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# PERSONAL BRANDING OF ATHLETES IN DIGITAL MARKETING: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND THEIR COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL

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**Abstract:** In the modern sports environment, personal branding of athletes has become a key factor in creating market value and recognition, especially through digital communication channels. This paper explores how athletes utilize digital marketing and communication strategies to build their personal brand, strengthen audience relationships, and enhance their commercial appeal. By analyzing practical examples and theoretical models, the study examines the impact of social media, content marketing, and authentic communication strategies on the development of personal brands. Special attention is given to the commercial potential of such branding, including sponsorship collaborations, product creation under the athlete's own name, and direct monetization of online presence. The conclusion highlights the growing importance of strategically managing athletes' digital identities and the need for education in this field.

**Keywords**: personal brand, athletes, digital marketing, communication strategies, commercial potential

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## Introduction

In today's digital era, athletes are no longer just competitors on the field; they have become recognizable brands whose identity is shaped beyond the sports arena - especially through digital media. Personal branding of athletes involves the strategic and consistent use of communication strategies to create a unique public image that attracts audiences, sponsors, and the media. Thanks to social networks, athletes now have a direct communication channel with their fans, allowing them to actively shape their identity and control public perception.

One of the most prominent examples of successful personal branding in sports is Swiss tennis player Roger Federer, who built a globally recognizable brand through a combination of athletic success, personal integrity, and carefully managed marketing activities. After ending his collaboration with Nike, Federer signed a lucrative deal with the Japanese brand Uniqlo in 2018, worth around $300 million - an outcome of his decades-long development of a personal brand based on elegance, consistency, and universal values (Badenhausen, 2018). His ability to maintain brand strength even after leaving the peak of professional tennis demonstrates the power of a long-term identity, one that has become attractive even outside the world of sports. Such examples illustrate the growing importance of strategic digital communication among athletes (Dašić, 2023). When developed consistently and authentically, a personal brand can generate high commercial value and secure long-term visibility and income for an athlete - even after the end of their sports career (Dašić & Jeličić, 2016).

The role of digital marketing in the personal branding of athletes has been strongly supported by research that points to a direct correlation between digital presence and commercial success. Through the analysis of social media profiles, authentic communication, and fan engagement, athletes are able to strengthen their market position. Parmentier and Fischer (2012) analyzed how professional athletes build personal brands through digital communication channels, including social networks and fan interaction. The study highlights authenticity, consistency, and active communication as key factors in developing a successful personal brand. Specifically, it examines the case of professional track and field athletes, showing how individual efforts in self-promotion affect sponsorship deals and public reputation. Digital marketing represents a form of promotion that uses digital channels and technologies to communicate with a target audience (Radaković et al., 2023). It encompasses a broad range of tools such as social media, search engines, email campaigns, mobile apps, and websites to deliver a message, product, or service as efficiently as possible. Its greatest advantages lie in precise targeting, real-time performance tracking, and direct user interaction. In modern business, digital marketing has become essen-

tial for brand building, increasing visibility, and achieving competitive advantage (Dašić et al., 2023; Vlajković et al., 2023; Jeličić, 2024).

## Literature review

Today, athletes build their public image not solely based on sporting achievements, but through carefully shaped personal branding, which encompasses their on-field performance, off-field behavior, presence on social media, and relationships with fans and the media. The branding process involves deliberate communication of one's values, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes, positioning the athlete not only as a competitor but also as a public figure and potential brand ambassador.

Dašić et al. (2021) analyze the influence of social media on athletes' personal branding and its commercial outcomes. Their study shows how athletes' activities on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter contribute to building their public image and commercial value. They conclude that social media has a growing impact on how the public perceives athletes, as these platforms allow them to share both positive aspects of their careers and glimpses into their private lives. Effective social media management has become crucial - especially post-retirement - with those athletes who employ digital communication professionals enjoying continued income streams beyond their active sports careers (Geurin & Burch, 2017).

The personal brand of an athlete emerges from the interaction of sports performance, personal characteristics, and media representation, significantly influencing the longevity and versatility of their professional careers (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Female athletes, in particular, use Instagram as a powerful promotional tool, shaping how the public perceives them. Through direct interaction with followers, they actively construct and control narratives around their professional and personal identities (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Authentic content fosters trust; by sharing real-life moments - achievements, challenges, workouts, or everyday life - athletes cultivate a sense of closeness and parasocial interaction with their audience (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014).

Professional athletes increasingly use Twitter for real-time communication with fans, sharing opinions, updates, and reactions, which enhances visibility and audience connection. However, given its public nature and message speed, Twitter requires careful content management. Every post can significantly affect public and media perception, demanding a balance between spontaneity and strategic messaging to preserve the brand's integrity and avoid misinterpretations (Pegoraro, 2010). During

major events like the Super Bowl, athletes can leverage Twitter to highlight social or health issues - such as concussion awareness - though research shows this potential remains underutilized (Hull & Schmittel, 2015).

Hambrick et al. (2010) categorize athletes' social media posts into three types: fan interaction, promotion, and personal thoughts. Interactions often include replies and gratitude to fans; promotional posts involve brand partnerships and event announcements, while personal thoughts reveal emotions and everyday life. A strategic balance between these categories enhances authenticity and strengthens personal branding.

Finally, social media - particularly Twitter - has become an essential tool for retired athletes to maintain visibility and influence. Through posts, comments, and fan interactions, they stay engaged with the public and continue to shape their community impact (Dašić et al., 2023). Yet, presence alone is not enough; sustained audience engagement requires a clear, consistent communication strategy rooted in authenticity, relevant content, and active interaction (Clavio & Kian, 2010).

## The Role of Communication Strategies

In modern digital marketing, communication strategies represent a key element in the personal branding process of athletes. The way an athlete communicates with the public, the media, and sponsors shapes their public image and directly influences the perception of their identity, values, and credibility (Zubić et al., 2024; Dašić et al., 2024). In this context, social media - particularly Instagram and Twitter - has enabled athletes to take control of their own narratives and independently shape their brands. Through the use of personalized messages, visual consistency, and carefully structured content, athletes convey their stories directly to target audiences, bypassing traditional intermediaries (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Authenticity has proven to be a crucial component of a successful communication strategy. When athletes share sincere stories, personal values, and emotions, audiences develop a deeper emotional connection with them, which increases loyalty and follower engagement (Tošić, 2023; Franjić, 2024). Geurin and Burch (2017) emphasize that authentic communication enhances public identification with the athlete, thereby strengthening their commercial potential. This is especially important in an era when audiences can easily detect artificial content and respond more positively to transparent and direct messaging (Vlajković, 2023).

In addition to authenticity, follower interaction is a vital element of communication strategies. Actively replying to comments, involving fans in content creation, and using social media as a platform for dialogue significantly boost engagement and the visibility of an athlete's brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). This interaction also influences advertiser interest, as brands increasingly seek ambassadors who not only have large followings but also maintain genuine connections with their audiences.

Dašić et al. (2021) highlight that strategic communication management becomes especially important after the end of an athlete's professional career, as a well-established personal brand allows for continued commercial activity and public presence. Their study shows that athletes who work with communication professionals and set clear goals for their online presence achieve far better results in monetizing their digital platforms.

Therefore, successful personal branding in digital environments requires well-designed communication strategies that combine authenticity, consistency, and active dialogue with the audience. This approach not only builds a strong personal identity but also opens the door to long-term commercial opportunities both within and beyond sports (Penezić, 2021; Penezić et al., 2023; Penezić, Bajić, 2024).

In addition to these aspects, recent research emphasizes the growing role of data analytics (Dašić, G., 2023; Mihić, 2024) in shaping effective communication strategies for athletes. By using tools to track engagement, follower demographics, and content performance, athletes and their teams can optimize their messaging for maximum impact on the target audience. Insights from audience behavior analysis support data-driven decisions regarding content frequency, format, and publishing time, enhancing branding efficiency. In this way, an athlete's digital presence no longer relies solely on intuition or personal judgment but on measurable indicators that offer a competitive edge in the increasingly demanding sports and media landscape (Mihić et al., 2023; Cvejić et al., 2024).

In the modern sports setting, effective tactical communication significantly impacts team performance and player engagement. Lin et al. (2025) introduce *SportsBuddy*, an AI-powered tool for creating sports video stories that integrates automatic player tracking, interactive elements, and time-based visualizations, enabling users – coaches, athletes, and content creators - to easily produce context-rich video highlights. Feedback from over 150 users points to high accessibility and usability, while case studies with university teams reveal a notable influence on training intensity, game analysis, and audience interaction. This tool demonstrates how contemporary communication strategies can enhance knowledge sharing and engagement in the sports sector (Lin et al., 2025).

## Economic Aspects of Personal Branding

In the digital era, personal branding of athletes is not only a tool for building reputation but also a vital economic asset. Athletes who successfully develop their personal brands can generate significant income through sponsorships, paid posts, brand collaborations, and the development of their own products or services. Su et al. (2020) emphasize that the number of followers on social media and the quality of audience engagement directly influence an athlete's commercial value in the eyes of advertisers and sponsors.

Unlike the traditional revenue model, which relies solely on sports contracts and prize money, modern athletes diversify their income streams through digital channels (Kostadinović & Ilievska Kostadinović, 2022; Dašić, 2023b). For example, athletes with strong personal brands can earn money even outside of competitions by monetizing video content, participating in promotional campaigns, and selling their own products (University of Delaware, 2024). This practice is especially prevalent among Olympic and individual sport athletes, where marketing revenues often exceed competition earnings.

Recent studies show that personal branding has a direct and measurable economic impact on professional development. Szántó, Papp-Váry, and Radácsi (2025), through a mixed-method study, identified three dimensions of personal brand equity (PBES): attractiveness, differentiation, and recognizability - all of which significantly correlate with salary growth, job satisfaction, and career advancement. These dimensions were confirmed through factor analysis, reliably demonstrating that high PBES contributes to improved financial and professional outcomes. The authors developed a validated PBES measurement scale, enabling individuals to systematically optimize their personal brands for career development. Their work highlights that investing in personal branding is a strategic move with tangible economic value.

Beyond direct financial gain, a strong personal brand provides athletes with long-term economic stability. After retiring from professional competition, athletes who have strategically developed their digital identities are more likely to remain relevant in the market - as influencers, coaches, analysts, or entrepreneurs (Numinal Agency, n.d.). In this sense, branding can be seen as an investment in the future.

Social media plays a crucial role in this process by allowing athletes direct access to both their audiences and markets. Greenfly (n.d.) highlights that engaging content that encourages interaction and sharing has significantly more commercial value than purely informational posts. High-quality communication, visual consistency,

and clearly defined values have become key elements recognized by advertisers as indicators of profitable collaboration.

Thus, the economic aspects of athletes' personal branding go beyond public presence - they involve systematic image management, strategic market engagement, and a long-term approach that integrates sports careers with business potential. In today's sports landscape, personal branding has become a key factor in creating additional revenue streams, particularly through the direct monetization of social media presence. Studies show that athletes with strong digital identities and engaged audiences can secure significant income through sponsorships, promotions, and the sale of personal merchandise. For instance, Yin (2025) emphasizes that social media has become a central tool in enhancing athletes' commercial value by facilitating direct communication with fans and potential sponsors. This strategy is not reserved for elite professionals - even athletes with smaller followings can generate revenue if they build an authentic and engaging brand.

The study by Park et al. (2020) illustrates that student-athletes who actively use social media for personal branding can attract sponsors and generate income, particularly under the newly established Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) regulations. Therefore, strategic management of digital presence allows athletes not only to increase current revenue but also to lay the foundation for long-term financial stability after their competitive careers.

Personal branding is no longer a secondary aspect of an athlete's career - it is its strategic foundation. Athletes who understand the power of digital communication and the economic value of personal branding gain a clear advantage in both the contemporary sports and business ecosystems. As Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) point out, a strong personal brand not only enhances athlete identity but also affects their perceived professional value among sponsors and the general public. Furthermore, Hambrick and Mahoney (2011) stress that effective use of social media gives athletes direct control over their narratives and opens the path to a sustainable post-sport career.

## Conclusion

In digital marketing, personal branding has become an indispensable element of the modern sports industry. Through carefully crafted communication strategies and active social media presence, athletes can develop a strong and authentic public identity. Authenticity, visual consistency, and engagement with the audience not

only foster greater trust and fan loyalty but also directly impact the athlete's commercial potential.

Modern approaches to personal branding in sports confirm that digital communication has become a key tool in building recognition and market value. Effective use of technology and strategic management of digital identity enable athletes to achieve greater audience engagement and generate additional income streams. A personal brand is no longer merely an addition to an athlete's career, but its sustainable and long-term foundation.

Numerous studies confirm the economic value of a personal brand, showing that athletes with strong digital presence generate substantial income beyond competition - through sponsorships, partnerships, and personal projects. This income model ensures financial security both during and after an athletic career. Digital platforms have enabled athletes to communicate directly with audiences and markets, making them not just competitors, but content creators, entrepreneurs, and opinion leaders.

Ultimately, personal branding is no longer a supplement to an athlete's career—it is its strategic core. Those who understand the power of digital communication and the economic potential of a personal brand hold a distinct advantage in the modern sports and business ecosystems.

**Conflict of interests**:
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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