achieved an above mean score remained in the pool. Ten items suggested by experts were added to the list and a final list of 74 items was determined. This number of items was considered feasible to administer in the form of a questionnaire.

To identify whether a unipolar or a bipolar response scale is most suitable for the ABIDS, the online questionnaire included two survey paths that lead to different response scale versions. A randomiser question at the beginning of the survey was used to decide which version the participant would be presented with. In version A, participants evaluated items on a bipolar, seven-point Likert-scale, anchored with *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. They were asked to read each statement as: "Being/having [item] is important for the brand of an athlete" and indicate their level of agreement (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree). Version B included a unipolar seven-point importance scale, anchored with *not at all important* to *extremely important*. Participants were asked to indicate the level of importance of the items (i.e., not at all important, of little importance, slightly important, fairly important, important, very important, extremely important). Items appeared in random order to prevent order and fatigue biases. The online questionnaire was distributed to athletes and consumers through targeted Facebook ads. The ads remained active for a period of two months with a fixed daily budget that determined the frequency with which the ads were shown to the population. Including incentives for survey completion significantly increased the ad-click-rate and willingness to participate in the study.

3.4.2 Data Collection

Online questionnaires were distributed to athletes and consumers to identify the underlying constructs of athlete brand identity and classify their associated items. Since Da Silveira *et al.* (2013) suggest brand identity as a dynamic concept, both athlete and consumer participants took part in the scale development process. However, consumers were not involved with the item generation to ensure only those items regarded by athletes to be of significance for identity formation were included, rather than items of importance from an image (consumer) perspective. Consumers were included in the surveying process, however, to ensure the scale had ability to fulfil its secondary purpose of comparing athlete and consumer opinions (i.e., congruence). It is important to highlight

that consumers were only asked to evaluate the items predetermined by the athlete experts. Initial scale development was therefore driven by brand identity and the insider perspective before adding the brand image perspective of consumers. This was essential to allow measurement of congruence.

The athletes surveyed were intercepted through high-performance networks (i.e., internal communication of the governing bodies of different sports) and social media outlets of two organisations within the elite sport sector. The consumer surveys were distributed using targeted Facebook ads, which is a time and cost-effective method to recruit participants (Gilligan *et al.*, 2014). Social media, in particular Facebook, is a common method of communication that can be leveraged for research purposes. A limitation to recruitment through Facebook is that the representativeness of the sample cannot be fully determined (Ramo and Prochaska, 2012). However, according to Gilligan *et al.* (2014), several studies confirm their participants reflected the demographic spread reported in population surveys and census data. In fact, studies report that advertising through social networking sites produced higher percentages of valid consents, individuals meeting eligibility criteria and completed surveys compared to other methods such as email invitations (Kapp *et al.*, 2013).

Participants could only complete one of the two survey versions, which naturally limited the amount of athlete participants due to the confined target population. In total, version A received $n=380$ responses and version B $n=243$. Participants who evaluated less than 50 per cent of the items were eliminated from the study as there was too much missing data. Data cleaning revealed 314 valid responses for version A and 194 for version B. Preliminary results highlighted potential issues with the bipolar agreement scale and confirmed the unipolar importance scale was more suitable for the purpose of this research. Responses to the majority of items of version A were skewed towards the upper end of the scale (strongly agree) with very few participants using the disagreement end of the scale. The response options of version B were more evenly distributed amongst participants. Further analysis was conducted with the survey data from the importance response scale only; 130 consumer and 64 athlete responses were included in the analysis ($n=194$).

3.4.3 Participants

The Australian athlete sample consisted of 40 (62.5 per cent) female and 24 (37.5 per cent) male athletes with an average age of 21 years. Most participants were senior athletes (54 per cent; participating in open-age competitions), 18.8 per cent were junior

athletes, and 26.6 per cent were junior athletes who competed in open-age competitions. The sample represented 19 different sports, with swimming (31.3 per cent) and athletics (20.3 per cent) showing the highest frequencies. The majority of participants represented their sports in international competitions (65.6 per cent). Most athletes (93.8 per cent) frequently used social media with 70.3 per cent stating they used social media to communicate about their athletic career (e.g., give updates about training, achievements, or other sport-specific information). However, only 31.3 per cent of athletes had received media communications training. The Australian consumer sample consisted of 91 (70 per cent) female and 39 (30 per cent) male participants with an average age of 29 years. The majority of consumer participants followed or liked athletes on social media (80 per cent) and were aware of athletes with a public persona and the existence of their athlete brand (83 per cent).

3.4.4 Data Analyses

Evaluation and refinement of the 74-item pool was undertaken in two separate stages. Factor analysis (FA) was conducted first to investigate the dimensionality of the items and to identify any factors. The factors and their associated items were then exposed to Rasch analysis. Rasch analysis assessed the measurement properties of each factor and allowed selection of the best set of items to form a concise, psychometrically sound scale, which represented all identified aspects of the athlete brand identity construct.

For the FA, suitability of data was indicated by a Kaiser-Meyer-Okin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy value above .60 (Kaiser, 1970) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < .001$; Bartlett, 1954). The number of factors was identified through the Kaiser criterion with eigenvalues exceeding '1', inspection of the scree plot, and Horn parallel analysis. The eigenvalues obtained were compared with those generated from a random data set of the same sample size. Those factors with eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding value from this random data set were retained. Rasch analysis was then conducted on the identified factors. The aim was to test whether the observed responses to the items conform to the expectations of the Rasch measurement model (Tennant and Conaghan, 2007).

Results of Rasch analysis present as fit statistics, which compare the observed results of an item or respondent with results expected by the model (Tennant and Conaghan, 2007). A good fit was indicated by a non-significant summary of chi-square interaction fit statistic and a fit residual standard deviation (SD) value below 1.5. A Bonferroni adjustment was made to the applied alpha level to assess the significance of

the chi-square statistic by dividing .05 by the number of items in the scale (Phyland *et al.*, 2013). The fit of individual items and persons was also evaluated using chi-square statistics and fit residual values. Chi-square should again be non-significant and fit residual values should fall within a range of ± 2.5 . A high positive fit residual value indicated a misfit, whereas a low value suggested the redundancy of an item. DIF was assessed by analysing the variance with a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level to detect bias among items and sub-groups. The internal consistency of the scale was displayed by the Person Separation Index (PSI), which should be above 0.7 (Pallant and Tennant, 2007). Item thresholds were inspected to investigate the suitability of the response format. Thresholds indicate the point between each adjacent response option where either response is equally probable. Disordering of thresholds can indicate problems with the response format. Disordered thresholds occur where participants inconsistently use response options as they may find it difficult to distinguish between them (Pallant and Tennant, 2007). Additionally, the residual correlation matrix was examined for positive correlations ($r > .20$). Local dependency among items can artificially inflate the PSI value and show higher internal consistency. This was investigated by combining items with elevated residual correlations to form sub-tests and compare the PSI values from the original and sub-test analyses. A marked difference in these two values would suggest local dependency between items. Last, a two-step process was used to ensure the unidimensionality of the scale. First, a Rasch internal principal components analysis of the residuals identified two sub-sets of items, which were the positively and negatively loading items on the first component. These sub-sets were compared for each individual with a series of *t*-tests. The scale was deemed uni-dimensional if less than five per cent of respondents showed a statistically significant difference in their scores [1].

Throughout the Rasch analysis process, modifications (e.g., removal of items or persons) and subsequent retests were systematically used to assess enhancements to the scale. The process of the analysis is iterative. Attempts to improve the scale were done consecutively (e.g., deletion of one item at a time, not multiple), to see whether the alteration has enhanced the fit of the scale or whether it ought to be reversed.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Factor Analysis

The suitability of the data ($n=194$; 130 consumers and 64 athletes) for FA was confirmed by the KMO value of .871 and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

($\chi^2=2942.306$, $df=528$, $p \leq .001$). Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above. Exploratory factor analysis of the 74 items exposed the presence of 16 factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 68.48 per cent of the variance. However, parallel analysis showed only four factors with eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding criterion values for a randomly generated data matrix of the same size (74 variables x 194 respondents). Further, inspection of the scree plot revealed either a three-, four-, or five-factor solution. To identify the most suitable solution and to aid interpretation of the included factors, oblimin rotation was performed. After examination of the results, the four-factor solution revealed the presence of simple structure (Thurstone, 1947) with all components showing a number of strong loadings and all variables loading substantially in only one factor (Table 4). On the contrary, the three- and five-factor solutions did not improve the results and showed many items with substantial loadings on multiple factors, as well as a number of items failing to show strong loadings at all. Hence, the four-factor solution was deemed most appropriate. The component correlation matrix of the four-factor solution presented weak to moderate positive correlation among all factors, ranging from $r=.129$ to $r=.304$.

Table 4 *Pattern Matrix with Oblimin Rotation of the Four-Factor Solution*

Item	Pattern Coefficients			
	1	2	3	4
behave according to right practice (ethical behaviour)	.794	-.015	-.053	-.034
show fair play	.702	.056	-.055	.075
hard-working	.689	.19	-.232	.014
self-integrity (being true to own values & believes)	.687	-.078	.126	.005
dedicated	.684	.156	-.112	.175
genuine	.669	-.088	.153	.055
trustworthy	.648	.015	.136	.144
a good role model for others	.609	-.065	.2	.142
respected	.587	.131	.169	-.045
clean (not use Performance Enhancing Agents)	.586	-.236	.251	-.03
respect for opponents and other players	.582	-.165	.164	.255
self-belief	.571	.397	-.186	.106
competitive	.078	.688	-.011	-.096
successful	.072	.687	-.026	.165
a well-conditioned body	.091	.682	.074	-.028
able to repeat successful performances (repeatability)	.108	.628	.185	.002
a star-player	-.137	.615	.086	.226
a competition style that is exciting to watch	-.039	.601	.165	.001
prominent athletic skills in their sport	.342	.599	.124	-.177
a status symbol (legend)	-.323	.547	.17	.286
distinctive	-.055	.540	.103	.202
interacting with fans	.063	-.025	.762	.154
engage in social media	.02	.15	.721	-.213
share athletic life with fans	-.032	.242	.662	-.116
appreciation for fans and spectators	.168	-.255	.621	.293
responsive to media attention	.022	.191	.615	.183
supported by fans	-.016	.211	.577	.088
online social media presence that is in-line with their athlete brand	.19	.162	.550	-.136
cooperative	.152	-.022	.116	.740
adaptable to change	.146	.11	-.053	.637
open-minded	.184	-.141	.198	.596
emotionally stable	-.068	.342	-.079	.579
organised	.213	.178	-.182	.547

Note. The four-factor solution explained 52.61% of the variance (factor 1=28.42%, factor 2=11.84%, factor 3=7.56%, factor 4=4.79%). Major loadings are shown in bold.

3.5.2 Rasch Analysis

Fit statistics

Factor 1 – Athletic Integrity. Initial inspection of the overall fit of the data from the 12 items showed a non-significant item-trait interaction chi square value ($p=.062$), which suggests no misfit between the data and the model. The PSI value of .829 indicated the ability to discriminate between at least two groups of respondents. The residual values for items ($M=.048$; $SD=1.09$) and persons ($M=-.322$; $SD=1.26$) showed no serious misfit among the respondents and items in the sample, suggesting the scale is well targeted for use with this group of participants. Closer examination of the statistics revealed one person with a high fit residual value of 3.281. This participant (female consumer) showed inconsistent item responses (values genuineness as very important but not self-integrity; values fair play as very important but not respect for opponents and other players). Removing this person from the analysis had a slight positive effect on the overall fit of the model.

Factor 2 – Athletic Success. The nine items showed a good fit to the Rasch model with a non-significant chi square probability ($p=.876$) and a PSI of .846. Item fit statistics revealed a mean close to zero and a standard deviation below 1.5 ($M=.44$; $SD=.71$), indicating no misfit between the items and the respondents; person fit statistics were also within range ($M=-.37$; $SD=1.37$). Although three participants showed fit residual values marginally above 2.5, this did not negatively influence the overall fit of the model.

Factor 3 – Fan Engagement. Inspection of the fit statistics of the seven items revealed no misfit between the data and the model, indicated by a non-significant chi square value ($p=.398$). The fit residual values for items ($M=.467$; $SD=.644$) and persons ($M=-.456$; $SD=1.446$) were within acceptable ranges and the PSI value of 0.815 represented the ability to statistically differentiate at least two groups of respondents.

Factor 4 – Character Traits. The final factor included five items. The non-significant chi square item-trait interaction statistic ($p=.093$) indicated the hierarchical ordering of the items was consistent across all levels of the underlying trait. The items of this factor showed no misfit with a fit residual mean value of .29 ($SD=.95$). The fit residual mean value for persons of -.48 with a standard deviation of 1.26 suggests the scale was reasonably well targeted for use with this group of athletes and consumers.

Thresholds, differential item functioning and dimensionality

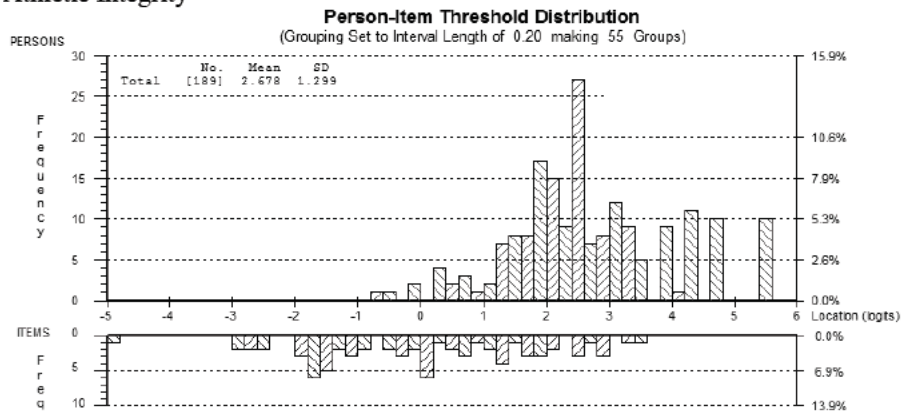
Further analysis of the four sub-scales revealed that some items presented disordered thresholds. Visual inspection of the category probability curves for each item confirmed the disorders to be only minor and, in most cases, occurred at the lower end of the scale where respondents were sparse. As the item generation and reduction was led by athlete experts and based on their evaluation, disordered thresholds and sparse use of the lower end of the importance scale were expected. In case of the ABIDS, the research team refrained from changing the response scale as the disordered thresholds have not negatively affected the fit of the items. It can be expected that the entire response scale may be employed when utilised for its specific purpose to evaluate an athlete's personal brand on the individual level.

The assessment of DIF detected no item bias across the subgroups gender and consumer or athlete for any factor, which provided important proof to support construct validity. In addition to the person-item analyses, tests of local independence and dimensionality were conducted by running PCA on the residuals. The PCA revealed no residual correlations above $r=.2$ for any items, which demonstrated the local independence assumption was not violated. Further, results of independent t-tests provided evidence for the uni-dimensionality of all four sub-scales.

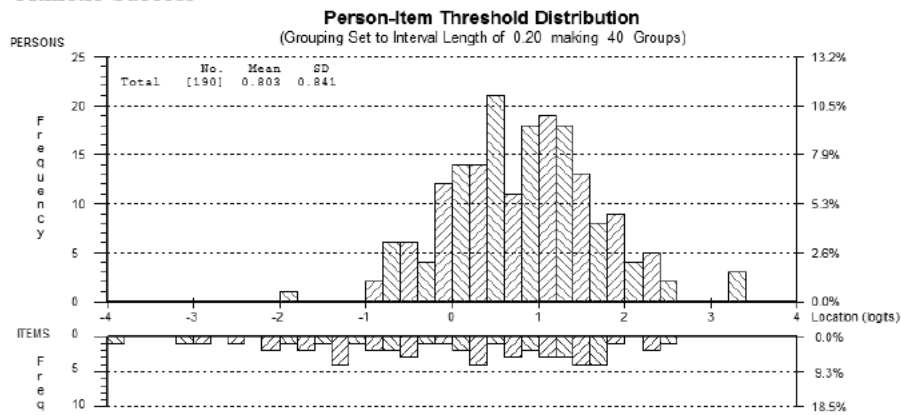
Targeting

According to Pallant and Tennant (2007), it is essential that scales are presented appropriately (neither too simple nor too difficult) for the targeted population to avoid 'floor' or 'ceiling' effects. The mean value for a well-targeted measure should be around the value of zero. Figure 4 shows the distributions of persons and items for the total score of all sub-scales. Each map includes the frequencies of participants (top graph) and items (bottom graph) calibrated to the same scale. Ideally, the items span the full range of the persons scores. The Athletic Integrity sub-scale revealed an elevated mean score of 2.678 and displayed a shift in the distribution of respondents to the right (see top graph, Figure 4). This implies that for many participants it was relatively easy to rate the items high on the importance response scale. The distributions of all other sub-scales showed participants and item difficulties were overall well matched and the maps revealed a spread of items across the majority of individual person scores with means close to zero. These findings suggest respondents were well targeted to the set of calibrated items.

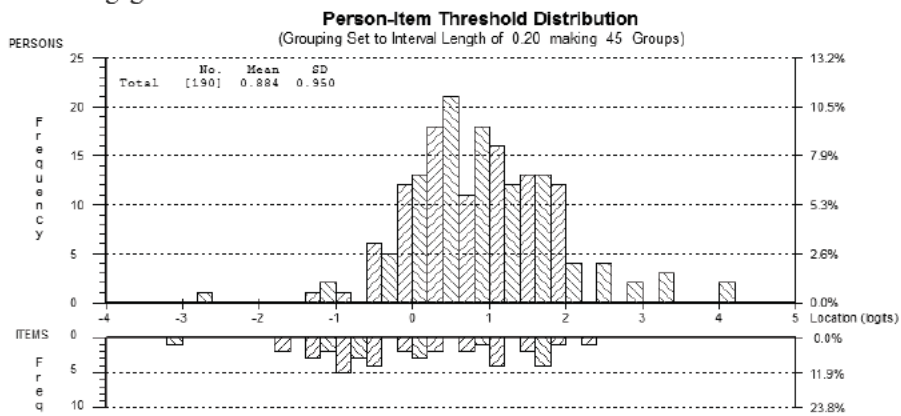
Athletic Integrity



Athletic Success



Fan Engagement



Character Traits

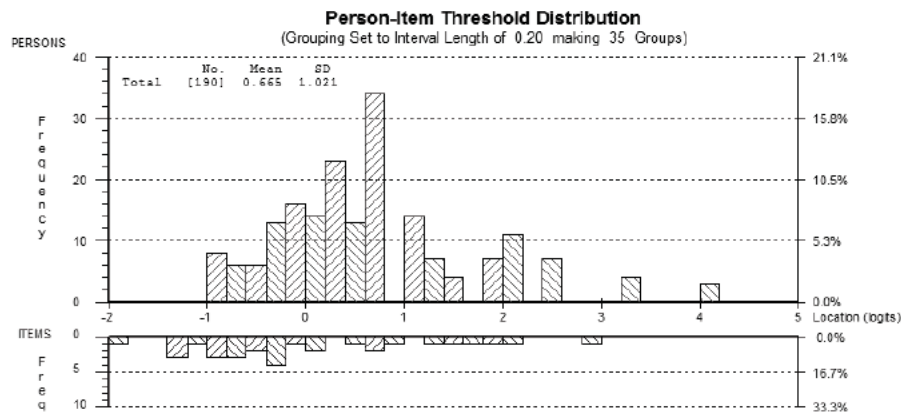


Figure 4 Targeting of participants and items of all four sub-scales

The person-item maps showed reasonably normal distributions of the participants and further support the scale's validity. Overall, Rasch analysis confirms the measures appear to perform as required in relation to other constructs, which is essential for construct validity (Martin et al., 2016).

3.6 Discussion

Athlete branding research is gaining momentum and has become a recurring theme in sport management literature (e.g., Arai *et al.*, 2014; Geurin, 2017; Kristiansen and Williams, 2015). Only a few studies, however, have addressed athlete branding from an inside-out approach, with most contemporary research focussing on perceptions external to the brand. But athletes have a significant influence upon the performance of their brand and athlete brand research should be inclusive of both internal and external viewpoints. With the development of social media as a personal branding tool, athletes face increased pressure to build an online presence and frequently share engaging and current content with fans and stakeholders (Geurin, 2017). These self-marketing activities have multiple benefits for athletes because building and maintaining a successful personal brand can attract endorsements, higher salaries and other opportunities that can last beyond their athletic careers (Arai *et al.*, 2014). As the athlete brand construct has already been scrutinised from an image perspective, the aim of this study was to identify the underlying constructs of athlete brand identity from an athlete's perspective and to develop a practical tool to assist athletes with evaluating and measuring the performance of their brand. All items included in the ABIdS were generated from existing scales and expert opinions and represent areas of importance for athlete brand identity.

As the items used in the scale were initially assessed through expert evaluations, many were excluded that are commonly found on brand image scales (and considered important for brand image creation) as they were deemed not relevant to athlete brand identity. For example, although the 'beauty' and looks of athletes may be part of their developed brand identity, these image-driven characteristics proved to be non-essential from an athlete brand perspective. Items like these would pose difficulties for comparisons between athlete and consumer opinions as they are subject to personal preferences and depend on genetic predispositions that are often impossible to change. However, if consumers evaluate an athlete's skilfulness, competition style or their interaction with fans, these are characteristics that are easily measurable from consumer and athlete perspectives and therefore provide a means to compare the results. Even though the final ABIdS contains nine identical items to the SABI and has common

characteristics seen in other brand image measures, there is a clear shift in focus towards athlete brand features that can be directly influenced and potentially changed by the athletes themselves. Notably, seven of the ten new items suggested by the experts survived the item reduction process and are important differentiating factors of the dimensions of athlete brand identity posed by this research. Those items have never appeared in any other image-driven identity scales before. Yet, since the study was conducted with an athlete and a consumer sample, this confirms that the focus on athlete brand identity in the item generation process and the items identified are also relevant from the consumer perspective. This further highlights the differences to existing brand image scales and substantiates the practicability of the ABIdS as it has the potential to assist athletes in evaluating their personal branding strategies.

The ABIdS is the first scale in the field of athlete branding based on Rasch analysis as part of the scale development process. The capability of Rasch to conduct statistical analysis with comparatively small sample sizes as well as the capacity to include participants despite the occurrence of missing data proved particularly useful in this research. Overall, Rasch analysis of ABIdS responses successfully identified four dimensions integral to athlete brand identity formation.

Athletic Integrity

The first dimension of athlete brand identity consists of items that relate to the integrity of athletes and their moral attitude in a sports related environment. The survey results showed consumers and athletes found it easy to endorse all items in this dimension and rated the majority of items as very important. As this scale relates to elite athletes, high ratings of the included characteristics were to be expected and demonstrate that athletic integrity is an essential part of athlete brand identity. Some items associated with this dimension are also present in, or relate to, Arai *et al.*'s (2013) SABI (e.g., *show fair play, respect for opponents and other players*). This confirms there is a significant overlap of athlete brand identity and image and shows what is essential from a consumer perspective is also relevant when focussing on the athlete perspective. An item suggested by experts, which was not included in scales in the past, was *clean (not using Performance Enhancing Agents)*. This reflects athletes' grievances around recurring doping scandals (such as Russia's Olympic affair or the ongoing Tour de France issues), which have placed expectations on athletes that they establish themselves as clean and honest brands. This item would also be of particular importance/concern to existing or potential sponsors. Most organisations sponsoring athletes (or those who use athletes to

endorse products) typically do not associate themselves with athletes using performance enhancing drugs. Often, an accusation can be highly detrimental to an athlete's brand image, hence being, and proactively communicating that one is 'clean' is important.

Athletic Success

This dimension refers to an athlete's performance-related achievements, with performance success likely to make the most significant contribution to brand equity over time (Gladden *et al.*, 1998). Again, some items of this dimension appear in the SABI (e.g., *a competition style that is exciting to watch, prominent athletic skills in their sport*) however an additional item was added by experts (*able to repeat successful performances*). While surprising and unpredicted athletic accomplishments can initially attract consumer attention, it is important for the durability of the athlete brand for those achievements (or better) to be repeated. Although the ABIdS includes many items from existing scales, the prevalent difference is that none of them relate to the physical appearance of athletes. In the process of item reduction, experts did not regard this as essential for the brand identity of athletes. The only item relating to the physical appearance is *a well-conditioned body*, which is not necessarily corresponding to attractive looks but rather to the physical shape required for the athlete's sport and success.

Fan Engagement

Most items included in the Fan Engagement dimension are associated with the social media output of athlete, which has not appeared in previous scales. Items related to engagement on social media were non-existent in any athlete or team brand scales developed in the past. Items in this dimension, therefore, were derived from expert suggestions (*engage in social media, share athletic life with fans, responsive to media attention and online social media presence that is in-line with their athlete brand*). The development of social media as a personal branding tool has only occurred over recent years and its growing importance for athlete brands is undeniable (Geurin, 2017, Su *et al.*, 2020). Arai *et al.* (2013) previously established that athletes' interactions with fans, spectators, sponsors and media are an essential part of the athlete brand. The emergence of fan engagement as an isolated component of athlete brand identity substantiates the requirement that athletes have to incorporate social media as an instrumental part of their personal branding strategies. It is therefore necessary to include communication behaviour within the brand evaluation of athletes. Interestingly, most athletes who participated in this research confirmed they already post about their athlete brand on

social media. Only a small number reported they had previously received media and communications training, however, despite operating professional athlete profiles dedicated to the promotion of their brand.

Character Traits

The last dimension of the ABIdS includes items relating to the character and personality traits of athletes. Three of the five items in this dimension appear in Goldberg's Five-Factor Model, which consists of human personality traits that are a result of genetics and upbringing (Carlson and Donovan, 2013). While this is the smallest dimension, there is evidence that personality traits (on and off-field) which have been deeply ingrained into an athlete's psyche and rooted in the past can also have significant impact upon how successfully an athlete's brand image aligns with brand identity.

3.7 Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to identify underlying constructs of athlete brand identity from an athlete's perspective. In order to achieve this, a second study purpose emerged, that being to utilise the Rasch model for scale development into sport marketing literature. Finally, the study sought to create a practical tool to assist athletes better understand their brand and enable them to deliver appropriate messaging to consumers and potentially build larger brands. Broader implications of this would be improvements in athlete/sponsor partnerships, better and more successful athlete communication and influence and reduced athlete dependency on public funding or external employment to support their training and competition schedules.

As a result, the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS) was developed; a reliable scale for measuring athlete brand identity. This scale development was achieved through a rigorous three-stage process of item generation, item reduction and detailed psychometric evaluation. Items were initially collated from existing studies and refined with expert opinions. The major difference between the ABIdS and other existing scales in the athlete brand research domain is the focus on the athlete perspective, as opposed to the consumer perspectives. Evaluating consumer perspectives does not explain how athletes perceive their own brand or how their own perception of their brand compares to that of people external to the brand (fans and consumers). The ABIdS developed in this study has the potential to achieve this objective as its design was driven by athlete perceptions but tested on both athletes and consumers. Although the ABIdS has a clear

focus on brand identity, adding the consumer perspective was essential to ensure the scale could be used to measure congruence between the two viewpoints.

Identity is what makes brands unique and clearly distinguishable from others (Kapferer, 1994). This also applies to an athlete's brand identity and the unique characteristics that help them to differentiate from other athlete brands. The ABIdS is the first scale that offers individualised evaluation of the brand of a single athlete, with the aim of enabling athletes to become aware of how their brand is perceived. When used over time, the ABIdS could potentially measure changes in athlete brand perceptions as indicators of the effect of adapted branding approaches and may predict athletes at risk of developing and pursuing strategies likely to produce negative impacts. In the early stages, the four dimensions identified as components of the athlete brand identity can help athletes and their managers to prioritise areas for personal branding strategies. Later, the ABIdS can be used to provide athletes with detailed evaluations of their brand and compare the results with consumer perceptions. If scores differ significantly, athletes should re-evaluate their personal branding strategies in response to the specific, highlighted areas of improvement.

3.7.1 Contributions

This study offers several theoretical and managerial contributions. In addition to formulating a methodological novelty by using Rasch analysis, the adaptation of Goffman's (1959) self-identity framework and Da Silveira *et al.*'s (2013) advancements thereof in the brand spectrum provide additional theoretical contributions to the athlete brand research domain. The use of Rasch analysis as part of the scale development process is new to this research field and offers a promising alternative to the standard approach based on classical test theory. The multifaceted range of characteristics within the identified components of athlete brand identity highlights the broad theoretical and multidisciplinary roots of this subject matter. Application of the ABIdS can facilitate subsequent theoretical development in athlete branding research as well as related domains.

The information gathered from athlete perceptions of what is important for their personal brand may further enhance our knowledge of the complexity of human brands and assist in the development of best-practice methods. Before athletes can develop successful brands, they need to understand their brand identity construct in its entirety. This research delivers a clear outline on the dimensions that constitute athlete brand identity, as well as the characteristics that comprise those dimensions. The

multidimensionality of the construct provides athletes and their stakeholders with a conceptual tool to define athlete brand identity, while the scale items comprise the specific characteristics required to evolve each dimension. When athletes aim to successfully build their personal brand, they need to be aware of the entire range of characteristics. The deliberate austerity of the ABIdS enables practical applications as it contains a manageable number of items, which ensures the scale is easy to use, quick to administer, and therefore user-friendly. Specifically, the ABIdS may prove useful for athletes in determining, evaluating, and delivering supportive data for determination of the true performance of their athlete brand.

3.7.2 Limitations

As with any other scientific research, this study is subject to a number of limitations. Although results suggest the ABIdS will be broadly applicable, further research on the individual athlete level will be necessary to confirm the reliability and stability of the instrument. The use of Facebook advertisements to promote the online survey to consumers may be seen as an additional limitation. Future research could investigate whether consumer recruitment through traditional means has an effect on the dimension of 'Fan Engagement', which is constructed by items that refer to social media. However, since social media are the biggest drivers of personal brands and an essential part of today's culture (Green, 2016), similar results would be anticipated. Additionally, Gosling *et al.* (2004) suggest prior studies have confirmed that participants recruited online do not appear to differ from participants recruited by more traditional means. The comparatively modest sample size and focus of Australian athletes limits the overall generalisation to a broader population of athletes. However, the ability to apply Rasch analysis on small sample sizes was particularly beneficial as it allows the examination of niche-populations, such as elite and pre-elite (emerging) athletes. Accumulating the number of respondents to meet statistical assumptions of classical test theory would have been difficult with the population targeted and the scope of this research. Despite this limitation, the study provides preliminary evidence and analysis of the athlete brand construct, which warrants further examination and validation on a larger athlete sample from diverse populations. Further tests with more participants will also show whether refinements are necessary with regard to the potential issue of disordered thresholds and targeting of the scale. Although the internal validity of the scale has been evaluated, future studies are required to investigate the brand identity construct and to fine-tune the ABIdS. Ideally, the data pool utilised for future studies should include a variety of different athletes, for example

concerning their culture, sports type, and age, to allow for further assessment of the presence of DIF across sub-groups.

3.7.3 Pathways to Future Research

The identification of the components of athlete brand identity and the development of the ABIdS has laid pathways for future research, particularly by way of comparing and contrasting athlete and consumer perspectives to determine congruency. According to Arai *et al.* (2014), an athlete's existing brand image should be reasonably consistent with the developed identity. Greater congruence between athlete brand identity and brand image will assist athletes in their public messaging, reduce consumer and sponsor confusion, and enable athletes to better target their marketing and align with appropriate sponsors. This, in turn, will increase increasing potential streams of revenue and reduce dependence upon public funding.

The ABIdS enables athletes to evaluate their own brand identity and to pinpoint specific areas of improvement so that athletes can develop a consistent strategy designed to establish successful personal brands. Given the development and increasing importance of personal branding in sports and other areas, more in depth research is required to investigate and truly understand the synergy between brand identity and brand image when it comes to human brands. The inclusion of both consumer and athlete perspectives should remain at the forefront of athlete brand research. Future studies should also investigate the ABIdS in different environments. If results of the ABIdS flag issues with an athlete's brand, a subsequent combination with qualitative research methods (such as consumer interviews) may be a way to provide athletes with even deeper insights into problem areas and help them devise specialised branding strategies.

Given the broad-reaching implications of this research to personal branding (not just for athletes but for all human branding efforts), it is anticipated that researchers will continue to investigate both perspectives of the branding spectrum and advance tools that allow comparison between the two.

Notes

[1] Detailed explanation of the Rasch analysis process can be found in Pallant and Tennant (2007).

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Chapter 4 Testing the ABIDS & Introducing Brand Congruence

Athlete Brand Congruence as a Measure to Evaluate Brand Identity and Image Fit

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Annika Linsner designed the study to test the previously developed ABIdS and introduce the athlete brand congruence measure with assistance from Kirstin Hallmann, Brad Hill and Popi Sotiriadou. Annika Linsner carried out the data collection and conducted the statistical analysis using SPSS and AMOS with contributions and reviews from Kirstin Hallmann, Brad Hill. Annika Linsner led the drafting of the manuscript and all authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

All Authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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4.1 Abstract

The paper introduces brand congruence as a measure to compare athlete and consumer perceptions of an athlete's brand. Congruence was measured on five elite athletes and their brands by $n = 794$ consumers participating in an online questionnaire. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling endorsed the applied scale as a reliable instrument for evaluating athlete brand identity from the consumer perspective and proved a valuable approach for relating athlete and consumer opinions. Comparison of the athlete and consumer perspectives using athlete brand congruence was established based on a fit index. We conclude that measuring athlete brand congruence helps to determine the cohesiveness between the intended athlete brand image and consumer interpretations and allows to evaluate and categorise the performance of athlete brands.

Keywords: athlete brand identity; brand congruence; athlete brand management; athlete perspective; consumer perspective.

4.2 Introduction

With the rapid development of social media as a personal branding tool, athletes are no longer reduced to their athletic abilities and behaviour on the field or known for being endorsers for brands they are sponsored by. Athletes are now seen as independent brands themselves (Kunkel, Walker, & Hodge, 2019). This has multiple benefits for athletes as building and maintaining a successful personal brand can attract endorsements, higher salaries and opportunities that last beyond athletic careers (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015). Many athletes are actively focussing on developing personal brands realizing the added benefits successful personal brand management offers (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013). Hence, alongside sporting achievements, athletes are equally, or often even more known for their portrayed personal brand identity and the image perceived by fans and consumers (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). This emerging trend of increased visibility and outreach of athletes has led to the necessity to thoughtfully develop and manage personal brands (Linsner, Hill, Hallmann, & Sotiriadou, 2020). Yet, athletes do not receive sufficient support or guidance on how to build strong brands and there is a lack of education regarding their social media presence (Geurin & McNary, 2020).

In brand management literature, the trend of personal branding, triggered by the increased importance of social media as a marketing tool, is well documented (e.g., Green, 2016; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). However, when it comes to athlete brands, the focus of studies conducted to date has been on brand image and consumer perceptions (Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2017) and the important athlete perspective has not been investigated (Linsner, Sotiriadou, Hill, & Hallmann, 2020). Further to this, studies that paid attention to social media use of athletes have mainly used qualitative case studies based on secondary analyses of famous athletes (e.g., Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). While these studies built essential knowledge, literature specifically analysing and evaluating athlete branding strategies and their effect remains limited (Linsner et al., 2020; Lobpries et al., 2017).

Lobpries et al. (2017) recognized that comparing the brand identity of athletes with the brand image perceived by consumers could provide invaluable insights to managers and academics alike. Following this appeal, and the need for greater understanding of the cohesiveness between brand messages sent by athletes and received by consumers, it is worth investigating brand congruence between the two perspectives. Hence, the purpose of this study is to add to the scant research of athlete brand identity and to answer the

question how brand congruence can be measured to evaluate the fit between athlete and consumer perceptions.

4.3 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

4.3.1 Brand Identity and Brand Congruence

Brand identity theory, which is rooted in identity theory (Stryker, 1987), suggests the most important step of the brand building process is to establish a distinct brand identity (Aaker, 1996). According to Da Silveira, Lages and Simões (2013) brand identity initiates from the inside of a brand (e.g. brand manager) and is influenced by several external components (e.g., brand image). Humans are capable of developing brand identity and therefore, can be considered brands as well. Similar to conventional brands, the initial step in human branding is to establish a distinguishable brand identity and to actively communicate this brand identity to consumers (Ghodeswar, 2008). Goffman (1959) posits a framework of self-presentation and impression management that helps individuals create and maintain a particular brand identity (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). Such a framework is now highly relevant with the explosion of social media use as the primary and most essential tool for personal brand management.

According to Goffman's (1959) framework, self-presentation is separated into frontstage and backstage performances and is an intentional and tangible component of a person's identity. Backstage is the private space where people show their true identity, whereas on the frontstage, people intentionally manage the impressions they give off to the public and consciously fabricate their identity (Goffman, 1959). Examples of this are personal information or pictures consciously shared on blogs and social media profiles (Labrecque et al., 2011). Hence, people are in control of their identity and how they want to be perceived by others. Goffman's (1959) approach proves particularly appropriate in modern times and is used by many researchers that investigate athletes' personal brands in a social media context (e.g., Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

Congruence is an essential factor for athlete brands as the brand image should be reasonably consistent with the developed identity (Arai et al., 2014). Strengthening the identity-image linkage builds strong brands with enhanced brand loyalty, brand value, emotional bonds and brand following (Nandan, 2005). This strengthening of the identity-image linkage is termed congruence which, in marketing, refers to the consistency or cohesiveness of the message (Lynch & Schuler, 1994). Congruence is a positive element as it assists consumers with processing brand communications (Fleck & Quester, 2007).

High congruence between what a company intends to deliver and consumers' actual perceptions of the brand represents the effectiveness of marketing communication strategies (Lee, Kim, & Won, 2018).

This investigation uses Bartlett's (1932) theoretical framework of image formation and schema theory to investigate congruence between athlete and consumer perceptions with regard to athlete brands. Bartlett's schema theory explains image formation as an indicator of how images exist in people's memory. Schema theory suggests that consumers' brand associations are influenced by direct experiences as well as predetermined opinions and knowledge of the brand's environment (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). These experiences and knowledge represent cognitive structures of beliefs and are referred to as schemas (Bettman, 1979). This theory has mostly been applied to evaluate image formation and congruence between two objects (e.g., event image/brand image, Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). However, its principles are also relevant for assessing one object but from two different perspectives. Within this research, congruence is examined between athletes' desired image of their brand (brand identity) and consumers' perceived image of that brand (cf., De Chernatony, 1999). The perceived image matches the desired image when the image attributes communicated by brand owners are understood by consumers (Ghodeswar, 2008).

Strategic management of athlete brands is essential to ensure congruence between brand identity and desired brand image. Misunderstandings (incongruencies) between internal branding goals and judgement by others represent branding failures (Labrecque et al., 2011). High congruence will assist athletes with their public messaging and enable improved targeting of their brand, increased frequency of social media followers and, alignment with appropriate sponsors. This will increase potential streams of revenue and reduce dependence upon public funding (Linsner et al., 2020). However, despite its importance for the development of effective brand communication and strong athlete brands, little is known about congruence between athlete brand identity and brand image (Lobpries et al., 2017).

4.3.2 Athlete Brands in the Age of Social Media

Athletes use social media platforms to develop relationships with their fans, gain popularity and build influential brands (Kunkel et al., 2019). Social media offer diverse access points and direct engagement opportunities with large audiences seemingly without any technological barriers and have become a popular tool for personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011), and are important components of successful athlete brand

creation (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). Social media platforms have changed how conventional brands communicate with consumers and paved the way for personal brands as influencers. Influencers are independent third-party endorsers who shape their audiences' opinions through social media (Freberg et al., 2011). They have sizable social media followers and are therefore a popular marketing tool used by brand professionals (Ki & Kim, 2019). The success of this marketing strategy relies on the attachment transfer from human brands to the promoted products/brands (Thomson, 2006). With this development, there are now more opportunities for brand collaborations than ever as they are no longer limited to star-athletes. However, audiences may be saturated with a myriad of personal brands to choose from (Khamis et al., 2017). This crowded space makes the development of distinct and noticeable personal brands essential to capture interest of consumers and attract attention of companies.

The success of athlete brands is linked to strong athletic performances, increased awareness through media coverage, as well as positive brand image and brand associations (Agyemang & Williams, 2013). Athletes essentially become influencers of consumer opinions and they can impact purchase decisions, the price they are willing to pay for products/services, and encourage positive word of mouth (Arai et al., 2013). However, athletes are constantly in risk of injuries or performance failures and as their physical capabilities naturally decrease over time, they have to build particularly strong brands to overcome periods of adversity during athletic careers in order to maintain their status (Arai et al., 2014; Lunardo, Gergaud, & Livat, 2015). Athletes with strong personal brands often benefit from the image they created during career transitions (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020), and even after their athletic career is finished (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Hence, much of athletes' future success depends on their ability to create and maintain distinctive personal brands (Hodge & Walker, 2015). It is therefore essential for athletes to develop and continuously nurture branding strategies that keep them engaged with their target audience. Each social media post can positively or negatively affect the athlete's brand instantly and requires careful consideration. It is crucial that any content athletes produce aligns with their desired brand image and creates added value for their followers (Na, Kunkel, & Doyle, 2020).

Establishing a particular identity and effectively communicating this identity to the public is the most important step of athlete branding (Ghodeswar, 2008). However, there is a lack of research that focusses on athlete brand building and brand identity creation as most research has focused on consumers instead of enabling evaluations from the athlete

perspective (Lobpries et al., 2017). Responding to this lack of research in this field, Authors et al. (2020) identified items and factors found important for elite athlete branding and developed a scale to measure athlete brand identity. While focussing on the athlete perspective, this scale also allows to identify consumer perceptions of athletes' brands which then permits congruence to be assessed. However, its use to evaluate athlete brand congruence between the two perspectives is yet to be determined.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Measures

Athlete Brand Identity

Athlete and consumer perceptions of the athlete brands were measured using the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (Linsner et al., 2020). The scale allows comparisons between athlete brand identity and consumers' perceived image of the athlete brand. It consists of four dimensions and their underlying items: athletic integrity (11 items), athletic success (9 items), fan engagement (7 items), and character traits (5 items). The items were measured using a 0 to 10 rating scale (0 = the athlete brand does not reflect this at all; 10 = the athlete brand absolutely reflects this). They are displayed in Table 5.

Athlete Brand Familiarity

It was important that participants were familiar with the athlete brand to ensure they could offer truthful evaluations. Participants were provided a short biography and were asked to spend time on the athlete's primary social media accounts. The level of familiarity was checked before and after providing this information. Brand familiarity was measured using a three-item, seven-point scale with the anchors familiar/unfamiliar, inexperienced/experienced, and knowledgeable/not knowledgeable. In prior research the reliability of this scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .85$ (Kent & Allen, 1994).

Additional Measures

Additional measures within the questionnaire sought information that included respondents' general awareness of athlete brands, prior knowledge of the athlete they were assigned to, as well as demographic questions on age and gender.

4.4.2 Data Collection and Participant Characteristics

The brands of five Australian elite athletes, identified with the help of a regional high-performance sports organization, served as context for this research. All five athletes (2 females, 3 males) practiced individual sports and ranged in age from 22 to 45. Data of the consumer sample were collected using an online questionnaire and a preceding randomizer question assigned participants to one of the athletes. The questionnaire was distributed using targeted Facebook ads and the crowdsourcing platform Prolific. Using Facebook ads to distribute the survey to a targeted audience is a time and cost-effective method to recruit research participants (Gilligan, Kypri, & Bourke 2014). Prolific is an online platform for subject recruitment that explicitly caters to researchers (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Both alternatives were comparatively inexpensive and allowed data collection in a short time frame. In this investigation recruitment through Prolific proved to be more efficient than Facebook ads. Although the number of completed responses between the two outlets were similar (Prolific=375; Facebook=419), recruitment through Prolific was faster and more effective with a particularly low drop-out rate (Prolific=55; Facebook=344). When compared to similar platforms such as MTurk, Peer et al. (2017) found that Prolific users were honest and naïve participants and provided higher quality of data. Only fully completed surveys were included, entries that showed consistent missing values were deleted. In total, 794 participants fully completed the survey (Athlete 1 $n=154$; Athlete 2 $n=188$; Athlete 3 $n=141$; Athlete 4 $n=151$; Athlete 5 $n=160$).

The average age of the Australian consumer sample was 30 years old, with 428 (53.9%) female and 366 (46.1%) male participants. The vast majority of consumers were aware of the existence of athlete brands (663; 83.5%) and 555 (69.9%) participants followed athlete(s) on social media. No significant gender difference was noticeable. Specifically, 71.7% of female and 67.8% of male participants followed athlete(s) on social media. Only 117 participants (14.7%) knew the athlete they were assigned to and of those, only 21 (17.9%) followed that athlete on social media.

4.4.3 Data Analysis

A two-step approach was used to test the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIDS) by first estimating a measurement model, followed by a structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to assess the relationships between the 32 observed variables and four latent constructs. Composite reliability (threshold $>.6$) and convergent validity (threshold $>.5$) were assessed to identify potential correlations between the latent constructs and to determine whether the

observed variables were reliably measuring the proposed latent constructs (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Discriminant validity was evaluated based on the average variance extracted (AVE) of any two constructs and their squared correlation, whereby the AVE of those two constructs is required to be higher than their squared correlation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The use of CFA was appropriate given the sample size exceeded $n=200$ and each dimension was measured by at least three items (Hair et al., 2010).

Although available literature consents that model fit should be determined by a number of fit indices with heterogeneous performance characteristics, there are different opinions which procedure best examines model fit (e.g., Brown, 2006; Hu & Bentler, 1999). This study followed Brown's (2006) recommendations and included exact model fit and normed model fit (chi square divided by degrees of freedom), comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The chi square value of the exact model fit should be non-significant to accept the model. However, this value is very sensitive to sample size and therefore a combination of other fit indices is recommended to assess model fit (Brown, 2006). Following this recommendation, the normed model fit (χ^2/df) was evaluated as it adjusts for model complexity, with a suggested threshold below 5 (Hair et al., 2010). The CFI value should exceed .9 and SRMR values should be close to .08 or below (Hu & Bentler, 1999). RMSEA values lower than .05 suggest good model fit, however, values less than .08 are also acceptable demonstrating adequate model fit (Brown, 2006; Hair et al., 2010). Further, the maximum likelihood estimator was employed.

Brand Congruence

The congruence variable was developed using the image fit measure by Musante et al. (1999). This fit measure calculates the absolute differences between athlete and consumer perceptions of the athlete's brand using all items from the ABIDS. These differences were used to compose the Euclidean Distance for each item. Following Musante et al.'s (1999) research, the fit indices for brand congruence are anchored at one for a perfect fit. The following equation was used to calculate the athlete brand congruence index: $1 - \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - y_i)^2}$. In this equation, x_i represents the i^{th} score of the athlete perception, y_i is the i^{th} score of the consumer perceptions. The equation was applied to every respondent and by dividing the results obtained from the Euclidian Distance by the highest possible squared distance results showed values between zero (poor congruence) and one (high congruence). This procedure allowed establishing

congruence scores for each athlete's brand. Adhering to Musante et al.'s (1999) analysis, any score above 0.7 indicated high congruence between consumer and athlete responses.

4.5 Results

4.5.1 Measurement Model

The CFA revealed an acceptable fit and the results confirmed reliability and validity of the estimated model. For all four constructs composite reliability was high ($CR > .95$), which also applied to the scale reliability ($\alpha > .90$). Convergent validity was assessed using the AVE, which was higher than .7 for all constructs. Tables 5 and 6 provide an overview of these results.

The initial measurement model included 32 items representing four dimensions. Re-specifications were investigated in an attempt to obtain the most psychometrically sound measurement model. Although results of the CFA revealed the overall fit of the model to the data was acceptable, the item *well-conditioned body* was the only item with a loading less than 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). It was also found to be problematic from the athlete perspective as two of the athletes scored their brand low within this area despite belonging to the national elite of their sport. Based on these considerations, the item *well-conditioned body* was removed from the scale. Elimination of this item led to improvements of overall model fit and relevant values ($\chi^2(428) = 2038.846$ at $p \leq .001$, SRMR = .044, CFI = .918, and RMSEA = .069 with a 90% confidence interval of .066 – .072).

Table 5 Results of the Measurement Model

Factors / Indicators	λ^+	SE ⁺⁺	CR ⁺⁺⁺	α^{+++}	AVE ⁺⁺⁺
Athletic Integrity			.969	.946	.742
self-integrity (being true to own values/believes)	.814 ^a				
respect for opponents and other players	.775***	.037			
behave according to right practice	.814***	.035			
genuine	.794***	.038			
dedicated	.774***	.034			
show fair play	.830***	.036			
respected	.791***	.034			
self-belief	.725***	.036			
trustworthy	.793***	.037			
hard working	.789***	.033			
clean (no use of PEDs)	.738***	.039			
Athletic Success			.954	.920	.722
prominent athletic skills	.751***	.038			
competitive	.751***	.038			
competition style that is exciting to watch	.735***	.045			
distinctive	.782***	.041			
star player	.800***	.040			
status symbol (legend)	.724***	.046			
repeatability	.806***	.037			
successful	.816 ^a				
Fan Engagement			.954	.920	.747
appreciation for fans/spectators	.807 ^a				
engage in Social Media	.763***	.039			
interact with fans	.782***	.039			
share athletic life with fans	.779***	.038			
supported by fans	.821***	.039			
responsive to media attention	.788***	.040			
Social Media is in line with athlete brand	.784***	.037			
Character Traits			.954	.918	.805
cooperative	.855 ^a				
open minded	.845***	.034			
emotionally stable	.794***	.034			
organised	.824***	.034			
adaptable to change	.842***	.035			
χ^2 (df); p	2038.846 (428); p ≤ .001				
χ^2/df	4.764				
CFI	.918				
SRMR	.0438				
RMSEA (90% confidence interval); pclose	.069 (.066-.072); pclose ≤ .001				

Note: + standardized factor loading; ++ standard error; +++ CR = composite reliability; α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; ^a in AMOS = analysis of moment structures, one loading has to be fixed to 1, therefore no t-value and standard error can be computed for this factor; ***p ≤ .001; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

Table 6 *Correlations of the Constructs in the Final Measurement Model*

	Athletic Integrity	Athletic Success	Fan Engagement	Character Traits
Athletic Integrity	1			
Athletic Success	.79 (.62)	1		
Fan Engagement	.71 (.50)	.81 (.65)	1	
Character Traits	.82 (.67)	.79 (.62)	.78 (.61)	1

Note: squared correlations are in parentheses.

4.5.2 Structural Model

In the next step, a structural equation model (SEM) was developed to assess the statistical significance of the relationships between the four constructs and athlete brand identity. Results confirmed the first-order factors Athletic Integrity, Athletic Success, Fan Engagement and Character Traits define athlete brand identity. The model is displayed in Figure 5.

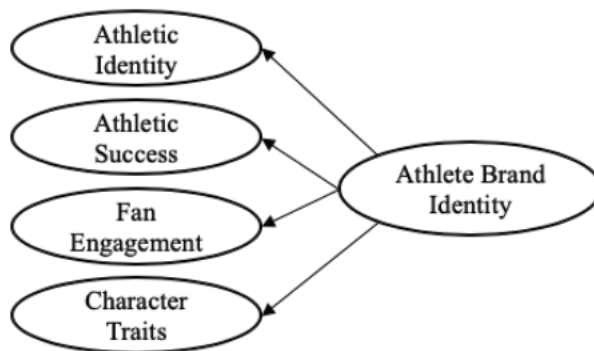


Figure 5 Structural model estimated including only the latent constructs

The model fit supported the proposed structure and the chi-square goodness of fit test showed the final model fit the data well ($\chi^2(430) = 2078.604, p \leq .001, SRMR = .046, CFI = .917, RMSEA = .070$ with a 90% confidence interval of .067–.073).

Results of the SEM for the overall model are presented in Table 7. All paths for the factor loadings were significant at $p \leq 0.001$ showing the items are significant predictors for their latent constructs. The identity construct was significantly defined by its four dimensions (Athletic Integrity = .873; Athletic Success = .899; Fan Engagement = .859; Character Traits = .908).

Table 7 Results of the Structural Equation Model

Factors / Indicators	λ^+	β^+
Athletic Integrity → Athlete Brand Identity		.873 ^a
self-integrity (being true to own values/believes)	.813 ^a	
respect for opponents and other players	.775***	
behave according to right practice	.813***	
genuine	.794***	
dedicated	.775***	
show fair play	.829***	
respected	.792***	
self-belief	.726***	
trustworthy	.793***	
hard working	.789***	
clean (no use of PEDs)	.738***	
Athletic Success → Athlete Brand Identity		.899***
prominent athletic skills	.752***	
competitive	.751***	
competition style that is exciting to watch	.735***	
distinctive	.783***	
star player	.797***	
status symbol (legend)	.723***	
repeatability	.808***	
successful	.816 ^a	
Fan Engagement → Athlete Brand Identity		.859***
appreciation for fans/spectators	.808 ^a	
engage in Social Media	.764***	
interact with fans	.781***	
share athletic life with fans	.781***	
supported by fans	.818***	
responsive to media attention	.785***	
Social Media is in line with athlete brand	.786***	
Character Traits → Athlete Brand Identity		.908***
cooperative	.853 ^a	
open minded	.846***	
emotionally stable	.792***	
organised	.825***	
adaptable to change	.845***	

Note: + standardized direct effects (λ = latent construct and β = indicators); ^a in AMOS = analysis of moment structures, one loading has to be fixed to 1, therefore no t-value and standard error can be computed for this factor; *** $p \leq .001$.

4.5.4 Athlete Brand Congruence

Based on the Euclidian Distance brand congruence (fit between athlete and consumer perceptions) was calculated for each athlete brand (see Table 8).

Table 8 *Athlete Brand Congruence Scores of all Athletes*

	Overall Brand Congruence	Athletic Integrity	Athletic Success	Fan Engagement	Character Traits
Athlete 1 (<i>n</i> =154)	0.73 (0.10)	0.75 (0.11)	0.74 (0.10)	0.72 (0.12)	0.76 (0.11)
Athlete 2 (<i>n</i> =188)	0.71 (0.07)	0.76 (0.09)	0.75 (0.11)	0.61 (0.12)	0.77 (0.10)
Athlete 3 (<i>n</i> =141)	0.77 (0.08)	0.81 (0.13)	0.78 (0.07)	0.73 (0.11)	0.79 (0.13)
Athlete 4 (<i>n</i> =151)	0.72 (0.09)	0.75 (0.16)	0.68 (0.09)	0.76 (0.10)	0.77 (0.13)
Athlete 5 (<i>n</i> =160)	0.67 (0.14)	0.71 (0.17)	0.66 (0.12)	0.66 (0.18)	0.67 (0.17)

Notes: results show mean values between 0 (poor congruence) and 1 (high congruence), standard deviations are displayed in parentheses.

Overall congruence for all brands, with the exception of Athlete 5 (0.67), was high (0.71 – 0.77). Athlete 3’s brand achieved the highest overall congruence of 0.77 and also recorded the highest score across all dimensions (Athletic Integrity = 0.81). The lowest congruence score among dimensions was reported for Athlete 2 (Fan Engagement = 0.61) indicating disparities existed between athlete and consumer perceptions on that dimension. With respect to overall congruence, Athlete 5’s score (0.67) was the only overall score below the 0.70 threshold that indicates high congruence. Closer inspection of Table 8 reveals Athlete 5 recorded the lowest congruence across three (Athlete Integrity, Athletic Success and Character Traits) of the four dimensions. The score of 0.66 for Fan Engagement was second lowest among athletes. Through use of Athlete 5’s scores, practical utility of the ABIDS in combination with the brand congruence measure is demonstrated. Table 9 details the item scores of the three poor performing dimensions for Athlete 5 to illustrate origins of the incongruencies. This breakdown of results for Athlete 5 highlights substantial differences between athlete and consumer perceptions on the item level of up to 4.42 points (exciting competition style). Notice the athlete has rated themselves relatively highly for most items across the athletic success dimensions (8-10) except for distinctive (6) and status symbol (2) yet, consumers have consistently rated the athlete lower across items rated highly by the athlete indicating incongruencies between athlete and consumer perceptions.

Table 9 Athlete 5: Item Scores of Athletic Success, Fan Engagement & Character Traits

Athletic Success	successful	prominent athletic skills	competitive	exciting competition style	distinctive	star player	status symbol	repeatability
Athlete 5	10	10	10	10	6	9	2	8
Consumers (n=160)	7.01	7.19	7.22	5.58	5.76	6.19	4.69	6.97
Fan Engagement	appreciation for fans & spectators	engagement in Social Media	interaction with fans	share athletic life with fans	supported by fans	responsive to media attention	Social Media is in line with athlete brand	
Athlete 5	9	8	10	10	10	10	10	
Consumers (n=160)	6.69	7.16	6.17	7.25	6.57	5.96	7.09	
Character Traits	cooperative	open minded	emotionally stable	organised	adaptable to change			
Athlete 5	8	10	10	8	10			
Consumers (n=160)	6.59	6.09	6.97	6.53	6.13			

Response Scale: 0=the athlete brand does not reflect this at all; 10=the athlete brand absolutely reflects this

4.6 Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this paper was to test an athlete brand identity scale and assess its effectiveness in measuring congruence between athlete brand identity and consumers' perceptions of that identity. CFA and SEM endorsed the ABIDS as a reliable instrument for evaluating athlete brand identity from the consumer perspective and proved a valuable approach for relating athlete and consumer opinions. Overall, the brand congruence measure demonstrated to be a successful technique to provide precise and candid identification of incongruencies between athlete and consumer perspectives.

Results showed that congruence of most athlete brands was high, which implied that athletes' brand identity communications largely conformed to consumers' brand image perceptions. This is important as the brand image of athletes should be reasonably consistent with the developed identity (Arai et al., 2013). Athlete 5 was the only athlete that received an overall congruence score below the 0.7 threshold and revealed multiple dimension incongruencies. This lower congruence score highlights differences between internal brand awareness and external perceptions and provides reasons for necessary adjustments of personal branding strategies. It is essential for Athlete 5 to react on this finding as mismatches between the athlete's perspective and judgement by consumers represent branding failures (cf., Labrecque et al., 2011). Athlete 5 needs their brand to be perceived with higher levels of congruence to increase effective communication with consumers. It is recommended for Athlete 5 to re-evaluate their brand goals and focus on developing strategies to improve congruence on items identified within the ABIDS where greatest disparity resulted between athlete and consumer perceptions.

Results show incongruence did not always result from higher ratings of brand identity by the athlete. Findings revealed on some items consumers rated athletes more highly creating incongruence. Where athletes rated their brands higher than consumers, this indicated an overestimation of the brand's performance. In this context, results function as a 'reality-check' and highlight areas where brand communication is not received by consumers as intended. Where athletes underestimated their brands and consumers provided higher scores athletes can take confidence from their branding efforts. The ABIDS in combination with brand congruence cannot only be used to reveal high and low congruence but it can identify items that require the athlete to improve. For example, even when congruence is high between items, if that item score is low, particularly from the consumer perspective then that item would need improving to enhance the athlete's image and attract or maintain sponsors. Additionally, item scores

can be used as benchmarks to evaluate branding strategies employed to enhance the athlete's image and effectiveness of that branding strategy. Further the scale can act as a confirmatory measure to give athletes confidence their brand is perceived as intended. This demonstrates the multifaceted use and practicality of the ABIDS in combination with the athlete brand congruence measure.

Results clearly indicate the existence of significant links between athlete brand identity and its four dimensions used in the ABIDS. The only alteration to the original ABIDS was removal of the item *well-conditioned body* from the Athletic Success dimension. An explanation of the inconsistency with this item could be the complexity of objectively evaluating a well-conditioned body and that consumers may believe the condition of an athlete's body does not necessarily determine athletic success. The item also appeared to be problematic from the athlete perspective. One of the elite sports persons used in the study was an elite paraplegic athlete and even though the athlete was achieving highly successful results and therefore, demanded a superior physical body shape, the athlete scored this *well-conditioned body* item very low. If athletes give their brand a low score in this area, while evidently being in good physical condition and body shape to succeed in their sport, further investigation would appear warranted from a psychological perspective rather than brand related explorations. Although the well-conditioned body of an athlete has merit within athlete brand identity, including this item would have biased results which justified its elimination. Overall, the ABIDS demonstrated its usefulness to evaluate athlete brands.

The adaptation of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation framework in the brand spectrum and the link to Aaker's (1996) brand identity theory provide *theoretical contributions* to the athlete brand research domain. This research adds to the connection between the two theories by highlighting the centrality of conscious brand identity creation as the driver of brand image. Specifically, as personal brands of athletes are assumed to be intentionally managed (frontstage), socially constructed and dynamic in nature. This connection is particularly relevant within social media given it has become the primary and most essential tool for personal brand management (e.g., Na et al., 2020). Depending on the context, athlete brands may become influencers that shape the opinions of their audience. This further demonstrates the relevance of Goffman and Aaker's advancements, as athletes intentionally manage the impressions they give off to their audience to fabricate distinctive public images for commercial or cultural benefits.

Additionally, this study contributes to theory by introducing brand congruence to the athlete brand research domain. Congruence between athlete and consumer perceptions is essential as it helps to establish powerful athlete brands (Linsner et al., 2020). Previous research mainly focussed on the consumer perspective of athlete brands, neglecting that brand image is partly driven and established by brand identity (Lobpries et al., 2017). The inclusion of athlete and consumer opinions within one study is innovative and has not been simultaneously tested before when evaluating athlete brands. A further benefit of this study is its replicability that enables versatile application in the athlete branding spectrum. Even though the ABIdS has been particularly developed for athlete brands, the applied brand congruence measure is not limited to this research field and allows application across multiple disciplines.

It is important to acknowledge *study limitations* and address areas for *future investigation*. The first limitation concerns the public recognition of the five athletes participating in this study. As the goal was to validate the ABIdS, it was essential to achieve a large sample size. However, due to the athletes being relatively unknown to the general public it was difficult to find large random samples with high familiarity. This problem was moderated by including athlete information in the questionnaire to ensure each participant could familiarize themselves before starting the evaluation. However, higher athlete familiarity may increase the significance and meaningfulness of brand evaluations. Further, although the five athletes were from different sports, they all practiced individual disciplines. Future research should use samples with a more diverse background (e.g., team sport athletes) to further develop and refine the psychometric properties of the scale. It would also be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to evaluate developments of athlete brands over time and throughout different stages of the natural sport-life-cycle. Although previous studies confirm the benefits of high congruence (e.g., Lee et al., 2018), investigating effects of high/low congruence on athlete brands demands further attention.

4.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to establish a congruence measure to compare athlete and consumer perceptions regarding athlete brands by applying the ABIdS. Using CFA and SEM, the model was tested and the latent constructs of Athletic Identity, Athletic Success, Fan Engagement and Character Traits were confirmed to be significant determinants of athlete brand identity. Collecting data from athletes and consumers on the same scale enabled the analysis of congruence based on Musante et al.'s (1999) fit

measure. In combination, the ABIdS and the congruence measure are an effective method to evaluate and categorise the performance of athlete brands. This is also useful for companies looking to investigate the performance of their athlete endorsers/influencers in contrast to consumer opinions as companies may collaborate with athletes to capitalize on their high level of influence.

More in depth research is required to investigate and truly understand the synergy between brand identity and brand image of human brands given the opportunities and challenges that come along with the technological developments of new media in the realm of personal branding. Including athlete and consumer perspectives provides athletes and their stakeholders with a better understanding of their brand performance and should remain at the forefront within this research domain.

4.8 References

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Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion of the Research Project

This thesis examined the personal brand of athletes from the perspective of the athlete (i.e., athlete brand identity) in order to answer the overarching RQ of “How can

athlete brands be measured and evaluated to assist athletes develop successful branding strategies?”

Specifically, the studies in this thesis improve the understanding of athlete brand identity, particularly from the athletes’ perspective, and introduce a measure that could assist athletes in developing successful branding strategies. This was accomplished by employing a three-study mixed-method research design. The first study presented a SQLR which examines existing research advancements within the athlete brand research domain. The knowledge gaps identified in the SQLR were used to formulate research questions that guided studies 2 and 3. Study 2 focussed on athlete brand identity and included the development of the ABIdS, which enables assessment of an athlete’s brand identity. Study 3 tested the ABIdS on five elite Australian athlete brands and introduced the brand congruence measure to identify differences and similarities between athlete and consumer opinions about the athlete’s brand. The most significant implication of these three studies is the development of a systematic understanding of brand identity, its relationship to brand image and the introduction of brand congruence for athlete brands. This knowledge can be used by brand insiders, such as high-performance sports managers, to assist athletes in developing successful branding strategies.

The three studies were presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this PhD thesis and each of these chapters included a discussion of the respective results. This chapter provides insights into the decision-making process of the applied strategies and outlines how the three sequential studies built on each other to answer the principal RQ. This is then followed by the ways the scale can provide practical ideas and opportunities to educate athletes on brand strategies and application of the scale in a high-performance management context. The chapter concludes with the theoretical advancements of this thesis in the area of athlete branding and the future prospects of advancing this work with further testing and research.

5.1 The Use of Sequential Studies to Answer the Research Question

This section discusses how the results of the three sequential studies made it possible to answer the principal research question and begin to fill the gap in knowledge surrounding athlete brand identity from the athletes’ perspective.

5.1.1 The Systematic Quantitative Literature Review (Study 1)

The overarching RQ served as the starting point for the PhD project. However, it was not possible to answer this question immediately as multiple components within this

field of study were not clearly defined nor studied scientifically at the time of commencement of this research project. An initial search of literature showed scales existed that measured and evaluated the brands of athletes, such as Arai, Ko and Kaplanidou's (2013) SABI. However, all existing scales focussed on the consumer perspective of the athlete brand, ignoring the athlete's perspective (i.e., athlete brand identity). In particular in the age of social media understanding of their own brand identity and the messages they project is important for athletes in developing strong personal brands to increase frequencies of fans, followers or supporters that can improve the likelihood of commercial gains and success. Prior literature (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Walsh & Williams, 2017) revealed, it was possible to get a good understanding of the outsiders' view regarding the brand of an athlete, yet research on the insider perspective (i.e., the athletes themselves) was lacking similar thoroughness (cf. Lobpries, 2014). Significantly, the symbiotic relationship between brand and consumer implied there is a need for combining the consumer with the brand insider perspectives and for examining brand congruence when assessing the performance of brands. However, the lack of research on the athletes' view of their brands also meant that it was not possible to combine the perspectives to identify the differences or similarities between athlete and consumer opinions, which is also necessary to provide essential feedback on the branding strategies of athletes.

As this initial search of literature left more questions than answers, it was crucial to first examine the status quo of science in the athlete brand research domain and to determine a suitable research approach. This was achieved by means of a systematic review of available athlete brand literature. Using a SQLR proved especially beneficial for this study as its reproducible nature allowed to continuously add new publications to keep up to date with the latest developments in the athlete brand research field. The latter is particularly suitable for PhD projects as they often stretch over several years and it is essential to be well informed of all research advancements throughout this time (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The research questions guiding the SQLR were related to uncovering any research advancements, theories and frameworks, as well as any scales developed in the field of athlete branding (cf., Chapter 1.2). Specifically, examination of existing measures of athlete brand identity and image was fundamental to this process in order to establish an empirical analysis for developing robust tools to measure and assess the athlete brand.

Findings of the SQLR revealed the various approaches researchers have used, the ways in which participants or subjects have been utilised and the theories which have informed the athlete brand research field. Most essentially, results highlighted, the athlete brand had mainly been investigated focussing on the perspective of consumers, yet there was no consistent conceptual approach or broad adoption of applicable scales and frameworks. This finding conforms to the majority of sport management research, which predominantly investigates brand equity from an outside-in approach and concentrates on understanding behaviour of fans and consumers (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Shilbury, 2011). In accordance with findings by Lobpries (2014), the SQLR helped identify only a few studies that emphasise strategic brand building by investigating the role and importance of brand identity creation in athlete branding. This focus on the consumer perspective is not surprising given that the fundamental objectives of successful brand management are consumer driven outcomes and measurable effects such as brand loyalty, increased fan bases and viewership, and other economic benefits (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). Evidently, investigating the consumer perspective is imperative and the results of studies conducted from this perspective provide essential feedback on how the athlete brand is perceived in the minds of its customers (e.g., fan base, followers, viewership).

However, according to the principles of brand management, brand identity is a set of associations which brand managers intend to build and sustain (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002), and is the key driver of all other brand-related activities, such as brand image (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009). In fact, Lobpries, Bennett and Bryson (2017) found that brand identity is the foundation of all personal branding efforts for athletes that are looking to generate valuable brands that last beyond their athletic careers. Understanding brand identity and the way consumers form positive or negative images of the athlete brand based on this identity is crucial. Yet, research that investigates athlete brand building from the perspective of the athletes remained limited (Lobpries et al., 2017). Besides highlighting the centrality of athlete brand identity, Lobpries et al. (2017) further suggested to compare the brand identity of athletes with consumers' perceived brand image (i.e., brand congruence). Therefore, the aims for the second study were to begin to fill this gap in knowledge and define the construct of athlete brand identity by identifying its dimensions and to develop a scale that facilitates evaluations of an athlete's brand identity from the athlete but also from the consumer perspectives as, according to Lobpries et al. (2017), this could provide valuable practical and theoretical insight.

5.1.2 Developing the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (Study 2)

Athletes have a significant influence upon the performance of their brand and athlete brand research should be inclusive of both internal and external viewpoints (Lobpries et al., 2017). With this call for action in mind as well as the identified lack of a clear definition of athlete brand identity, the second study of this PhD focused on the athlete perspective.

Importantly, people may develop unfavourable brand associations if an athlete's desired image (brand identity) is not in line with the reality of consumers, which can then harm the reputation of the brand (c.f., Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018). However, only if the athlete perspective is thoroughly analysed and included in brand evaluations is it possible to provide detailed advice to athletes on how their intended brand message is actually received by consumers (Linsner, Sotiriadou, Hill, & Hallmann, 2020b). Thus, in Study 2 athlete brand identity was scrutinized and the ABIdS was developed using Rasch analysis.

A rigorous three-stage process of item generation, item reduction and detailed psychometric evaluation lead to the identification of the four athlete brand identity dimensions: Athletic Integrity, Athletic Success, Fan Engagement, and Character Traits. As the items used in the scale were initially assessed through expert evaluations and reconfirmed from athletes, many items were excluded that are commonly found on brand image scales (and considered important for brand image creation) as they were deemed not relevant to athlete brand identity. Even though the final ABIdS contained several identical items and common characteristics seen in brand image measures, such as the Arai et al.'s (2013) SABI, there was a clear shift in focus towards athlete brand features that can be directly influenced and potentially changed by the athletes themselves. For example, the ABIdS does not contain subjective items related to the athlete's physical appearance outside of their sport (e.g., beauty, attractiveness, style). Although these items have merit from an image perspective, they represent subjective opinions that do not allow for objective brand evaluations. Significantly, the emergence of Fan Engagement as an isolated component of athlete brand identity demonstrated the growing importance of social media to athlete brands and substantiated the requirement that athletes have to incorporate social media as an instrumental part of their personal branding strategies. Even though most of the Fan Engagement items were items suggested by athlete experts, which have not been used in previous scales (cf. Section 3.6), the growing importance of engaging fans through social media is also evident in the direction of research in recent

years. Technological developments and the shift towards self-branding strategies through social media were congruent with increased research interest in this field. In fact, results of the SQLR showed that 22 of 43 articles published between 2012 and 2019 investigated the athlete or team brand with a focus on social media (Linsner et al., 2020b). Recent publications by Na, Kunkel and Doyle (2020) and Su et al. (2020) confirm and continue this trend, which further accentuates social media as the integral branding instrument for athletes.

Notably, the ABIdS was the first scale in the extended field of sports management that was developed using Rasch analysis. A few different factors influenced the decision to use this novel approach as opposed to conventional measurement approaches, such as CTT. The capability and effectiveness of Rasch analysis to conduct statistical analysis with comparatively small sample sizes (McCreary et al., 2013), the ability to evaluate to latent variables, as well as the capacity to include participants despite the occurrence of missing data (Ewing, Salzberger, & Sinkovics, 2005) proved particularly appropriate and useful for this research project. Even though Rasch analysis received prominence in other research domains it had not previously been used within sports marketing research and its application therefore offered the opportunity to introduce a robust analytical model into this field of science.

Overall, use of Rasch analysis in the development of the ABIdS successfully identified the four dimensions integral to athlete brand identity formation and proved a reliable scale for measuring athlete brand identity. To demonstrate practical utility and validity of the scale, ABIdS was employed to investigate how the perception of the athletes regarding their own brand compares to those of consumers. Although the ABIdS has a clear focus on brand identity, adding the consumer perspective was essential to ensure the scale could be used to measure congruence between the two viewpoints. Therefore, the purpose of the final study was twofold. First, to test reliability and validity of the ABIdS. Second, include a brand congruence measure to compare athlete and consumer perceptions to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of brand messages sent by the athlete and received by the consumer. Study 3 provides description of ABIdS testing using five authentic elite athlete brands.

5.1.3 Introducing Athlete Brand Congruence (Study 3)

The previous studies of this PhD thesis have established the substantiality of brand identity for successful athlete brand management. Strategic management of athlete brands is essential to ensure congruence with the desired brand image (cf., Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). According to Arai et al. (2013), the brand image of athletes should be reasonably consistent with the developed identity. Interestingly, Roy and Banerjee (2014) found many brands have faced issues due to a lack of alignment and consistency between brand identity and brand image. Their finding indicates that greater congruence between the two will assist athletes in their public messaging, reduce consumer and sponsor confusion, and enable athletes to better target their marketing and align with appropriate sponsors. This, in turn, will increase potential streams of revenue and reduce dependence upon public funding (Linsner, Hill, Hallmann, & Sotiriadou, 2020a). Looking at it from the consumer perspective, athlete brand congruence also has positive effects for associated business partners, such as increased ticket sales or memberships (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2015).

These conclusions confirmed the essentiality of brand congruence for athlete brand research and for measuring the effectiveness of athlete brand strategies. Consequently, the final study of this research project sought to identify a way to evaluate the relationship between athlete and consumer perspectives. For this purpose, Study 3 tested the ABIDS on the personal brands of five Australian elite athletes. The athletes that volunteered for this project were all supported by the Queensland Academy of Sport and covered a range of different demographics relating to sports, gender and age. Athletes and consumers were required to evaluate the athlete brand on the same scale. Including both perspectives allowed for the analysis of brand congruence, which was developed based on Musante, Milne and McDonald's (1999) fit measure. Results of the data analysis endorsed the ABIDS as a reliable and valid instrument for measuring athlete brand identity from the consumer and athlete perspectives. Further, the application of the athlete brand congruence measure proved to be a successful technique to provide precise and candid identification of incongruencies between the two viewpoints. Most significantly, in combination the ABIDS and the athlete brand congruence measure are an effective method to evaluate and categorise athlete brands.

5.2 Practical Implications

The developed ABIDS provides practical utility in that it can assist athletes to measure and evaluate their brands based on the four dimensions that constitute athlete brand identity. The different characteristics (i.e., items) of each dimension give athletes an understanding of what areas to focus on, or need improving, for their branding efforts. Items within the ABIDS can also illustrate to athletes which elements of their identity are deemed most essential to their brand. The ABIDS is particularly valuable as its use is not limited to the athletes themselves but it can also be used on consumers to allow external evaluation of an athlete's brand. This is essential as gaining insights from the two different perspectives enables comparisons in form of brand congruence. Based on the outcomes of these measures, athletes can develop successful branding strategies. The most substantial practical contributions of this research project are discussed in the following section.

5.2.1 Educational Value to Athletes and High-Performance Sports Organisations

Hodge and Walker (2015) argued that athletes do not receive sufficient support or guidance on how to build strong brands. In fact, less than 30% of the athletes that participated in this research project have received media communications training. This lack of education, in particular regarding the social media presence of athletes, has also been confirmed by Geurin and McNary (2020). Significantly, high-performance sports organisations (HPSOs) can use the outcomes of this research project to extend their educational portfolio offered to their elite athletes. For example, this could be realised by delivering online learning modules that outline and exemplify all essential characteristics of athlete brand identity as the key focus for athletes' personal brand development. Besides highlighting the importance and benefits of successful brand creation, these learning modules should include detailed examples on each characteristic of the four dimensions of athlete brand identity (see Section 5.2.2).

The identified lack of media communications training offered to athletes is also problematic as athletes may not be fully aware of the risks and challenges of social media. While social media is a necessary medium for personal branding, every athlete that uses such platforms may be exposed to online harassment, cyber-bullying and abusive comments (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Building awareness and resilience for such negative conduct is crucial, in particular for young athletes. HPSOs could invite guest speakers (e.g., cyber-crime specialists, psychologists) for athlete brand building seminars to alert and educate athletes on the risks they face online and how they can protect themselves.

To build a successful athlete brand is not an easy task and it is important that athletes receive comprehensive social media training to prepare them not only for the opportunities and benefits but also for the many issues and challenges that can occur. It should be the obligation of HPSOs to support their athletes with the development of their brands and to follow up on the athletes' progress at regular intervals.

5.2.2 A Practical Guide for Successful Athlete Brand Building

It is essential that athletes understand their brand identity construct in its entirety and any branding strategies should reflect who the athlete is on and off the field (Lobpries et al., 2017). In response to the identified need for athlete brand identity and brand strategy educational advancements, this section provides athletes with a practical guide for successful brand building and outlines the areas that are essential for athlete brand development. The ABIDS provides athletes and their stakeholders with a conceptual tool to define athlete brand identity while the scale items comprise the specific characteristics required to evolve each of the four dimensions. When athletes aim to successfully build their personal brand, they need to consider the entire range of characteristics of the ABIDS. Athletes and practitioners can apply these findings to their athlete brand strategies. Specific examples of each dimension are outlined below:

The first dimension of athlete brand identity is *Athletic Integrity* and includes items that relate to the integrity of athletes and their moral attitude in a sports related environment. For example, one of the emerging items that is part of this dimension is *clean (not using Performance Enhancing Agents [PEAs])*. Recurring doping scandals and discussions (e.g., Russia's Olympic affair) have placed expectations on athletes to proactively establish themselves as clean and honest brands, although they may have never been associated with PEAs in the past. Hence, to establish themselves as *clean*, athletes could for example openly oppose the use of drugs by supporting anti-doping motions within their respective sports. One of the prime examples here is elite Australian swimmer Mac Horton, who publicly dissented rival Sun Yang due to his doping offences. By taking a stance against doping in his sport, Horton illustrated his personal athlete brand as clean which is an essential characteristic of his brand identity and differentiates his personal brand.

Athletic Success is the most palpable dimension of athlete brand identity as it refers to performance-related accomplishments. While surprising and unpredicted, athletic achievements can initially attract consumer attention, it is important for the durability of the athlete brand that athletes can repeat (or improve) those achievements. One significant

implication this research project revealed is that the physical appearance of athletes was not found to be an important part of athlete brand identity. Although athlete brands may benefit from their looks, it is more essential to establish an athlete brand identity that is built on characteristics that relate to the exceptional physical abilities of the athletes, for example having *a competition style that is exciting to watch*, or demonstrating *prominent athletic skills in their sport*.

The *Fan Engagement* dimension is constituted of items associated with the social media output of athletes. The growing importance of social media as a personal branding tool is undeniable (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Su et al., 2020) and the emergence of this dimension as a standalone component of athlete brand identity confirms the significance of social media for branding strategies of athletes. As indicated by items in the Fan Engagement dimensions, athletes therefore should focus on how to establish an *online social media presence that is in-line with their athlete brand* (i.e., not present any contradicting information on their social media platforms or use a tone/language that goes against their values as an athlete). Further, athletes are encouraged to *engage in social media, share their athletic life with fans*, and be *responsive to media attention*. Each social media post can positively or negatively affect the athlete's brand instantly and requires careful consideration.

The fourth and last dimension of athlete brand identity relates to the *Character Traits* of the athlete. While there are only five items in this dimension, there is evidence that personality traits (on and off-field) which have been deeply ingrained into an athlete's psyche can also have significant impact upon how successfully an athlete's brand image aligns with brand identity. Therefore, the athlete should focus on demonstrating that they are *cooperative, adaptable to change, open-minded, emotionally stable, and organised*, as this could benefit how their athlete brand is perceived by consumers.

5.2.3 The Benefits of Analysing Athlete Brands for Brand Insiders

Athletes have the opportunity to use the results of this research study to improve their branding strategies and develop more successful personal brands that could make their brand more attractive to sponsors. Knowledge about the current status of their personal brand is essential for athletes and athlete managers as there may be substantial differences between what athletes believe their brand stands for, compared to consumer perceptions. HPSOs could apply the ABIdS in combination with the brand congruence measure to help their athletes identify any differences between their own perceptions and consumer perceptions to unveil strength (congruencies) and weaknesses (incongruencies)

of the athletes' brand performance. Such application is possible at sports events that are planned or supported by the sports organisation by asking fans to fill in the ABIDS to evaluate the personal brand of athletes in question. Athletes can then respond to any unveiled weaknesses by adapting their branding strategies accordingly, for example by focusing on improving specific areas such as sharing more of their athletic life on social media.

For brand insiders, findings from this research project are helpful, since understanding the dimensions of athlete brands from the viewpoints of athletes as well as consumers allows brand strategists to better identify any discrepancies and pinpoint those areas that should be targeted in their branding efforts. Further, longitudinal use of the ABIDS may prove a useful tool to measure changes of consumer and athlete perceptions as well as indicators of the effect of adapted branding strategies. Athletes (and their stakeholders) are able to use this information to counteract, improve their branding strategies and implement targeted changes to their personal brand. During the study it was revealed most athletes that participated at the various stages of this research project had never received athlete brand or social media training. In accordance with suggestions by Hodge and Walker (2015), such training would be beneficial for athlete branding efforts and increase awareness of the requirement to start building a positive public brand profile early on in their sporting career. HPSOs could use the findings of this research project as points of reference for developing and implementing such training early on within the career development plans of their athletes.

Given the growing importance of sports and athlete branding, the co-branded existence between teams/athletes, organisations and sponsors has become increasingly prevalent through commercialisation (Arai et al., 2013; Frederick & Patil, 2010). From a practical viewpoint, assessing the brand identity dimension of athletes is an important aspect toward maximising opportunities for sponsorship endorsement and establishing powerful brands. In summary, the most significant practical impact of this study rests in the development of the ABIDS as the first scale that offers individualised evaluation of the brand of a single athlete from two perspectives. If used early on in the brand development process or as part of educating athletes on athlete brand strategies, the four athlete brand identity dimensions provide an understanding on the specific areas that need to be prioritised. Later, and with the support of HPSOs, the ABIDS and the athlete brand congruence measure can be used to provide detailed evaluations of an athlete's personal brand and compare the results with consumer perceptions. If scores differ significantly,

athletes should re-evaluate their branding strategies in response to the specific areas that require improvement. Repeated application of the ABIDS over certain time-periods could measure changes in athlete brand perceptions and provide insights regarding the effects of adapted branding approaches. Further, this could also identify athletes at risk of producing negative impacts.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

Results from the SQLR confirmed Lobpries et al.'s (2017) judgement that athlete branding is a niche and largely underdeveloped research area particularly from the athlete perspective. Very limited research has examined the personal brand of athletes from the viewpoint of the athletes themselves, and even less have combined the consumer and athlete perspectives. The results of this PhD thesis filled this knowledge gap by identifying and defining the four dimensions of athlete brand identity (exemplified above) and developing the ABIDS through advancing athlete brand theory. In doing so, this research provided significant theoretical implications by enabling the comparison between athlete and consumer opinions and introducing the brand congruence measure for athlete brands. This section outlines and discusses the theoretical key contributions of the PhD thesis.

5.3.1 Defining the Athlete Brand Identity Dimensions by Developing the ABIDS

Evaluations and measurements are pivotal for scientific researchers as they facilitate data collection and knowledge generation relating to different entities, such as people, products, and services. In particular, measurement tools, such as scales, are useful to quantify occurrences that are difficult or impossible to gauge and truthfully assess (Morgado et al., 2017). According to DeVellis (2003), scales consist of groups of items that expose underlying theoretical variables, which cannot be detected by direct means. In response to the identified importance of brand identity for successfully creating and managing athlete brands, it was essential to develop and test a scale that allowed to quantify athlete brand identity and uncover the different underlying variables of the phenomenon.

Study 2 (scale development) and Study 3 (scale test) provided evidence of the characteristics that are essential to the brand identity of athletes and formed four underlying variables (Athletic Integrity, Athletic Success, Fan Engagement, Character Traits). The ABIDS was developed using an inside-out approach considering Aaker's (1996) notion that brand identity is the most important step of brand building and

Lobpries et al.'s (2017) perception that the athlete is in control of how they want to be perceived by consumers. Though consumers were also part of the scale development process, they were only added after items/characteristics had been identified and rated by brand insiders (current and former athletes as well as high-performance sports managers). The ABIdS is the first scale that was developed with a focus on the brand insider perspective but what is pivotal for the scope of application of the ABIdS is that it can also be administered on consumers to allow for a comparison between the two perspectives in form of brand congruence.

Further, the ABIdS offers individualised evaluation of the brand of a single athlete with the aim of enabling athletes to become aware of how their brand is perceived. Thus, the most significant theoretical contribution of this PhD thesis rests in the somewhat unconventional but promising procedure applied to develop the ABIdS (i.e., focus on the insider perspective before adding the view of outsiders) and the scale's capability to evaluate the brands of individual athletes. Measuring brands on an individual level is important, as in contrast to existing scales, such as Arai et al.'s SABI (2013), the items of the ABIdS indicated a clear shift towards athlete brand features that can be directly influenced and changed by the athletes themselves. This supports Lobpries et al.'s (2017) assertions and highlights that athletes are indeed able to have a lasting effect on the creation of their own brands. Even though what consumers think about a brand is essential, the brand creation process starts with the athletes themselves. It can be anticipated that future application of the ABIdS within different settings can further progress theoretical advancements in the field of athlete brand research as well as related domains.

5.3.2 Advancing Theory by Relating Different Subject Areas

This PhD thesis used a multidisciplinary approach to develop and advance the theoretical understanding of athlete brand management. As outlined by Da Silveira, Lages and Simões (2013), brand identity is a dynamic concept, which offers a link between Goffman's (1959) self-identity framework and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory. Although coming from two different philosophical backgrounds (Goffman = sociology; Tajfel & Turner = social psychology) both theories help to explain brand identity as a concept that shapes itself and varies depending on the context and social interactions. As identified in the SQLR, these two theories have also repeatedly been cited or applied within athlete brand research, although never in combination. Therefore, the theoretical value of Study 2 is based on the combination of these two concepts of self-

identity and social identity and applying them to the brand identity of athlete brands. This proved particularly relevant as traditional models of brand management placed most emphasis to external brand perspectives while neglecting brand identity creation from the inside (cf., De Chernatony, 1999).

Study 3 built on these theoretical advancements further by highlighting the centrality of conscious brand identity creation as the driver of brand image and providing a link to Aaker's (1996) brand identity theory. Aaker's theory suggests that establishing a distinct brand identity is the most important step of the brand building process, while the mechanism that helps individuals to create and maintain a certain brand identity can be derived from Goffman's (1959) framework of self-presentation and impression management. Goffman's approach upholds in modern times and is used by many researchers that investigate human brands and social media (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Na, Kunkel, & Doyle, 2020). The combination of these frameworks and theories led to the assumption that the personal brands of athletes are intentionally managed, socially constructed and dynamic in nature.

The recognition of athletes as brands coupled with the ease of communication through social media suggests athletes have increasing potential to become influencers of consumer/fan behaviour. Many researchers that investigated athletes' personal brands in a social media context are based on Goffman's (1959) framework (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). In line with this framework, athletes intentionally manage the impressions they give off to their audience to fabricate a distinctive public image for commercial or cultural benefits. In turn, athlete brands essentially become influencers of public opinion. This further demonstrates the relevance of Goffman (1959) but also of Tajfel and Turner (1979) in the era of social media. Specifically, findings of this thesis and the development of the ABIDS provide particular contemporary importance to athletes and high-performance managers to be able to develop clear congruent links between athlete brands as influencers and their audience, bringing the athlete brand conversation as a key factor for success into the present social media age.

5.3.3 Introducing Brand Congruence to Evaluate Athlete Brands

Another significant theoretical contribution of this research project is the introduction and application of the brand congruence measure into the athlete brand research domain. Successful athlete brand management is "the process of achieving brand congruence between the brand manager and consumer perspectives of the athlete brand" (Linsner et al., 2020b, p. 23). As this PhD thesis argued, congruence between athlete and

consumer perceptions helps establish powerful brands and conscious brand identity creation is the driver of brand image. Despite looking at athlete brands from a different perspective, this is in agreement with Arai et al.'s (2014) notion that the brand image of athletes should be reasonably consistent with the developed identity. Merging the theoretical frameworks of identity formation (i.e., Aaker 1996; Goffman 1959) with Bartlett's (1932) schema theory in the context of athlete branding helped to provide evidence on the efficiency of congruence in the brand building process. Further, the application of the brand congruence measure provided empirical support for Ghodeswar (2008), who suggested that the perceived image matches the desired image when the image attributes communicated by brand owners are understood by consumers. In combination, the theoretical foundation and the successful development and application of the brand congruence measure confirm that congruence between athlete and consumer perceptions is an essential factor of athlete brand development.

5.3.4 Methodological Contributions

In addition to the theoretical advancements on athlete brand identity and brand congruence, Studies 2 and 3 offered two significant methodological insights (i.e., Rasch analysis and the brand congruence measure) to the extended areas of sports marketing and brand management. The use of *Rasch analysis* as part of the scale development process in Study 2 was a novelty for sports marketing research and presented a promising alternative to the standard approach based on CTT. Studies that compared Rasch analysis and conventional methods found results of Rasch analysis were similar or superior (e.g., Salzberger & Sinkovics, 2006). Further, Prieto et al. (2003) found that the Rasch method could offer significant advantages when the questionnaire is used at an individual level. This argument proved particularly relevant as the intention of the ABIDS is application on individual athlete brands. Even though Rasch analysis received prominence in other research domains, such as psychology and medicine (Salzberger & Sinkovics, 2006), it had not previously been used within sports marketing research and its application therefore offered the opportunity to introduce a robust analytical model into this field of science. Hence, this study can serve as a reference point for future scale development inquiries in this research domain. The multifaceted range of characteristics within the identified components of athlete brand identity (e.g., personality traits, behaviour patterns related to social media, athletic abilities and characteristics) highlighted the broad theoretical and multidisciplinary roots of this subject matter. Therefore, application of the ABIDS can facilitate subsequent theoretical development in athlete brand research as well

as related research domains. In addition to testing the ABIdS, Study 3 also introduced *athlete brand congruence* and demonstrated the practicability of the combination of the two measures. The inclusion of athlete and consumer opinions within one study is innovative and has not been simultaneously tested before when evaluating the brands of athletes. A particular benefit of Study 3 is its replicability that enables versatile application in the athlete branding spectrum. Yet, even though the ABIdS has been particularly developed for athlete brands, the brand congruence measure is not limited to this research field and allows application across multiple disciplines.

5.4 Research Limitations and Future Research

It is essential to acknowledge certain limitations of this research. This section starts with outlining the key limitations of each of the three studies. The overall limitations that span across the full scope of the PhD thesis are brought into focus thereafter. Reflecting on these restrictions is essential to enable the development of recommendations for future investigations in the athlete brand research domain.

First, as only peer-reviewed English language journal publications were included as evidence base in the SQLR it is recommended that future reviews extend their scope by investigating non-English language publications and including grey literature reports. As athlete brands exist across the globe, this inclusion may lead to a larger reference base and could unveil research advancements only available to a smaller audience due to the language barrier.

Second, and in relation to the development of the ABIdS, the relatively small sample size and focus on Australian athletes limits the overall generalisation to a broader population of athletes. Despite this limitation, the study provided preliminary evidence and analysis of the athlete brand construct which warrants further examination and validation on a larger, international athlete sample. Further, the extended discussion of the research findings helped to overcome the sample size limitations. Results of the study suggested that future use of Rasch analysis of the ABIdS on other athlete and consumer groups is warranted. Ideally, the data pool utilised for future studies should include a variety of different athletes, for example with regards to their culture, sports disciplines and age, to allow for further and more detailed assessment.

Third, as the goal of Study 3 was to validate the ABIdS, it was essential to achieve a large sample size. However, due to the athletes being relatively unknown to the general public it was difficult to find large random samples with high familiarity. To counter this

problem, information of the athletes was included in the survey to ensure each participant could familiarise themselves with the athlete and their brand before starting the evaluation. However, it is recommended that future studies that wish to apply the ABIDS select a consumer sample that is already familiar with the athlete whose brand is to be evaluated. It is proposed that higher familiarity with the athlete will increase the significance and meaningfulness of brand evaluations.

Overall, this research project followed precise theoretical approaches to reduce issues that could potentially influence the reliability and validity of results. Nevertheless, there are several impending issues that have to be considered. The restricted time frame of this PhD provided a natural limitation to this study as it did not permit to measure athlete brand value changes over time and test athletes' implementation of brand congruence strategies in response to their initial brand evaluations. Quantitative research provides many advantages due to its statistical rigour, such as increased generalisability and validity (Hair, Page, & Brunsveld, 2019). However, it must be acknowledged that researchers that develop scales face several significant time constraints caused by the need for large sample sizes and complex statistical analyses (Boateng et al., 2018). Additionally, the geographical scope of this research was focused on Australia and in particular Queensland athletes. This limits the generalisability with regards to cultural, regional and social implications. However, due to the increased interest in the field of athlete brand research, findings of this study provide a solid foundation for further development and could be continued post PhD submission.

Future research should expand the findings of this PhD thesis and conduct the studies in a variety of different settings to allow for comprehensive evaluations and comparisons. In particular, due to the identified importance of social media for athlete branding more in depth research is required to investigate and truly understand the synergy between athlete brand identity and brand image of human brands given the opportunities and challenges that come along with the technological developments of new media in the realm of personal branding. Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory provide an appropriate lens to examine this phenomenon as they account for the dynamic nature of brand identity, which is particularly relevant for the constantly developing social media environment. Including the perspective of athletes and consumers provides athletes and their stakeholders with a better understanding of their brand performance and should therefore remain at the forefront of athlete brand research.

Significantly, the overall design of this research project provides the basis for further testing and investigation of the personal brand of athletes. In particular, researchers could test the ABIDS and the brand congruence measure on a wider variety of athletes, including team sport athletes, to identify whether the established construct of athlete brand identity is generalisable to environments across different sports. To ensure familiarity with the athletes and improve the meaningfulness of brand evaluations, researchers could work with HPSOs to conduct such tests at sports events by asking fans to complete the ABIDS with reference to a particular athlete that is competing at the event. Further, to support the findings of this research and prove the practicability of the ABIDS and the brand congruence measure it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to investigate whether adapting branding strategies in response to identified brand incongruencies will in fact improve an athlete's brand performance and has positive effects such as increased popularity and results in higher attractiveness to sponsorship opportunities. This research would benefit from the inclusion of athlete interviews to collect in-depth information regarding their adapted strategies. Additionally, interviews with potential sponsors could shed light on the decision-making process regarding their cooperation and support of athletes. This is not only useful for athletes but also for companies looking to investigate the performance of their athlete endorsers/influencers in contrast to consumer opinions as companies collaborate with athletes to capitalise on their sporting success but more so on their followers and high level of influence. Outcomes of this study would further highlight the importance of successful brand identity creation as the most important step of brand building and significantly add to athlete brand theories from the perspectives of the athletes as well as sponsors.

5.5 Conclusion of the Research Project

This thesis contributes to the growing conversation and research on the personal brands of athletes and advances theoretical and practical understandings of the athlete brand identity construct. In addressing the overall research question, this thesis concludes that the primary and most essential factor for developing successful athlete brand strategies is the establishment of a distinct athlete brand identity that is clear and effective in connecting to intended audiences. To aid the athlete brand identity creation, assessment, and subsequent improvements, the ABIDS allows for athlete and consumer perspectives to be combined in one measure to evaluate the current status of an athlete's brand in form of brand congruence. This thesis has shown how rigorous application of qualitative and quantitative methods support the advancements of research on athlete brands. Overall, the knowledge gained through the three sequential studies provides evidence that will help to positively influence the development of successful athlete brand strategies and advances the theoretical understanding of this research domain.

A Brief Reflection on the Current Situation

Given the recent global turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic it is important to be aware and reflect on how this may affect the personal brands of athletes. Athletes, as well as sports organisations, have to embrace the challenges of this situation and put peoples' health and safety ahead of commercial gains (Sharpe, Mountifield, & Filo, 2020). In today's context, perhaps even more so than ever, possessing a strong personal brand could help athletes to overcome the negative impact the pandemic has on sports worldwide. Sports events are cancelled and training venues are closed but athletes and sports organisations can still engage with their audience online. Hence, connecting with fans and consumers through social media is more relevant than ever and the involuntary halt of international sports could even provide athletes with the additional time needed to focus on the creation of their personal brands. In fact, this unique situation gives athletes the chance to further establish and extend their brand identity beyond sports by engaging with their fans and followers on relevant topics, such as the promotion of hygiene practices and social distancing or giving advice on how to stick to healthy habits while on lockdown. Ultimately it is up to the athletes themselves to use the unique challenges the world is facing for their benefit.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Example of online survey information sheet for athletes



Online Research Survey Tool

Load unfinished survey Exit and clear survey

ATHLETE BRAND IDENTITY - IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

Athlete Brand Identity - Important Characteristics

Hey Athlete,

We need your help!

And for this help, you could win a \$200 David Jones Voucher!

You are invited to participate in an online survey on the personal brands of athletes, conducted by researchers from Griffith University and supported by the Queensland Academy of Sport.

Your participation is extremely valuable to this research as our plan is to create a tool that is useful for athletes like yourself, which can eventually be used to monitor, evaluate and improve your athlete branding strategies. The overall goal is to assist athletes in creating brands that are attractive to sponsors, so you can focus more on your sport and train!

Complete the survey and enter the Prize Draw!

We appreciate your time and support, which is why we have organised a little Thank-you. Once you have completed your survey, leave your email address to enter the draw for the chance to win 1 x \$200 David Jones Voucher as well as 4 x \$25 Woolworths Vouchers

The Ins and Outs

- ▶ This questionnaire takes between 11 and 13 minutes to complete.
- ▶ If you would like to provide feedback or wish to be informed about the outcomes of this research, please send an email to annika.lohneiss@griffithuni.edu.au (this will not risk the anonymity of the answers provided in this survey).
- ▶ To enter the prize draw you must complete the survey and enter a valid email address. We run this prize draw to encourage participation in our study on athlete brand identity. If you would like to participate in the survey, but you do not want to enter the prize draw, you can opt out at the end of the survey and do not have to provide your email address!
- ▶ The prize draw expires by the 30th of July 2018. Entries received after closing day will not be accepted. The prize winners will be selected randomly from valid entries received. You may only submit one entry in the prize draw and each entry can only be drawn once. Prize winner names will not be published, they will be contacted to arrange the delivery of prizes. Please make sure to provide your correct email address (check for spelling errors)! If any prize winner cannot be contacted within three (3) months of the draw, then that person's right to the prize is forfeited and the prize will be treated as an unclaimed prize. Only one redraw of unclaimed prizes will take place, and other existing prizes are not affected. We are not liable for any loss, expense, damage or injury sustained by any entrant in connection with this prize draw, the prize or redemption of the prize, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law (in which case, that liability is limited to the minimum allowable by law). We may suspend the promotion if we determine that the integrity or administration of the promotion has been adversely affected due to circumstances beyond its control. We may disqualify any individual who tampers with the entry process. By electing to participate, you accept these terms and conditions as governing the prize draw. Any personal information you provide to us in the course of entering the prize draw will be dealt with by us in accordance with our privacy policy.
- ▶ Your participation is voluntary and without any risk. We will not collect identifying information such as your name or IP address; your responses will remain completely anonymous. If you chose to enter the prize draw, your email addresses will be kept separate to your survey responses which will remain anonymous. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. However, participants will not be able to withdraw once they have submitted their questionnaires as it will not be possible to identify individual responses. Your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult Griffith University's Privacy Plan at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan> or telephone: +61 07 3735 5585. Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 373 54375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au. GU Human Research Ethics reference number: 2016/959. Please print or save this page and retain it for your later reference.

By starting the online survey it will be deemed that you have agreed to participate in this research!

A note on privacy

This survey is anonymous.

The record of your survey responses does not contain any identifying information about you, unless a specific survey question explicitly asked for it. If you used an identifying token to access this survey, please rest assured that this token will not be stored together with your responses. It is managed in a separate database and will only be updated to indicate whether you did (or did not) complete this survey. There is no way of matching identification tokens with survey responses.

Appendix 2 – Example of online survey information sheet for consumers



Online Research Survey Tool

[Load unfinished survey](#) [Exit and clear survey](#)

WELCOME TO THE ATHLETE BRAND SURVEY!

Welcome to the Athlete Brand Survey!

You are invited to participate in an online survey on the personal brands of athletes, conducted by researchers from **Griffith University** and supported by the **Queensland Academy of Sport**.

Take this survey for a chance to win an Apple iPad Wi-Fi 32 GB, 7th Gen (rrp\$ 467)

The Ins and Outs

- ▶ This questionnaire takes between 8 and 11 minutes to complete.
- ▶ Your participation is extremely valuable to this research as our plan is to create a tool to monitor, evaluate and improve the branding strategies of athletes. The overall goal is to assist athletes (and their stakeholders) in creating brands that are attractive to consumers and sponsors.
- ▶ If you would like to provide feedback or have any questions regarding this research, please send an email to annika.linsner@griffithuni.edu.au (this will not risk the anonymity of the answers provided in this survey).
- ▶ To encourage participation, every participant has the chance to enter a prize draw to win an Apple iPad (rrp\$ 467) or the equivalent value in form of a store voucher. To enter the draw you must complete the survey and provide a valid email address. If you would like to participate in the survey, but you do not want to enter the prize draw, you can opt out at the end of the survey and do not have to provide your email address. The prize draw expires on the 15th of April 2020. Entries received after closing day will not be accepted. The prize winner name will not be published, they will be contacted to arrange postage. Please be aware that there is only one prize on offer and the winner must be living in Australia.
- ▶ Your participation is voluntary and without any risk. We will not collect identifying information such as your name or IP address; your responses will remain completely anonymous. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. However, participants will not be able to withdraw once they have submitted their questionnaires as it will not be possible to identify individual responses. Your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult Griffith University's Privacy Plan at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan> or telephone: +61 07 3735 5585. Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 373 54375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au. GU Human Research Ethics reference number: 2016/959. Please print or save this page and retain it for your later reference.

By starting the online survey it will be deemed that you have agreed to participate in this research.

Appendix 3 – Study 3: Participant Information Sheet



GU Human Research Ethics reference number: 2016/959

"An Examination of Athlete Brand Management within High Performance Sport"

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Athlete,

You are invited to participate in a research study on the personal brands of athletes, conducted by researchers from Griffith University, Australia and supported by the Queensland Academy of Sports.

Your participation is extremely valuable to this research as our plan is to create and test a tool that is useful for athletes like yourself, which can eventually be used to monitor, evaluate and improve your athlete branding strategies. The overall goal is to assist athletes in creating brands that are attractive to consumers and sponsors.

Your participation involves:

- ▶ Giving us insight into your athlete brand from your perspective by filling in a short survey to evaluate your current athlete brand and answering a few additional questions on your branding strategies.
- ▶ Potentially (depending on survey outcome): A short follow up interview where we ask a few more details about your brand and also want to hear your viewpoint on the topic (e.g., past experiences). This should take no longer than 10 minutes and can be conducted over the phone!

After you have filled in the survey, we will ask consumers to evaluate your brand by responding to the same questions. We will then compare your responses with those of consumers and are able to provide you with **targeted feedback on your athlete brand!** This could help you to get a better understanding on how your brand is perceived by the public and if there are any areas that you can work on to improve the perception of your brand!

Please be aware that we initially need to use your real name and public profiles (e.g. Facebook and Instagram handles) for the consumer survey as we are asking them to evaluate your actual athlete brand. However, we will only provide feedback of the results to you personally and will de-identify all material for our research purposes. Your participation is voluntary and without any risk and you may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty.

Privacy Statement

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult Griffith University's Privacy Plan at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan> or telephone: +61 07 3735 5585. Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 373 54375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au. GU Human Research Ethics reference number: 2016/959. Please print or save this page and retain it for your later reference.

By starting the online survey it will be deemed that you have agreed to participate in this research.