

Integrative Human Branding - Brand Building and Brand Management in the Logic of Value Co-Creation

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FOR MY BELOVED FAMILY

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"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

(widely attributed to Confucius)

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Abstract

This thesis examines the dynamics of brand building and brand management in the logic of value co-creation across the micro and meso level of aggregation. It introduces the concept of *integrative human branding* as an overarching framework, combining management-oriented approaches to build brand identity with multi-actor approaches to co-create brand meaning. The thesis comprises eight interrelated empirical studies, employing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches.

At the micro level, Papers 1 to 3 focus on athlete brand building, examining how athletes build their brands and how brand meaning is co-created within brand networks. Paper 1 develops the first typology of athlete brand building, while Paper 2 identifies key actors and brand meaning co-creation performances on digital platforms. Paper 3 extends the analysis to club brands, analyzing Brand Co-Creation Performances (BCCP) within a broader sports context.

At the meso level, Papers 4 to 8 expand the level of aggregation to the brand ecosystem, encompassing multi-actor relationships and the dynamics within a larger context. Paper 4 developed the first athlete sustainability index, a novel measurement framework to evaluate individual athletes' sustainability behaviors based on the perspective of various actors. Paper 5 focuses on athlete activism as it examines how brand meaning co-creation performances differ regarding the level of actor involvement. Paper 6 investigates the role of athlete brands for the international marketing of professional sports leagues, while Paper 7 focuses on their impact on fan behaviour in international markets. Paper 8 further examines generational differences in fan identification with athlete brands and team brands and their influence on merchandise preferences among different age groups. Finally, this thesis discusses its key findings, theoretical and managerial implications, and provides recommendations for future research. The appendix contains an overview of international conference contributions, including two full papers (cf. Papers 9 and 10).

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List of Abbreviations

AR	Augmented Reality
ANOVA	Analysis Of Variance
ASI	Athlete Sustainability Index
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BCCP	Brand Co-Creation Performances
BIRGing	Basking in Reflected Glory
CCO	Chief Communication Officer
COO	Country of origin
CORFing	Cuting Off Reflected Failure
CR	Composite Reliability
CSD	Christopher Street Day
dBCCP	direct Brand Co-Creation Performances
eBCCP	enabling Brand Co-Creation Performances
EPI	Environmental Performance Index
EPL	English Premier League
Gen X	Generation X
Gen Z	Generation Z
HBM	Health Belief Model
HQ	Head Quarter
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IoT	Internet of Things
IRT	Innovation Resistance Theory
K-S	Kolmogorov-Smirnov
MABI	Model of Athlete Brand Image

MWU	Mann-Whitney U
PAI	Point of Attachment Index
PHA	Preventive Health Applications
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SST	Smart Stadium Technologies
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
VBL	Virtual Bundesliga

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Research Aim

Brands are widely recognized as strategic assets that create value for organizations and individuals alike (Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2008). Strong brands provide differentiation in competitive markets, guide consumer choice, and reduce uncertainty by signalling trust and quality (Keller, 2008a). They also foster long-term relationships through loyalty and advocacy, generating sustained competitive advantage (Keller, 2008). Beyond their functional and economic roles, brands generate symbolic and cultural value. They serve as resources for identification and self-expression, enabling consumers and other stakeholders to communicate belonging, status, and values (Iglesias et al., 2020). For organizations, this translates into deeper engagement and relational benefits; for individuals such as athletes, personal branding provides visibility, career opportunities, and influence that extend beyond their immediate field (Arai et al., 2013; Panthen et al., 2024). In this broader sense, brands matter because they operate simultaneously as economic and cultural resources, delivering measurable business outcomes while also shaping communities, narratives, and cultural conversations (Anderski et al., 2025; Merz et al., 2009).

Conventional branding approaches are rooted in a management-oriented perspective, perceiving brands as static entities shaped by strategic management actions of the brand owner. In this traditional approach, brand owners independently develop, maintain, and communicate a clear and consistent brand identity to create brand meaning, neglecting the influence of other actors (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008; Michel, 2017). This approach considers brands as static, owner-controlled assets, conceptualizing consumers and external actors as passive receivers. Actors are positioned as passive recipients of a one-way brand communication by the brand owner, which serves as the sole origin of brand meaning (Brand et al., 2023). As a result, this management-oriented perspective conceptualizes brands as static outcomes of deliberate decisions by the brand owner (Burmam et al., 2009; Keller, 1993).

However, the perspective on brand building and management has shifted from this management-oriented approach to a multi-actor perspective (Merz et al., 2009; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). This new approach emphasises the active involvement of multiple actors on multiple engagement platforms in the co-creation of brand meaning (Iglesias et al., 2020; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Advancing the understanding of actor engagement and value co-creation, Breidbach and Brodie (2017) introduced the perspective of engagement platforms. Engagement platforms are defined as both physical and digital touchpoints, facilitating interactions and

resource integrations in various contexts (Breidbach et al., 2014). As a result, brands are no longer seen as static and solely controlled by the brand owner, but as dynamic, social constructs that evolve through interactions between different actors on different platforms (Merz et al., 2009; Woratschek et al., 2014). Brand managers therefore cannot dictate brand meaning, as it is the result of collaborative brand meaning co-creation performances involving multiple actors (Brodie et al., 2017; Loureiro et al., 2020).

In this multi-actor perspective, the role of brand owners shifts from 'brand guardians' to 'conductors' who facilitate and orchestrate co-creation processes between different actors (Michel, 2017). This shift is particular amplified by the rise of digital engagement platforms, such as social media channels, which empower brands to interact and communicate publicly, freely accessible, and directly with international audiences (e.g., Casalo et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021).

The concept of integrative branding provides a comprehensive framework to understand and structure the dynamic nature of brands (Brodie et al., 2017; Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016). Integrative branding serves as an overarching framework conceptualizing brands as dynamic social processes. Based on this framework, brands are considered as social processes that dynamically evolve among various actors on different platforms (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). Integrative branding consists of two interrelated sub-processes: (1) building brand identity and (2) co-creating brand meaning (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Brodie, 2017; Evans et al., 2019).

The process of building brand identity is largely management-driven, focusing on creating and communicating a coherent and unique brand identity. This brand identity needs to be communicated to the different actors of the brand network through different marketing and communication activities (Woratschek et al., 2019). Building brand identity aims to establish brand awareness and lay the groundwork for the second sub-process of brand meaning co-creation (Brodie et al., 2017). However, brand meaning is not solely the outcome of the brand owner's activities. Instead, it emerges through collaborative interactions and resource integrations among various actors, facilitated by platforms that enable and orchestrate these co-creative processes (Pereira et al., 2022). Co-creation of brand meaning often extends beyond the direct control of brand management and occurs in broader contexts, emphasizing the dynamic and social nature of brands (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016; Wider et al., 2018). Consequently, brand management becomes an iterative process that requires continuous evaluation, adaption, and reinforcement of brand identity in response to the evolving brand

meanings co-created through resource integration and actor interactions across engagement platforms (Brodie et al., 2017). This iterative approach ensures that brand building and brand management integrates both the strategic development of brand identity and dynamic co-creation of brand meaning.

Applying this overarching framework to the research context of human brands, it becomes evident that existing research in marketing and sport management literature has predominantly focused on the first sub-process of integrative branding: building brand identity. Therefore, the co-creation of brand meaning, particularly in the realm of human brands, has often been largely overlooked (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2020; Hasaan et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). Consequently, the dynamic and integrative aspects of brand meaning co-creation, especially for human brands, remain relatively underexplored. Human brands, such as athletes, entertainers, influencers, or musicians, are associated with traditional marketing and branding attributes. Based on the concept of integrative branding, human brands do not evolve naturally; rather, they are the result of a strategic process of building, developing, and maintaining the brand over time (Osorio et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Therefore, we apply integrative branding to the research context of human brands and introduce the concept of *integrative human branding* as the overarching framework for this thesis. *Integrative human branding* combines management-oriented approaches to build brand identity (sub-process 1) as well as multi-actor approaches to co-create brand meaning (sub-process 2) through brand co-creation performances on various brand platforms.

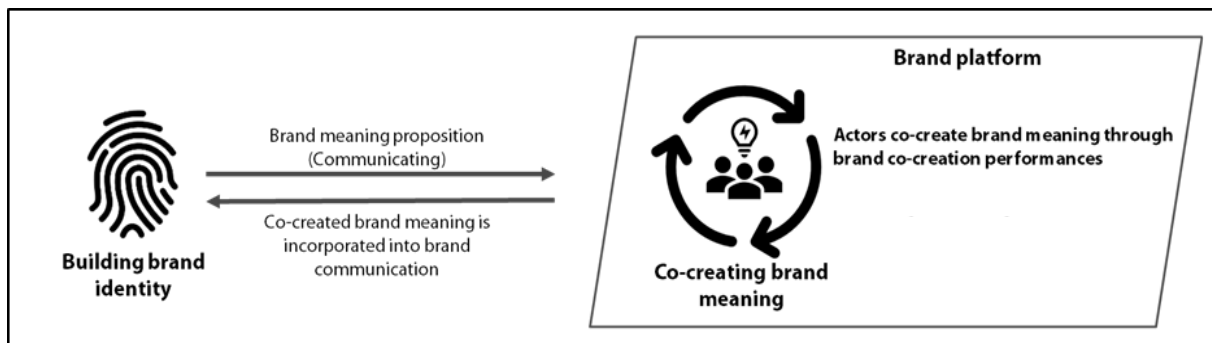


Figure 1.1-1: Integrative human branding

Although human brands have emerged as a relevant topic in marketing and brand management literature (Levesque & Pons, 2020), there is still relatively little research on brand building and brand management from a multi-actor perspective. Human brands not only fulfil many of the functions, characteristics, associations, and attributes of traditional brands, but they also offer enhanced opportunities for identification and engagement. Therefore, this thesis

focuses on athlete brands as a distinct type of human brand, offering a unique context to address this research gap.

Athlete brands have unique characteristics and personalities in the context of sport. However, they are not limited to the context of sport, as they achieve recognition far beyond its boundaries (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Many athletes have recognised the importance of personal branding and actively build their individual brands by creating symbolic meanings and values through distinctive elements such as icons or acronyms (Arai et al., 2013). As a result, professional athletes have become some of the most successful human brands, particularly in terms of social media followers, endorsement deals, and their social and cultural relevance. Athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Michael Jordan and Serena Williams are globally recognised brands whose influence extends far beyond their respective sports into broader social and cultural spheres (Warner, 2020). Ronaldo's presence on digital platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube has established his status as one of the most marketable athletes in the world (Garcia, 2024). Jordan's partnerships with a wide range of organisations, including major sports brands and international clubs, have reinforced his enduring legacy, while Williams' activism has positioned her as a prominent advocate for equality and justice (O'Neill et al., 2023).

Based on the multi-actor perspective, athlete brands interact with various actors, such as fans, sponsors, media, associations, and clubs, across diverse physical (e.g., stadium, press conference, events) and digital (e.g., social media, blogs, online communities) engagement platforms. Brand conductors must continuously adapt the brand identity, based on the brand meaning co-creation evolved from resource integrations and interactions across various engagement platforms. As these two sub-processes are deeply interconnected, it requires ongoing evaluation, refinement, and re-communication. However, existing research on athlete branding has primarily focused on the first sub-process of building brand identity, leaving the processes of brand meaning co-creation underexplored. Consequently, it remains unclear how athletes build and manage their brands within the framework of integrative branding. To address this gap, this thesis aims to understand how athletes build their brands and how brand meaning is co-created. To answer this research question, this thesis comprises eight empirical papers using qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. To provide a comprehensive understanding, these papers address different levels of aggregation, ranging from the micro level (brand building and brand management within the brand network) to the meso level (brand meaning co-creation within the brand ecosystems).

1.2 Cumulative Thesis within the Joint PhD Program

The present thesis is a cumulative work consisting of eight empirical research articles that have been published, accepted or submitted to international peer-reviewed journals. In addition, and in line with the requirements of the University of Bayreuth, further papers published during the PhD, as well as conference contributions, are listed in the appendix (cf. Papers 9 and 10).

The cumulative format allows the research topic to be explored through several interrelated studies, each addressing a specific aspect of the overarching research question. The articles contribute to both high quality scientific and practical discourse and are published, accepted or submitted to leading journals in the fields of marketing and sport management. To ensure this, the selection of journals was guided by the VHB-JOURQUAL ranking and the ABDC Journal Quality List, which rank journals according to their academic reputation and impact. Table 1 provides an overview of the selected journals and their respective rankings.

Paper and Journal	Status	ABDC*	VHB**
(1) European Sport Management Quarterly	Published	A	C
(2) Journal of Business Research	Published	A	B
(3) Journal of Brand Management	Published	A	C
(4) Marketing Review St. Gallen	Published	-	D
(5) Australasian Marketing Journal	Under Review	A	C
(6) International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	Published	B	-
(7) European Sport Management Quarterly	Under Review	A	C
(8) Managing Sport and Leisure	Published	B	-
<i>Appendix</i>			
(9) Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences	Published	-	B
(10) Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences	Published	-	B

* ABDC Journal Quality List 2022; **VHB Publication Media Rating 2024

Table 1.2-1: Selected journals and their rankings

This thesis is part of the joint PhD program between the University of Bayreuth, Germany, and La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, to promote international collaboration and innovation in research. The programme provides a unique platform to explore the research questions in an international context, incorporating different cultural perspectives and approaches. The research integrates insights from international co-authors and draws on practical knowledge gained through active engagement with leading industry partners in the sport sector, such as athletes, associations, clubs, media, and sponsors. These collaborations ensure that the research is both academically rigorous and practically relevant. Additionally,

the joint framework facilitates the transfer of knowledge between academia and practice, bridging theoretical concepts with managerial insights.

The joint PhD program aligns with the University of Bayreuth's internationalization strategies, which emphasize strengthening global research networks, fostering innovative and interdisciplinary projects, and promoting international collaborations (University of Bayreuth, 2021). Additionally, it reflects the University's transfer strategy, which focuses on bridging the gap between academia and practice through innovative research and active industry engagement (University of Bayreuth, 2022). Similarly, the program supports La Trobe University's strategic vision outlined in its 2020–2030 strategic plan, which highlights creating knowledge that shapes the future, advancing research with academic and industry relevance, and building strong global collaborations with leading partners (La Trobe University, 2020). Based on these shared objectives, the joint PhD program provides a robust framework for addressing complex research questions in an international research team, utilizing various methodological approaches, and delivering meaningful contributions to both academic discourse and practical applications.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

To ensure a systematic and coherent structure, the eight empirical studies presented in this thesis are organized within a research framework that incorporates two key dimensions: *methodological approach* (two dimensions) and *level of aggregation* (two dimensions). Accordingly, the research framework consists of four different categories. Figure 1 visualises the structure of the thesis based on the dimensions of the methodological approach and the level of aggregation. The methodological approach is divided into qualitative and quantitative studies. The level of aggregation contains the micro and meso level. Based on this structure, the eight empirical studies are summarised in two interconnected chapters.

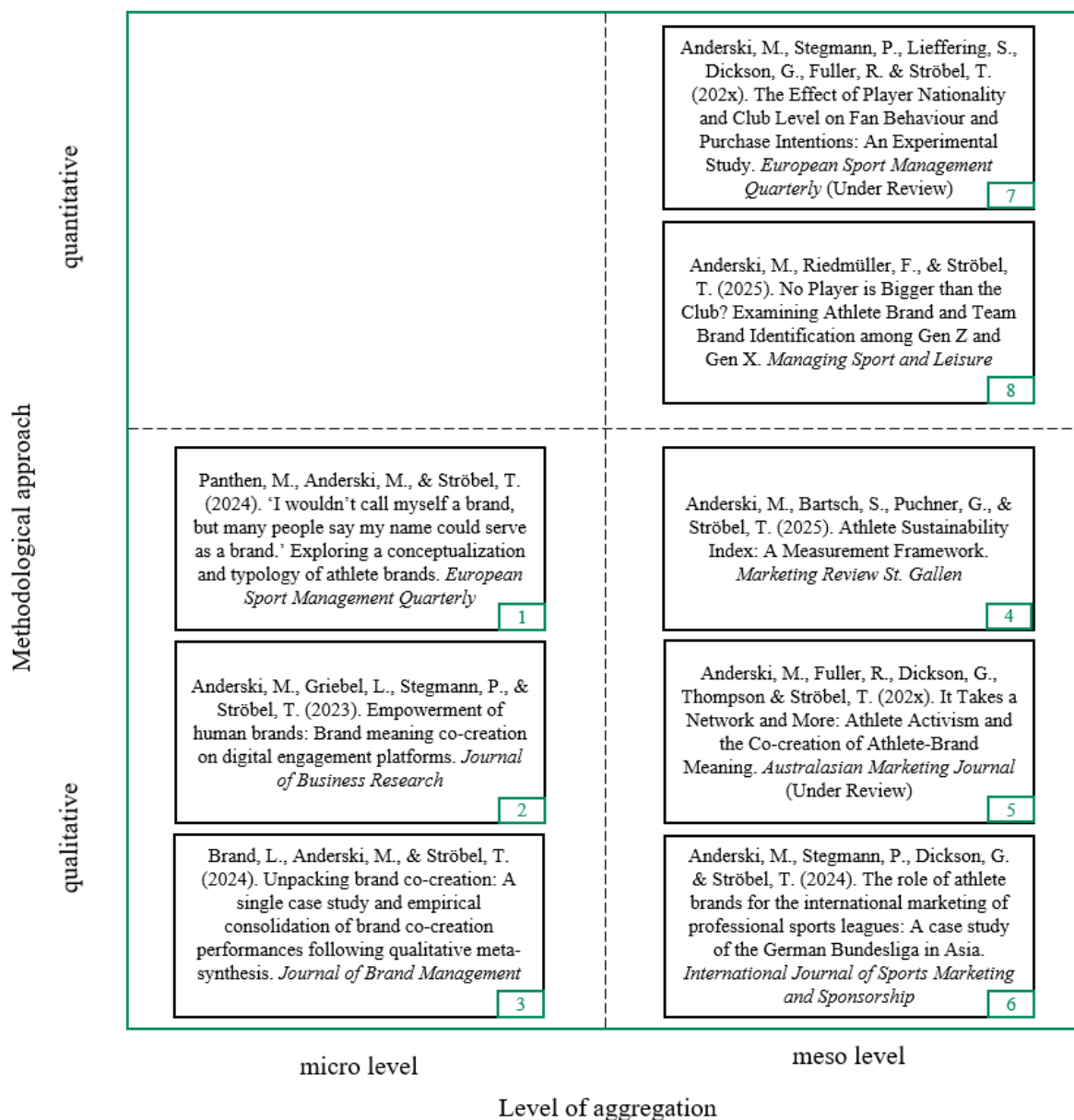


Figure 1.3-1: Structure of the thesis

1.3.1 Methodological Approach

The methodological approach in this thesis aims to systematically generate and validate knowledge in alignment with the overarching research questions. Following a mixed-methods design (Cresswell 2014; Venkatesh et al., 2013), the qualitative studies (cf. empirical Papers 1–6) serve as a foundation for generating new insights through exploratory methods such as interviews, literature reviews, and netnography. These methods facilitate the identification of key literature, development of theoretical frameworks, and exploration of emerging phenomena within a new research context (Swedberg, 2020). Building on these qualitative insights, the quantitative studies (cf. Papers 7 and 8) employ surveys and experimental designs to test hypotheses and validate conceptual frameworks, ensuring the robustness and generalizability of findings (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). For example, interview studies were conducted to understand actors' perceptions and experiences (cf. Papers 1, 3, 4 and 6), while netnography offered unique insights into actors' interactions and resource integrations on digital engagement platforms (cf. Papers 2 and 5). The qualitative studies also incorporated comprehensive literature reviews (e.g., Paper 4) to map existing research gaps and refine theoretical models, providing a crucial basis for subsequent work. Surveys were used to collect large-scale data on constructs such as fan identification, fan behaviour, and purchase intentions, providing a robust basis for examining relationships and effects between these constructs (cf. Paper 7 and 8) (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). Experimental designs further enhanced the rigor of the quantitative research by allowing for controlled manipulation of variables, such as player nationality and club level, to examine their effects on fan behaviour (cf. Paper 7 and 8). This combination of survey data and experimental insights not only validates theoretical propositions but also provides actionable insights for brand managers.

All articles in this thesis are based on original data independently collected and analyzed by the authors, demonstrating the author's methodological and analytical expertise. The originality of the data highlights the thesis's novel contributions to brand building and brand management from a multi-actor perspective. This iterative knowledge generation bridges conceptual development with empirical validation, advancing both theory and practice in marketing and sport management.

1.3.2 Level of Aggregation

The second dimension of the research framework focuses on the level of aggregation. Addressing more complex research questions often requires analysis at different levels of aggregation (Woratschek et al., 2020). Based on the multi-actor perspective, this thesis

examines how athletes build their brands and how brand meaning is co-created across different levels of aggregation. Typically, these levels are categorized into three main dimensions: micro, meso, and macro level (e.g., Storbacka et al., 2016; Taillard et al., 2016). Analyzing these levels is essential to understand the dynamics of brand building and brand meaning co-creation in the context of athlete brands. This thesis primarily focuses on the micro and meso level for examining brand building and brand management of athlete brands in the logic of value co-creation.

At the micro level, the research focuses on the brand building process of athlete brands, providing foundational insights into how athlete brands are developed and managed. This includes developing the first athlete brand building typology, which categorizes and explains the various pathways through which athletes can establish themselves as brands (cf. Paper 1). Following this, the research delves into brand meaning co-creation, identifying key actors involved in the process and analyzing their performances through a single case study of a professional athlete brand (cf. Paper 2). Lastly, the research compares and evaluates brand meaning co-creation performances within brand networks, offering a deeper understanding of how actors contribute differently to the co-creation process using various performances (cf. Paper 3). This micro-level analysis provides crucial insights into the individual and relational dynamics of brand building and brand meaning creation for athlete brands within their brand networks.

The meso level expands the level of aggregation to the brand ecosystem, encompassing multi-actor relationships and the dynamics within a larger context. At this level of aggregation, the thesis focuses on the development of an Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI), a novel measurement framework designed to evaluate an individual athlete's sustainability behavior. This framework assesses athletes across ecological, social, and economic dimensions, providing a comprehensive, multi-actor evaluation of their sustainability impact (cf. Paper 4). Via the process of co-creation, actors within the athlete's brand ecosystem such as fans, teammates, sponsors, or media, all contribute to the athlete's brand meaning. Research at this level examines the brand meaning co-creation of athlete activists, analyzing how athlete brands contribute to social and cultural change within the brand ecosystem and how their brand meaning co-creation performances differ regarding the level of actor involvement (cf. Paper 5). Furthermore, this research explores the role of athlete brands within the brand ecosystem in the context of international marketing. It examines how athlete brands influence the global promotion of sports leagues and their clubs (cf. Paper 6) and their impact on fan behaviour

(transactional and non-transactional) in international markets (cf. Paper 7) as well as among different age groups (cf. Paper 8).

1.4 Link between Research Projects

Papers 1 and 2 are closely connected in their exploration of the brand building and brand meaning co-creation processes for athlete brands within the overarching framework of *integrative human branding*. Paper 1 lays the foundation by examining the brand building process of athletes based on an interview study. This paper introduces the first typology of athlete brand building, distinguishing three types of human brands: brand antagonist, brand supporter, and brand manager. This typology provides a structured understanding of how athletes develop their brands, considering factors such as the athlete core, brand concept, social media use, sponsorship relationships, and the sports ecosystem. Furthermore, it outlines the main commonalities and differences among the three types.

Building on this foundation, Paper 2 shifts the focus to brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms, highlighting the interactive and performative aspects of athlete branding. Drawing on literature from human branding, integrative branding, and performativity theory as well as applying netnography and interviews, the study identifies key actors involved and introduces three novel performance categories for the co-creation of brand meaning. It demonstrates how digital engagement platforms empower athlete brands to actively engage with various actors, reinforcing their role as human brands.

The previous study explored brand meaning co-creation at the athlete level, focusing on how human brands, specifically athlete brands, engage with various actors through co-creation performances on digital engagement platforms. Having addressed this perspective, paper 3 shifts the focus to the club brand level, applying and expanding the concept of Brand Co-Creation Performances (BCCP) to a broader organizational context. This research builds on and extends the empirical work initiated in paper 2 by moving from athlete brands to club brands, using the unique and single case of FC St. Pauli to identify and analyze BCCP in a new context. By consolidating and synthesizing findings from multiple studies, paper 3 uncovers eight interrelated BCCP, divided into direct and enabling performances, offering a comprehensive understanding of how multiple actors co-create brands. Building on the micro-level analysis of athlete brand building and brand meaning co-creation in Papers 1 to 3, papers 4 to 8 transcend to the meso level by examining the roles of athlete brands within the brand ecosystem.

In doing so, paper 4 introduces the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI), a novel measurement framework assessing athletes' sustainability across ecological, social, and

economic dimensions based on a multi-actor perspective. The ASI is developed based on a systematic literature review and 38 expert interviews, focusing on professional football players. It provides a structured approach to linking athletes' actions in both sports and private life to sustainability goals. The framework integrates an adjustable weighting system, allowing various actors within the brand ecosystem - including sponsors, clubs, and agents - to tailor the index to specific athletes and objectives. By addressing individual sustainability behaviors, the ASI bridges a critical gap in existing sustainability frameworks, which predominantly focus on organizations rather than individual actors. Its application enhances accountability and enables sports organizations to track and report individual contributions to sustainability efforts, aligning with broader sustainability goals set by governing bodies in sports such as the Deutsche Fußball Liga (DFL) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Paper 5 extends the focus of sustainability from paper 4 to a broader view of brand activism, examining how athlete activism unfolds in the context of major sporting events. While paper 4 introduces the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI) to assess individual sustainability behaviors, paper 5 explores how multiple actor groups contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning for activist athletes. Using athlete activism as a context, paper 5 examines three mega sports events - the Tokyo Summer Olympics 2021, the Beijing Winter Olympics 2022, and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar 2022 - to explore how multiple actor groups contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning in this context. We deliberately included all German athletes to avoid bias based on age, gender, sport, success, popularity, or team versus individual competition. Germany was chosen as it represents a strong sporting nation with both high- and lower-profile athletes, allowing us to capture a broad spectrum of athlete activism. This shift broadens the scope of analysis, offering insights into the interconnected dynamics of the brand ecosystem and the influence of athlete brands beyond their sport-related networks. The study identifies ten actor groups involved in co-creating brand meaning for activist athletes and introduces four distinct levels of activism-related brand meaning co-creation performances: autonomous activism, collaborative activism, sports-network activism, and beyond-network activism.

Paper 6 extends the analysis of athlete brands within the brand ecosystem by focusing on their role in the international marketing of professional sports leagues. While paper 5 explored the dynamics of brand meaning co-creation without emphasizing specific actor groups, paper 6 shifts the focus to leagues as key actors in the brand ecosystem, specifically examining how they strategically integrate athlete brands into their marketing initiatives. Using the German Bundesliga as a case study, this paper highlights how leagues can collaborate with athlete brands to enhance visibility, engage global audiences, and expand into new markets. By

addressing the specific roles and strategies of leagues, paper 6 provides valuable insights into the co-creation opportunities between athlete brands and league brands, emphasizing their pivotal role in shaping the brand ecosystem and driving international marketing success.

Similarly, paper 7 builds on the findings of paper 6, extending the analysis of athlete brands within the international marketing efforts of the German Bundesliga by employing an experimental design to focus specifically on Asian fans in the target market of China. While paper 6 explored the strategic integration of athlete brands into league marketing initiatives, paper 7 shifts the focus to drivers of fan behaviour in international markets. Positioned at the meso level, it focuses on multi-actor relationships within the brand ecosystem. More specifically, it explores the influence of athlete nationality and club level on fans' consumer behaviour and purchase intentions in new and international markets (China) within a league context (German Bundesliga). Together with Paper 6, this study demonstrates how professional sport leagues strategically rely on athlete brands to internationalize and connect with global audiences. By targeting Chinese fans, the research provides valuable insights into the international fan base's preferences and behaviors, complementing paper 6's findings on co-creation opportunities by offering actionable strategies for tailoring league marketing efforts to specific international markets and target groups. Together, these studies reinforce the importance of understanding diverse fan dynamics in global markets and leveraging athlete brands strategically to enhance international engagement.

Paper 8 extends these findings of fan behaviour by focusing on generational differences in athlete brand identification and team brand identification. Unlike previous studies that examined general fan behaviour, this paper utilized two quantitative studies (survey and experimental design) to specifically compare how Gen Z and Gen X fans identify with athlete brands versus team brands and how these identifications influence their preferences for team-branded or athlete-branded merchandise. By highlighting significant generational differences, this study provides targeted insights for brand managers to tailor strategies that align with the distinct preferences of different age groups, advancing the understanding of branding within the sports ecosystem.

Together, the eight papers presented in this thesis offer a comprehensive exploration of brand building, brand meaning co-creation, and engagement dynamics across different levels of aggregation. The progression from athlete brand building and brand meaning co-creation at the micro level (Papers 1 to 3) to the examination of athlete brands within broader ecosystems at the meso level (Papers 4 to 8) illustrates the interconnected nature of branding processes and

actor engagement. Figure 2 presents the thesis's conceptual framework, embedding the eight papers within the research context of integrative human branding.

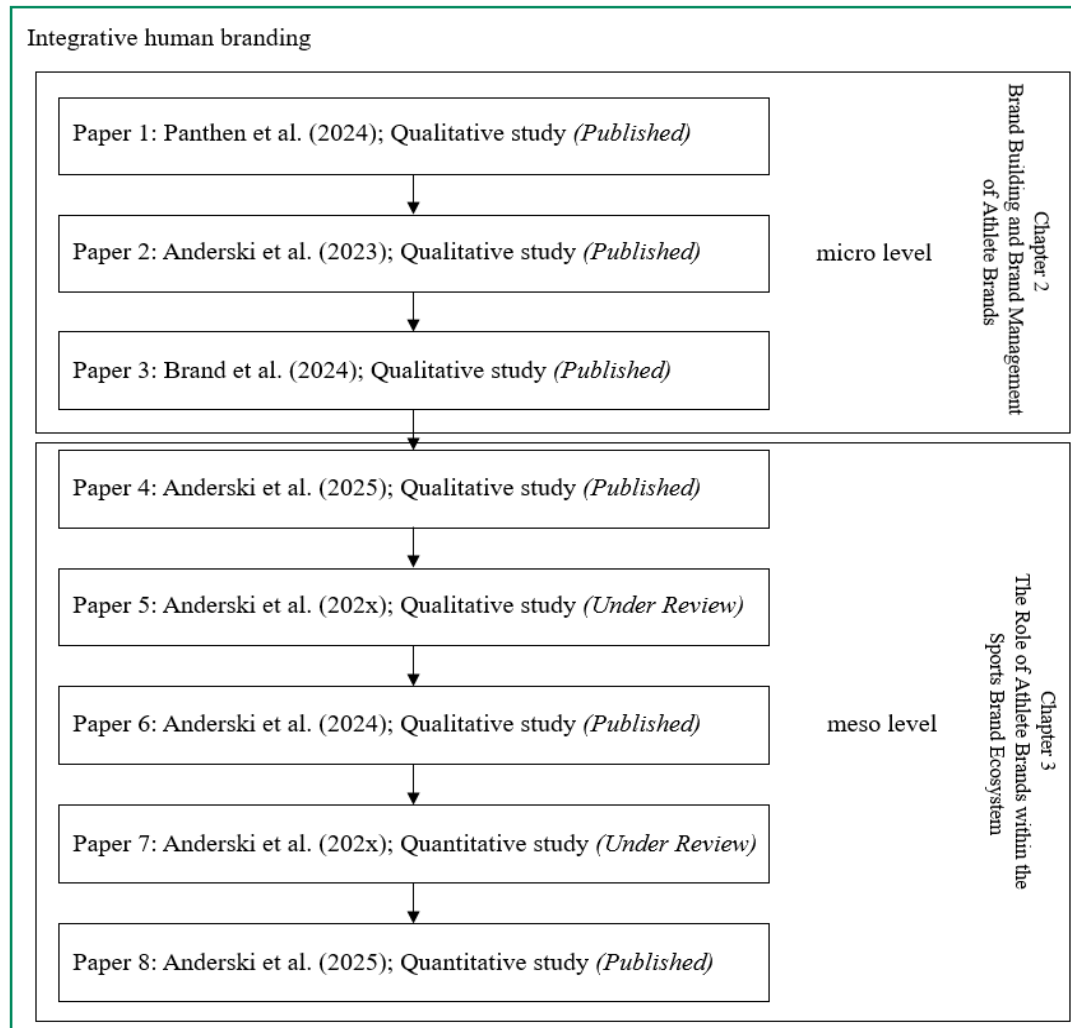


Figure 1.4-1: Conceptual framework of the thesis

1.5 Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All co-authors have been informed and have agreed to the submission or publication of the following articles. As referenced in the text, material that has been published or accepted for publication, in which I am a co-author, includes the following eight papers. The author of this thesis - hereafter referred to as "the author" - contributed to this work as follows and is summarized in Table 1:

Paper 1: Panthen, M., Anderski, M., & Ströbel, T. (2024). ‘I wouldn’t call myself a brand, but many people say my name could serve as a brand.’ Exploring a conceptualization and typology of athlete brands. *European Sport Management Quarterly*.

Maximilian Panthen developed the project and conducted the first round of data collection. The author conducted the second round of interviews, analysed the data, prepared the data presentation, and contributed significantly to writing the manuscript. Maximilian Panthen and the author jointly led the reviewing process, revising and refining the paper throughout the reviewing process. Co-author Tim Ströbel actively participated in regular discussions, offering valuable insights on the theoretical framework, the presentation of the results, and their overall contribution. He also provided detailed revisions to strengthen the manuscript.

Paper 2: Anderski, M., Griebel, L., Stegmann, P., & Ströbel, T. (2023). Empowerment of human brands: Brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms. *Journal of Business Research*.

The author conceptualized the research idea, developed the research project, and took the lead in designing, coordinating, and writing the study. He led the data collection and analysis processes, synthesized the findings, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Lars Griebel acted as a ‘critical friend’ partner throughout the project, contributing to the refinement of the research idea and design. He actively participated in the data collection and played a significant role in drafting and refining sections of the manuscript. Pascal Stegmann provided mentorship, offering critical insights and guidance on the theoretical background of the study and the selection of appropriate research methods. Furthermore, he contributed the results and discussion section of the manuscript. Tim Ströbel supervised the project, providing detailed reviews of the manuscript and engaging in regular discussions on the theoretical framework, research design, and overall positioning of the study within the scientific community.

Paper 3: Brand, L., Anderski, M., & Ströbel, T. (2024). Unpacking brand co-creation: A single case study and empirical consolidation of brand co-creation performances following qualitative meta-synthesis. *Journal of Brand Management*.

Lars Brand served as the lead researcher, conceiving the research idea, designing the study, conducting data collection and analysis, and writing the manuscript. The author engaged in discussions with the two co-authors on the theoretical framework of the paper, provided advice during the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stage and revised the paper repeatedly. Tim Ströbel supervised the project, offering regular feedback on the research design, data

interpretation, and manuscript drafts, while ensuring the academic rigor of the study throughout the publication process.

Paper 4: Anderski, M., Bartsch, S., Puchner, G., & Ströbel, T. (2025). Athlete Sustainability Index: A Measurement Framework. *Marketing Review St. Gallen*.

The author, Georg Puchner, and Tim Ströbel developed the research idea. Georg Puchner and Silke Bartsch conducted part of the data collection and data analysis. The author developed the theoretical background, conducted the second part of the data collection and analysis and wrote the first draft of the paper. Tim Ströbel, Georg Puchner, and Silke Bartsch reviewed the manuscript, while the author was responsible for the final version and its submission.

Paper 5: Anderski, M., Fuller, R., Dickson, G., Thompson, A-J., & Ströbel, T. (202x). It Takes a Network and More: Athlete Activism and the Co-creation of Athlete-Brand Meaning. *Australasian Marketing Journal* (Under Review).

The author led the conception and design of the project, conducted the data collection and analysis, and drafted the first version of the manuscript. Rachel Fuller, Geoff Dickson, Ashleigh-Jane Thompson, and Tim Ströbel contributed by reviewing the manuscript, engaging in discussions to refine the structure, theoretical background, the findings and its contribution. They supported the data analysis, and collaboratively enhanced the quality of the paper.

Paper 6: Anderski, M., Stegmann, P., Dickson, G. & Ströbel, T. (2024). The role of athlete brands for the international marketing of professional sports leagues: A case study of the German Bundesliga in Asia. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*.

The author developed the research idea and the research design, conducted the data collection and data analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Pascal Stegmann contributed to significant sections of the manuscript and provided critical input to its refinement. Geoff Dickson and Tim Ströbel engaged in regular, insightful discussions, offered valuable feedback on the theoretical background, the findings, and its contributions.

Paper 7: Anderski, M., Stegmann, P., Lieffering, S., Dickson, G., Fuller, R. & Ströbel, T. (202x). The Effect of Player Nationality and Club Level on Fan Behaviour: An Experimental Study. *European Sport Management Quarterly* (Under Review).

The author developed the research concept, led the project, conducted the data collection, and wrote the manuscript. Pascal Stegmann co-authored parts of the manuscript and played a key

role in structuring the paper as well as the experimental design. Simon Lieffering was responsible for the data analysis. Geoff Dickson, Rachel Fuller, and Tim Ströbel participated in reviewing the manuscript, contributed to discussions on the research design, data analysis, and data interpretation. Furthermore, they constantly reviewed the project and enhanced its quality.

Paper 8: Anderski, M., Riedmüller, F., & Ströbel, T. (2025). No Player is Bigger than the Club? Examining Athlete Brand and Team Brand Identification among Gen Z and Gen X. *Managing Sport and Leisure*.

The author wrote the paper, conducted the data collection and analysis for study one, and developed the conceptual design and methodological approach. He also led the reviewing process, ensuring the manuscript's quality and coherence. Florian Riedmüller was responsible for the data collection and analysis of study two, contributed as a sparring partner for the paper's design and structure, and provided input during the writing process. Tim Ströbel supervised the project, offering critical guidance in methodology, particularly in data analysis, and participated in regular discussions. He provided valuable feedback to enhance the theoretical and practical contributions of the manuscript.

Matthias Anderski, 14 February 2025

Paper	Name	Contribution	Percentage of Contribution
1	Panthen, M. Anderski, M. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Data collection, Data analysis, Revision Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Writing, Revision, Supervision	40% 40% 20%
2	Anderski, M. Griebel, L. Stegmann, P. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Data analysis, Writing, Revision Supervision	50% 25% 15% 10%
3	Brand, L. Anderski, M. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Data analysis, Writing, Revision Writing, Revision	50% 30% 20%
4	Anderski, M. Bartsch, S. Puchner, G. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing Concept, Data collection, Data analysis, Revision Concept, Data collection, Data analysis, Revision Concept, Supervision	40% 20% 20% 20%
5	Anderski, M. Fuller, R. Dickson, G. Thompson, A-J. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Data analysis, Revision Data analysis, Revision, Supervision Revision Revision, Supervision	50% 25% 10% 5% 10%
6	Anderski, M. Stegmann, P. Dickson, G. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing Data analysis, Writing Revision, Supervision Revision, Supervision	50% 25% 15% 10%
7	Anderski, M. Stegmann, P. Lieffering, S. Dickson, G. Fuller, R. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Writing Writing Data analysis Revision, Supervision Concept, Revision Concept, Revision, Supervision	50% 15% 15% 5% 5% 10%
8	Anderski, M. Riedmüller, F. Ströbel, T.	Concept, Administration, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing, Revision Data collection, Data analysis, Writing Revision, Supervision	50% 25% 25%

Paper	Authors*	Concept	Administration	Data collection	Data analysis	Writing	Revision	Supervision
Paper 1: ‘I wouldn’t call myself a brand, but many people say my name could serve as a brand.’ Exploring a conceptualization and typology of athlete brands. <i>European Sport Management Quarterly</i>	MP	X		X	X		X	
	MA		X	X	X	X	X	
	TS					X	X	X
Paper 2: Empowerment of human brands: Brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms. <i>Journal of Business Research</i>	MA	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	LG			X	X	X	X	
	PS				X	X	X	
	TS							X
Paper 3: Unpacking brand co-creation: A single case study and empirical consolidation of brand co-creation performances following qualitative meta-synthesis. <i>Journal of Brand Management</i>	LB	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	MA				X	X	X	
	TS	X					X	X
Paper 4: Athlete Sustainability Index: A Measurement Framework. <i>Marketing Review St. Gallen</i>	MA	X	X	X	X	X		
	SB	X		X	X		X	
	GP	X		X	X		X	
	TS	X						X
Paper 5: It Takes a Network and More: Athlete Activism and the Co-creation of Athlete-Brand Meaning. <i>Australasian Marketing Journal</i> (Under Review)	MA	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	RF				X		X	
	GD				X		X	X
	AJT						X	
	TS						X	X
Paper 6: The role of athlete brands for the international marketing of professional sports leagues: A case study of the German Bundesliga in Asia. <i>International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship</i>	MA	X	X	X	X	X		
	PS				X	X		
	GD						X	X
	TS						X	X
Paper 7: The Effect of Player Nationality and Club Level on Fan Behaviour: An Experimental Study. <i>European Sport Management Quarterly</i> (Under Review)	MA	X	X	X		X		
	PS					X		
	SL				X			
	GD						X	X
	RF	X					X	
Paper 8: No Player is Bigger than the Club? Examining Athlete Brand and Team Brand Identification among Gen Z and Gen X. <i>Managing Sport and Leisure</i>	TS	X					X	X
	MA	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	FR			X	X	X		
	TS						X	X

*Acronyms based on authors’ initials

Table 1.5-1: Contribution statement

1.6 References

- Anderski, M., Riedmüller, F., & Ströbel, T. (2025). No Player is Bigger than the Club? Examining Athlete Brand and Team Brand Identification among Gen Z and Gen X. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 1-21.
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Chapter 2: Brand Building and Brand Management of Athlete Brands

2.1 ‘I wouldn’t call myself a brand, but many people say my name could serve as a brand.’ Exploring a Conceptualization and Typology of Athlete Brands

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Abstract

Research Question: Building on the literature on human branding, athlete branding, and branding capability, this study examines the brand building process of athletes and is the first to derive an athlete brand building typology.

Research Methods: Semi-structured interviews with 13 professional and semi-professional German athletes were conducted in 2018. The interviews were enriched with data from the athletes’ Instagram accounts. To verify the data and obtain deeper insights into the athletes’ branding capabilities, the study was repeated with 12 of the 13 athletes prior to the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo.

Results and Findings: The findings indicate the first typology of athlete brand building with three specific types of human brands: brand antagonist, brand supporter, and brand manager. These three types can be differentiated by the athlete core, the brand concept, the role of social media, the sports ecosystem, and their sponsorship relationships.

Implications: This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emerging field of athlete branding. The typology can help athletes and their managers to design specific brand building activities depending on the respective athlete type. Additionally, this study is the first conceptualization and typology of athlete brand building. Furthermore, this study marks a starting point for a more comprehensive understanding and further research on athlete branding.

Keywords: Human brands, Athlete brands, Brand building, Dynamic brand capability, Typology

2.1.1 Introduction

Athletes, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, play key roles in the business-oriented and commercialized sports world. They represent prototypical human brands. Their market values and sponsorship deal incomes have reached millions of dollars. Beyond the economic perspective, athlete brands are important societal role models who can influence a wide range of people with their behaviors (Doyle et al., 2023; Harris & Brison, 2023; Leng & Phua, 2022; Taniyev & Gordon, 2022). However, most athletes do not reach the star status of Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo. Therefore, brand building and management is even more important for professional athletes without widespread celebrity status.

With a strong background in brand building and brand management of celebrities and social media influencers (Jacobson, 2020; Johns & English, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2023; Tafesse & Wood, 2023), there is growing research on athlete branding in sports management. With the rise of social media, athletes have begun to develop, maintain, and extend their personal brand (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin, 2023; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Stegmann et al., 2021), surpassing traditional brands on digital platforms in terms of followership. Social media does not fundamentally change consumers' knowledge of brands but makes brand building activities public, accessible, and measurable (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021). Athletes act as influencers on social media, sharing fresh and allegedly unfiltered information directly with their followers (Bredikhina et al., 2023; Casaló et al., 2020). In the context of more strategic athlete brand building, literature highlights the importance of brand congruence where athlete brand identity and athlete brand image largely overlap (Linsner et al., 2021). Athletes are increasingly proactive in creating personal brand strategies to leverage their brands (Arai et al., 2013). According to Cortsen (2013), athlete brands enhance recognition, build reputation and credibility, add authenticity and trustworthiness, and help other actors to stand out in a competitive environment. A key factor for the success of an athlete's brand is the image perceived by consumers, which is shaped by the associations the athlete conveys (Keller, 1993). To create accurate and positive brand images in consumers' minds, athletes or their brand managers need to clearly establish and communicate their brand identity and desired image through a well-defined strategy (Chernatony, 1999).

Research on human brands has yielded classifications, typologies, and other dynamic representations of brand building in the case of influencers (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020; Erz &

Heeris Christensen, 2018) or entertainers (Pluntz & Pras, 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research that focuses on different athlete brand building approaches and on the level of their branding activities. Moreover, athletes' contribution to the brand building process remains unclear. Athlete brand building goes beyond social media and incorporates the complete brand co-creation process. Several actors are involved in brand ecosystems, including the athlete's team, fans, sponsors, associations, and the media, who interact on brand platforms and integrate their resources to co-create the shared meaning of the brands (Baker et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2023; Noh et al., 2023). As with any other brand meaning co-creation process, athletes must be aware of their limited control over their brand. Dynamic branding capabilities must be applied to orchestrate the co-creation of brand meaning with other actors (Anderski et al., 2023; Manoli, 2020; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). This background leads to the following research questions: (1) How do athletes engage in brand building? (2) How do athletes differ in their brand building capabilities? (3) How do they communicate their brand identity and orchestrate the co-creation of brand meaning? (4) How capable are they of building and marketing their own brands?

Sport is a key context for studying the unique effect of human brands (Anderski et al., 2023; Levesque & Pons, 2020). This study contributes to the existing research on athlete brands by conceptualizing the process of athlete brand building and developing a corresponding typology. The typology will help researchers and practitioners to better understand the conditions and characteristics of different athlete groups with regard to their athlete branding efforts. Therefore, this paper aims to further advance our knowledge about diverse brand building techniques employed by various types of athlete brands.

2.1.2 Theoretical Background

2.1.2.1 From Personal to Human Branding

Human beings can be transformed towards and positioned as human brands (Ries & Trout, 1981). Empirical and conceptual contributions underpin the notion that personal brands and human brands are two points on a continuum (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Personal branding is an active process, which requires agency, whereas human brands may evolve without individual engagement (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Intention and consciousness are key characteristics of personal branding. In contrast, the human brand definition does not comprise the active engagement aspect: "persona, well-known or emerging, who are the subject of marketing, interpersonal, or inter-organizational communications" (Close et al., 2011, p. 923). The term human brand puts a clear emphasis on a marketable person

and thus, more on the outcome of a branding process (Scheidt et al., 2020). A human brand is a specific brand type that can be managed as a product or service brand (Thomson, 2006). Everyone can engage in personal branding, but not everyone will become a human brand.

The literature on human brands describes various cues or characteristics that serve as (observable) indicators of a person's classification as a brand (Na et al., 2020; Ohanian, 1990). A person's perceived brand authenticity and identification (Kucharska et al., 2020; Ströbel et al., 2021) as well as consumer evaluation (Eng & Jarvis, 2020; Noh et al., 2023), behavioral intention (Moulard et al., 2015), and emotional attachment (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016) are important cues for a human brand.

2.1.2.2 The Sports Context as an Ecosystem for Human Brand Building

Several insights about our current understanding of human brands stem from sports contexts (Scheidt et al., 2020). Especially high-class athletes are celebrities and can hold a large number of roles through the course of their careers. The Meaning Transfer Model suggests that the attributes of these roles are then transferred to the endorsed products or services (McCracken, 1989; Miller & Allen, 2012). In fact, athlete brands can be conceptualized as a specific type of human brand with unique attributes and distinctive characteristics in the field of sports. Arai et al. (2014) pointed out "athletes have been studied as endorsers rather than brands for decades" (p. 103).

The notion of co-creation between various actors plays a decisive role in the sports ecosystem (Buser et al., 2022; Stieler & Germelmann, 2018). Sports actors comprise fans, sponsors, the media, and individual athletes (Baker et al., 2022). Human and athlete brand building are dynamic and social processes (Anderski et al., 2023). In a sport brand ecosystem, actors such as federations, leagues, clubs, teams, sponsors managers, investors, individual athletes or commercial brands all are involved in the brand building process (Baker et al., 2022).

For athletes, both performance-based factors (e.g. sporting success) and media-based factors (e.g. social media engagement) form the brand image. A positive brand image is related to market value, which in turn may be a direct income source (Hofmann et al., 2021). Athletes as product endorsers are cases where commercial brands leverage the marketing value of the human brand. Being a human brand may be a precondition to successfully act as a product endorser and leverage someone's own earning potential (Mogaji et al., 2020). However, athlete brands require dynamic brand building capabilities to effectively navigate the ever-changing landscape of the sports ecosystem, including external impacts such as the COVID-19 pandemic

and digital transformation. These capabilities enable athletes to continuously build, integrate, and adapt their brands to maintain relevance and maximize their brand value.

2.1.2.3 Athlete Brand Building as a Dynamic Capability

Dynamic brand capability refers to the ability of brands to respond quickly to changing environmental conditions by building, integrating, and reconfiguring external and internal competencies (Teece et al., 1997). Brand capability is defined as the ability of entities to utilize specific resources to achieve their goals (Brodie et al., 2017). More precisely, the concept can be described as a non-transferable specific resource integrated into an organization (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Makadok, 2001). Thus, brand capabilities serve as information-based, firm-specific, and intangible processes that develop over time through complex interactions with various actors.

This perspective is echoed in current sport management research. In addition to traditional sports organizations and club brands (Curado et al., 2021; Gerke et al., 2022; Manoli, 2020), brand extensions in eSports rely on the dynamic capabilities of all actors involved (Lefebvre et al., 2023). Brand extensions in eSports demonstrate how athletes can leverage their existing brand equity to enter and succeed in new (digital) markets and interact with new actors, such as eSport teams, athletes, sponsors or fans. Therefore, athlete brands must also possess dynamic brand capabilities to maintain relevance and maximize their brand value in diverse and evolving markets. Exemplary, in the context of the German Bundesliga, the virtual Bundesliga (VBL) serves as a brand extension that highlights the dynamic capabilities of both traditional sports organizations and athletes. Traditional Bundesliga clubs recognized the growing popularity of eSports and the potential to engage new audiences. Athletes associated with these clubs demonstrate dynamic brand capabilities by adapting their skills to the virtual arena, eSports tournaments and media events, and engaging with fans through online platforms (Schubert et al., 2022).

Few studies have investigated athletes' roles in brand building (e.g., Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). Individual athletes face the growing challenge of managing their brand whilst focusing on a successful sports career (Hallmann et al., 2023; Mogaji et al., 2020). Lack of time and knowledge are among the top challenges professional athletes face when they engage in branding (Hodge & Walker, 2015). Limited media coverage of niche sports and gendered perceptions of sports can be contributing factors which inhibit brand building (Harris & Brison, 2023; Mogaji et al., 2020). Therefore, this research conceptualizes athlete brand building as a

positive motivational state of well-being aimed at developing and maintaining an athlete brand within a wider ecosystem involving other actors (Baker et al., 2022).

2.1.3 Methodology

2.1.3.1 Overview

A multi-method approach was adopted to analyze how athletes engage in brand building. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 professional and semi-professional German athletes in 2018 to explore the multifaceted dimensions of athlete brand building. This included questions regarding their financing, sponsorship, everyday athlete life, brand building and social media activities. Second, the study included data from the athletes' Instagram accounts as a more quantitative part of this study. This step provided information on the athletes' engagement, interaction with followers, and commercial activities. Instagram has already been used to analyze athletes' brand building and self-presentation on social media (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012) and has emerged as the preferred channel for visual representation (DeVeirman et al., 2017)

To enrich and validate the results, the study proceeded with a second data collection in 2021, several months before the Olympic Games in Tokyo. The second interview study served as triangulation to ensure the consistency of the answers. The researchers included answers and content from the first interview study to better understand and validate the responses. Furthermore, the second interview study helped to better understand the development of the athlete brand building process and to make the results more robust and valid in terms of trustworthiness. The researchers conducted interviews with 12 of the 13 athletes from the first study and subsequently updated the qualitative data using current Instagram account numbers. One of the 13 athletes did not respond to our invitation to the follow-up interviews.

2.1.3.2 Sample Description and Interview Procedure

The sample for the first survey comprised 13 athletes from the German national athletics team. The 2018 sample included an Olympic Champion as well as athletes who had won several medals at the Olympic Games and World and European Championships. At the time of data collection, one athlete held the German national record in their discipline, five were employed by the army or federal police, four were students, two were professional athletes, one worked full-time, and one part-time in a regular job. Two of the athletes were siblings who trained together and presented themselves as a joint brand (see Table A1). In the second data collection period in 2021, 12 of the 13 athletes were interviewed using an identical interview guide

(Creswell, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016). At the time of the second study, two athletes had already retired from their active careers, whereas all other athletes were still active and preparing for the Tokyo Olympics, in which most of the athletes participated.

The sampling approach for this study followed a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling aims to intentionally identify participants based on their characteristics and knowledge (Patton, 1990). According to a purposeful sampling strategy, the approach of this study can be classified as a maximum variation approach (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sampling technique is in line with the research questions for developing a typology as maximum variation represents the extreme poles of the typology. The athletes were then selected based on their branding activities. It was not a single selection criterion, but more an array of different criteria such as social media followers and sporting success. All athletes were approached via social media channels or their contact details on their webpages. Existing contact details were used for the second data collection in 2021.

The interviews were conducted by two experienced researchers and followed an interview guide, based on a systematic five-step process, allowing flexibility to explore emergent themes while maintaining a consistent framework to address the research questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide consisted of seven major parts and was pre-tested with student athletes competing at an amateur or semi-professional level with a focus on comprehension and logical order of questions. First, the athletes were asked about their careers, followed by questions about their professional lives, sources of income, potential sponsorship, and other social relationships. The next section included questions about their understanding of athletics marketing, self-marketing, perceptions of a human brand, and their own brand management efforts, followed by broader questions on current opportunities and challenges associated with their sport.

The researchers also took ethical considerations into account. Participants were fully informed about the aims of the study, the procedures, confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The study was designed according to the guidelines and questions proposed by Roth and Unger (2018) and Guillemin and Gillam (2004). The interviews were processed anonymously with the consent of the respondents.

2.1.3.3 Data Characteristics and Analysis

The interviews for initial data collection were conducted between January and April 2018, and the second interview study was conducted between May and July 2021. The interview duration varied between 25 to 55 minutes and 16 to 60 minutes for the first and second study,

respectively (average length: 37 minutes and 34 minutes). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

For the analysis, the study followed a six-step research procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to ensure quality and trustworthiness of the analysis, the six steps were accompanied by several quality checks (Nowell et al., 2017). Data analysis was conducted using a rigorous thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis provides a systematic and in-depth exploration of the data, allowing researchers to identify recurring patterns, themes, and concepts that arise from participants' narratives. Through this interpretive process, the study aims to uncover the underlying meanings, relationships, and dynamics of athlete brand building. Therefore, transcripts were repeatedly reviewed and coded independently by two independent researchers to identify themes and patterns in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the second part of the study, we provided the interview partners with the answers from the first study. In doing so, we also ensured internal validity of the themes and concepts. Due to time constraints for professional athletes, no member checks could be conducted.

At the beginning of the analysis, researchers made themselves familiar with the data corpus. This step also included taking notes and writing down first impressions. In the next phase, the data was analyzed in a systematic way using a mixed-coding procedure. Some main codes were more data-driven which emerged from the responses of the participants (open-coding). Other codes were more theory-driven and derived from the theoretical framework (e.g. 'sponsorship'). The transcripts were coded independently from each other. After the first independent coding by both researchers, coder 1 recorded 863 codings, while coder 2 registered 661 codings in the dataset. The MAXQDA 2020 software was used to facilitate the coding. Researcher triangulation was carried out to minimize the influence of the personal biases of investigators (Tobin & Begley, 2004). This consisted of 1,524 codings across 60 unique codes. To ensure the quality of the data, intercoder reliability was determined for the entire data set. The intercoder reliability of $r = 0.85$ indicated a good match (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). In the case of inconsistent coding, the researchers checked and discussed the inconsistencies. After this step, the emergent codes were discussed and refined (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Patton, 1990).

In the next step of the analysis process, both researchers jointly formulated and selected the themes. A theme is a "patterned response or meaning to the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In this phase, seven themes were preliminarily identified. Themes were examined with regard to the plausibility of the data, as well as with regard to the allocation of sub-themes.

As the thematic analysis goes beyond the analysis of the semantic content of the codes, the preliminary themes were peer debriefed. For this purpose, two independent external researchers reviewed the themes based on the dataset. After discussing the results with the authors, five final themes plus sub themes were defined (Nowell et al., 2017). A visual summary of the data analysis process is provided in Figure 1.

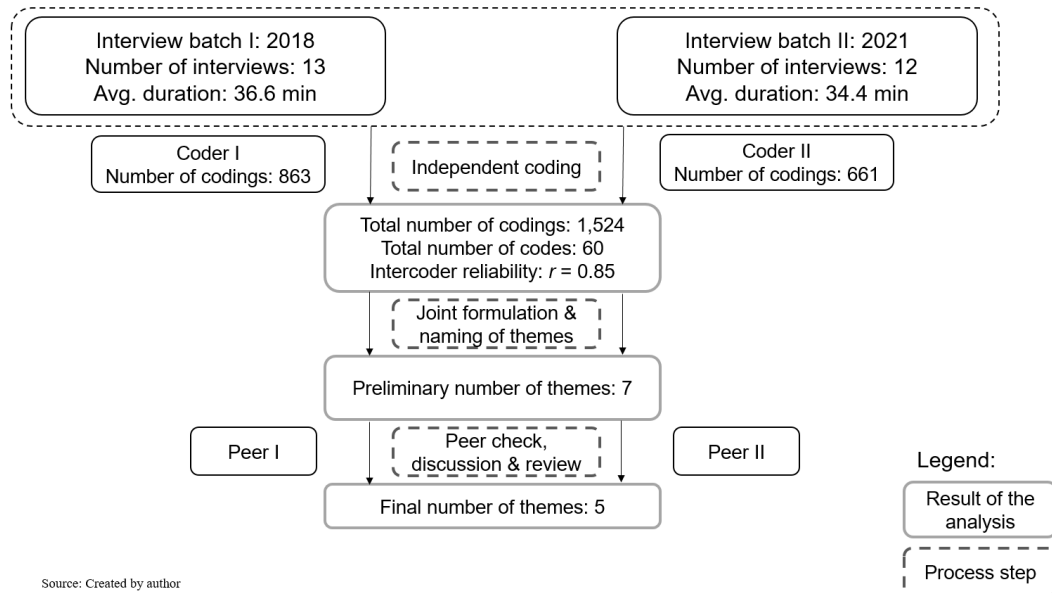


Figure 2.1-1: Data analysis process

Regarding social media figures, the number of Instagram followers is an important measure of the domain of human brands (Dias et al., 2021; Levesque & Pons, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). Instagram numbers were collected from July 15–19, 2018 and April 20–25, 2021 (see Table A2).

2.1.4 Results

To address research questions (1) and (2), the authors identified three distinct types of athlete brands: brand antagonists, brand supporters, and brand managers. Research questions (3) and (4) guided the authors in selecting themes to characterize these types. The three athlete brand types are characterized across five themes: (1) athlete core, (2) brand concept, (3) role of social media, (4) the sports ecosystem, and (5) sponsorship. Each theme includes several sub-themes to distinguish the identified types (see Table 1).

The ‘athlete core’ deals with how the athletes view themselves and what guides their values and behaviors. It consists of three sub-themes: authenticity, personality, and sporting success. Authenticity represents the conservation of a sports identity over a long time. Personality represents characteristics such as passion, discipline, and ambition. Sporting success refers to

the achievements during the sports career. The 'brand concept' encapsulates how athletes perceive and cultivate their personal brands. Self-perception delves into how athletes view themselves as brands, shaping their identity and guiding their branding efforts. Prerequisites outline the foundational elements necessary for successful brand building, including authenticity or uniqueness. 'Role of social media' explains the pivotal role of digital platforms in athlete branding. Engagement addresses the level of interaction and connection athletes maintain with their audience through social media channels, crucial for building a loyal fan base and enhancing brand visibility. However, athletes also encounter challenges in navigating the complexities of social media, such as managing time effectively or dealing with negative feedback. The 'sports ecosystem' is directed towards the various actors and platforms that shape the context within the athlete operates. The role of actors examines the influence of stakeholders like sports organizations, media outlets, and sponsors on athlete branding and career development. Platforms encompass the diverse environments where athletes showcase their talents and engage with their audience, spanning from traditional sports events to digital platforms like social media and online communities. Lastly, 'sponsorship' focuses on the dynamics of brand relationships and financial support. Duration evaluates the longevity of sponsorship agreements, providing stability and support for athletes' careers. Fit & identification explores the alignment between athletes and sponsors in terms of values, image, and target audience, while the type of relationship investigates the nature of interactions between athletes and sponsors, ranging from collaborative partnerships to transactional arrangements. These themes and sub-themes collectively contribute to understanding the multifaceted nature of athlete branding and its impact on career success.

	Brand antagonist	Brand supporter	Brand manager
Level of brand building			
	Passive	Moderate	Active
Athlete core <i>Authenticity</i> <i>Personality</i> <i>Sporting success</i>	Strong, but narrow emphasis on the athlete core; focus on athletic performance and sporting success	Strong, but narrow emphasis on the athlete core; focus on personality	Strong emphasis on the athlete core; able to use and extend the athlete core for branding purposes
Brand concept <i>Self-perception</i> <i>Prerequisites</i>	Does not perceive herself/himself as a brand; only few athletes with outstanding sporting success	Has an ambivalent view on branding; only regional or sports domain-specific scope of the own brand	Clearly acknowledges the concept; knows about her/his own USP or brand attributes
Role of social media <i>Engagement</i> <i>Challenges</i>	No or infrequent use; does not see value in social media; social media as a burden and distraction	Regular, but unsteady engagement; mainly during events and competitions and ‘good times’; social media can be a stress factor	Very high engagement: active community management, experienced in handling difficult topics (e.g. shit storms); smooth integration in the daily routine
Sports ecosystem	Passive role: other actors should promote the sports; dependence on mass media coverage; no interaction with other athletes	Passive role; aware of the relevance of other actors, but no active engagement	Active role in the ecosystem: knows what role the actors play and how they are interconnected
Sponsorship <i>Duration</i> <i>Fit & Identification</i> <i>Type of relationship</i>	Long-term relationship preferred; fit & identification are important; transactional and passive perspective on sponsorship (e.g. put a logo on the website or jersey; sponsorship activation as a duty)	Long-term relationship preferred; fit & identification are important; pragmatic approach to sponsorship	Long-term relationship preferred; fit & identification are important; Active partnership (e.g. joint activity planning; both sides bring in their ideas)

Table 2.1-1: Typology of athlete brand building

The Brand Antagonist

Definition. The brand antagonist is a type of athlete who strongly identifies with their core role as an athlete, prioritizing sporting success and passion above all else. They do not see themselves as brands and are not or only passively interested in self-marketing activities. Brand antagonists view branding in athletics as difficult and believe that only a few exceptional athletes can truly be considered as brands. They are generally uninterested in social media and view it as a distraction from sports.

Athlete Core. Brand antagonists consider the ‘athlete core’ as central to their identity. Sporting success is an important aspect of the athlete's role. Excellence in sports, training, regeneration, and other sports-related activities are in the center of the brand antagonist's life. The core of the athletes' role is both the aspiration for success and passion as two motivational drivers: the focus on the sports identity is strong. These athletes focus intensively on their sports and set clear priorities. Activities that are not related to the athlete core are dispensable for brand antagonists and often seen as annoying or distracting. Brand antagonists closely stick to the athlete core.

There is only one thing, and that is sporting success, which the athlete either has or does not have. Success alone in their sports or discipline made them into personalities. From this perspective, sporting success is the one thing that really matters (A7, 2018).

Branding Concept. Brand antagonists do not see themselves as brands and are not particularly interested in self-marketing. They find it difficult to present parts of their lives to the broader public, either because they are not the type of person or they do not see any value in self-branding activities: “No, not me, I’m not a brand. I would not want that at all [...]. It is really the case with me that I do not like to take the center stage. That’s not my thing” (A9, 2018).

Brand antagonists find branding in athletics difficult per se. They find themselves not suited for branding activities because that does not fit with their personality. These athletes see inherent difficulties in the sport itself and say that marketing team sports would be easier. In individual sports, it is much harder in their eyes to stand out in the crowd. In turn, when asked for what is needed to build a human brand, they say that self-presentation skills along with outstanding performance are needed. Sporting success is, for brand antagonists, the number one driver of brand building. Taking this together, brand antagonists see only a few athletes as real brands and view their and other brand building activities with skepticism. Only a few outstanding individuals like Michael Jordan (former National Basketball Association player),

can be considered as brands. This does not mean that brand antagonists are unsuccessful in their sport or that they do not have sponsors; they simply do not care about activities other than sporting activities.

Role of Social Media. Brand antagonists rarely post on social media or do not even have a social media account. They do not see the value in these activities, and they do not have much experience with them. If at all, brand antagonists only use social media for basic functions, do not post much on their accounts, lack followers, and do not interact much with them. For this athlete type, social media is a burden that distracts them from focusing on sports. It is time-consuming for them, and they are generally uninterested in social media. Particularly, the cost-benefit ratio is not good for them: being active on social media costs significant time, distracts from training and regeneration, but does not yield outcomes. Therefore, any other activities such as interacting with followers would distract them from developing their sports performance.

I used to have a social media account personally, but only on Facebook, which I set up in 2014, but I do not think I have actively managed it since 2016. But it is still open in case there is a request (A7, 2021).

The Sports Ecosystem. Brand antagonists consider athletics as a sport in a weak position compared to other sports, mainly team sports. Mass media (e.g. TV senders) and event organizers are the main actors who should promote the sports. For brand antagonists, new event platforms and more media exposure would be needed to promote athletics in order to make the sports more attractive for sponsors. In the personal network of the athletes, regional ties to sponsors and the club play a major role for brand antagonists.

Sponsorship. Brand antagonists are not very active in finding new sponsors. They do not dedicate much time to it and find it an exhausting process. On top of that, they are very selective about which sponsor they want to go with. Brand antagonists only accept sponsorships when the company accepts who they are and how they behave (authenticity principle of the athlete core). For them, it is important to stay true to themselves and they do not want to adjust their behaviors for sponsors (e.g. a certain number of postings). Long-term relationships and mutual identification are indispensable aspects of sponsorship for brand antagonists; “I want to be ‘myself’, I don’t want to pretend to be something or I don’t want to represent something that I don’t support 100%” (A10, 2021).

The Brand Supporter

Definition. The brand supporter is an athlete who places importance on the athlete core, including sporting success and personality traits like passion and ambition. They engage in brand building moderately with occasional efforts that lack a strategic plan. While they recognize the importance of branding, they may face personal barriers or lack a clear understanding of how to proceed. Brand supporters use social media regularly but may not follow a strategic communication plan and may feel ambivalent about its time-consuming nature.

Athlete Core. Brand supporters have a strong emphasis on the athlete core. Sporting success is important, and they have a clear focus on personality characteristics such as passion, discipline, and ambition. They have a basic interest in branding. However, brand supporters are athletes who passively engage in brand building. Their activities are infrequent; thus, their brand building process does not follow a strategic plan and is based on rudimentary efforts. Brand supporters want to show as little of their personality as possible. However, brand supporters understand the mechanisms of self-branding and intuitively know what would be needed to further build their own brand. For example, they see a certain level of uniqueness necessary to brand building. For brand supporters, it is particularly hard to maintain the athlete core and actively promote their own brand at the same time.

I try to show myself authentically, but at the same time as less of myself as possible. I also don't show a lot of private things, that's not me, unfortunately. I think if I would, I might get more attention, but I want to separate that. I only want to show the most necessary sporting content – together my partners (A4, 2021).

Brand Concept. Brand supporters do not necessarily view themselves as brands, but undertake initial brand building activities on social media. Brand supporters consider branding as important, but still have some personal barriers, either because the concept does not fit with their personality or they do not exactly know what to do.

However, brand supporters see a trade-off between social media activity and the 'sports domain' (training, relaxation, physiotherapy, etc.). They do not follow a strategy and may therefore need support from their athlete manager, marketing agency, or coach. Some brand building activities (such as public relations) are well executed, but mainly driven by intuition. Their branding activities are loosely coupled and have a regional and sports domain-specific scope. Other actors, e.g. athlete manager or sponsor, mostly trigger the branding activities of brand supporters.

The Role of Social Media. Brand supporters have social media accounts and use them on a regular basis. However, sometimes, they do not follow a strategic communication plan and sometimes just forget to post content. The social media efforts are not embedded in a larger branding concept. However, they know about the functionalities of social media platforms and have an idea how they can present themselves. They receive requests for product placements and recognize the trade-off between the athlete core, and products that do not fit with their identity as an athlete: “I wouldn’t call myself a brand. However, many people say that they like my hashtag and my Instagram, so that my name could serve as a brand” (A6, 2018).

Brand supporters also see the downsides and challenges of social media. For example, these athletes mention how much time social media postings consume and that this can also lead to mental issues. Therefore, they have an ambivalent relationship with social media channels.

The Sports Ecosystem. Brand supporters are aware of the relevance multiple actors have for their brand, but they do not actively engage with them. They acknowledge that this attitude limits their brand building, which could be important for their future. Brand supporters usually have support from other actors (e.g. coaches, athlete management or the club) that push them a little bit. They need other actors to further promote their brand.

Sponsorship. For brand supporters, long-term relationships and athlete-sponsor fit are important aspects, but they also see the financial value of sponsorships. Usually, they cannot choose between sponsors, and they thus have a pragmatic approach to sponsorship. They fulfil their contractual obligations as best as possible to keep their sponsor satisfied and to secure this income stream: “The sponsor, for example, must also be able to identify with me as a brand. So that I can represent the brand properly and it appears genuine. Because authenticity is actually the most important aspect” (A6, 2021).

The Brand Manager

Definition. The brand manager is an athlete who strongly identifies with their role as an athlete and recognizes the importance of sporting success. They view themselves as brands and actively engage in strategic brand-building activities in addition to their athletic pursuits. They understand the significance of social media and use different platforms effectively to showcase their personality and sporting activities. Brand managers possess a deep understanding of the sports ecosystem and actively shape their environment to promote their brand. They value long-term sponsorship relationships and actively collaborate with other actors.

Athlete Core. Brand managers are athletes first and want to be recognized as such. Sporting success is an important aspect of the athlete role. The role of ‘being a real athlete’ is

associated with professionalism, perfectionism, honesty, and reliability: ‘You have to be convinced of what you do.’ Being authentic in the athlete context reflects sports associated values: not being fake, being honest, being respectful, being genuine. The brand manager is aware that athletes serve as role models for the youth and that the athlete core has an outward perspective.

Brand Concept. Brand managers clearly view themselves as brands and have no reservations about it. They act in a strategic and entrepreneurial manner and enjoy building their brand in addition to being an athlete. They devote considerable time to brand building activities and actively seek assistance and inspiration from other actors (e.g., athlete managers or other athletes) in the ecosystem to achieve this goal. Brand managers actively manage their brand and know what they stand for. What is unique about brand managers is that they try to ‘de-couple’ themselves from the reliance of sporting success. They try to extend their brand to other fields, e.g., coaching, running courses, speeches etc., which may fit with their athlete core. However, they are well aware that this is a double-edged sword as other branding activities may distract them from focusing on sports: “I have to say that I’m really a brand, and there is a real demand for this brand” (A5, 2018).

Still, brand managers clearly see value in brand building activities for athletes. They find it important to build a human brand that is less reliant on sporting success, especially for the period after retirement from athletics. Brand managers know about the advantages of individual sports (compared to team sports), because they do not have to share the attention with other team members. Thus, it is easier for them to position and promote their brand: “We have now considered how to reposition our brand. That’s actually where we are right now, and we are also focusing on the area of nutrition for example” (A11+12, 2021).

The Role of Social Media. Brand managers know which important roles social media plays for their branding activities. These athletes have a good understanding of the mechanisms and know that it takes significant time from their day-to-day business and must be professionally designed. However, they also acknowledge that managing social media channels is a challenge for athletes who are not familiar with it. They see clear value in social media channels, especially Instagram, because they have the chance to manage much of it themselves. Social media allows them to show how they do their sports.

Brand managers are familiar with media tools and the mechanisms underlying the search for sponsors. Athletes as brand managers know how to use online (e.g., social media, online communities, virtual event platforms) and offline communication tools (e.g., press conferences,

sponsor events, charity events) effectively to promote their brand. In this study, brand managers were able to significantly increase their Instagram followers, as they realized the importance of this figure to make their brand attractive for media and sponsors. They are capable and motivated to build their brands, actively engage in a brand building process, and cooperate with other actors in the sports ecosystem. Brand managers can present themselves on social media in a way that fits with their athlete core, especially an authentic representation of their own personality: “So it’s no longer only about athletic performance, it is more about showing what you stand for as a brand on your social media channels” (A1, 2021).

The Sports Ecosystem. Brand managers have a good knowledge of the interdependencies in a sports ecosystem and think in more political ways, e.g., the influence of Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter. These athletes act interconnected. Brand managers also have in mind the big picture, because they do not only focus on their own sports career, but also see the developments of the whole sports and funding system. They attempt to actively design their environment instead of waiting for other actors in the network to take initiative (e.g., promoting the sport). They view brand building as a process and not as a final state. They have the capabilities to adapt to societal changes and reposition their brand. For example, the public awareness for climate protection is such a societal change that can influence the brand building of brand managers. In doing so, they cooperate with various actors beyond their sporting-related ecosystem. The following quotes exemplary illustrates some actors: “...my club, the athletics association, German sports funding, private sponsors, press at competitions, newspaper, radio, TV etc.” (A8, 2021).

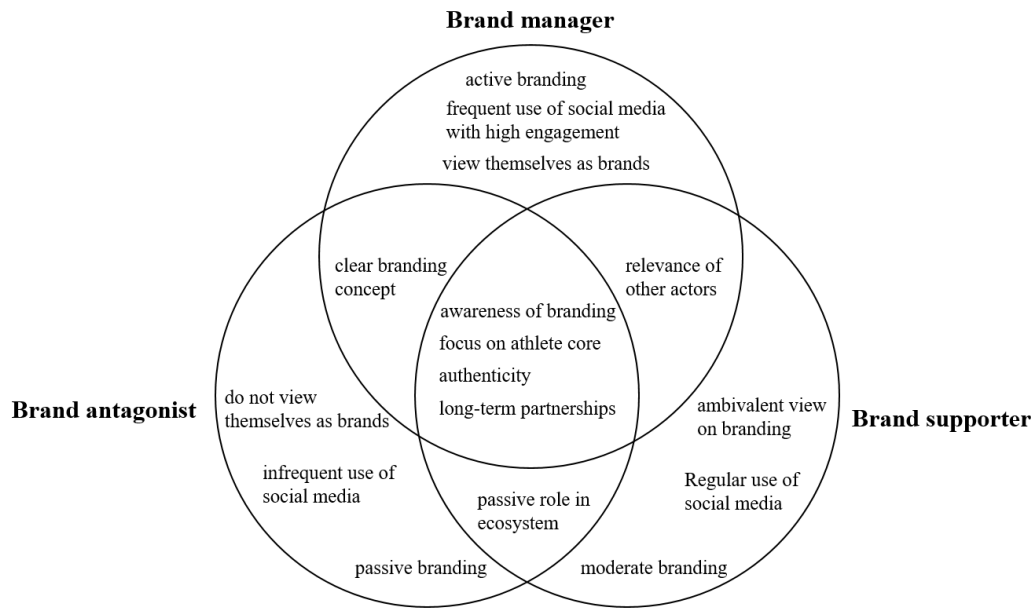
Sponsorship. Like the other athlete types, brand managers also value long-term sponsorship relationships. Brand managers show a clear tendency towards independence from single sponsors or public funding. Their approach to sponsorship is more active and person driven. The sponsor-athlete fit and identification with the sponsor is also important to them, but they want to build a relationship. Brand managers want to work with sponsors intensively and bring the contract to life. A shared vision and common goal are important aspects of the sponsorship-athlete relationship for them. What is also unique about brand managers is their approach to different income streams. This is the reason why they appreciate long-term sponsorships, because money such as kick-off or winning bonuses are riskier.

2.1.5 Discussion

As our results show, the athlete core is important to all three athlete brand types. Keeping up and maintaining the core principle of authenticity in different situations, e.g. interview

situations, competitions or on social media, is important for the athletes in this sample. However, the athletes differ strongly in how they interpret and live the athlete core. For brand managers, authenticity is a good guiding principle that makes them unique and helps them to build their brand. Brand managers are prototypes of ‘achieved celebrities’ (Rojek, 2010), because they have active agency, know about their role as athletes and act accordingly. Brand antagonists have a strong focus on the athlete core only. This allows them to put their actual role as an athlete in the center of action and devote time and energy to this passion. They try to block out any disturbances that could distract them from doing sports. This attitude is in line with their approach to social media. Social media activities require high engagement from the athletes even though they have support from others (e.g. professional photographers). Brand supporters are somewhere between these extremes. For them, it is especially difficult to find the right balance between branding activities in their daily sports life.

Despite their distinct approaches, the three athlete brand types share some commonalities in their attitudes and brand building behaviors. Firstly, all prioritize sporting success and focus on the athlete core, recognizing it as a fundamental aspect of their athlete identity. This emphasis on athletic achievement underscores their dedication to their core business and contributes to their credibility within the sports community. Additionally, they all value authenticity and integrity, albeit manifesting differently in each type. Whether it is the brand antagonists’ commitment to staying true to themselves in sponsorships, the brand supporter’s pragmatism in fulfilling contractual obligations or the brand manager’s entrepreneurial spirit in extending their brand beyond sports, authenticity remains a core principle guiding their actions. Moreover, they all acknowledge the importance of long-term relationships in sponsorship, albeit with varying degrees of active engagement and independence from sponsors. What differs across the sample is how broadly the athletes define their role, how much they extend their athlete identity and whether they adopt other roles as well. Figure 2 visualizes the main commonalities and differences among the three types.



Source: Created by author

Figure 2.1-2: Main commonalities and differences among the three types

2.1.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study categorizes athletes into three athlete brand types based on the athletes' level of engagement and capability in brand building. Existing studies on athlete brand building treat athletes homogenously with regard to their tendencies for self-marketing; however, the present study shows that the mindsets and actions regarding brand building vary significantly. A 'one size fits all' approach to brand building seems not to provide further insights into theoretical development. The types proposed in the typology differ in terms of various categories, such as the motivation to use social media, the importance of sponsorships, brand self-perception, or the role in the athletes' ecosystem. In line with previous research on branding, sports brands are perceived as dynamic and social processes (Anderski et al., 2023). These types are not fixed, therefore, athletes can move between different levels of brand building. In this respect, our research is in line with recent approaches identifying different categories within the lifecycle of a human brand (Hasaan et al., 2021). Our typology can be linked with different stages in the lifecycle of an athlete brand. Brand supporters are in the brand inception phase where they initiate first brand building activities. Brand managers have moved beyond the brand inception phase since they use and extend their athlete core for branding purposes in a strategic manner.

The typology can help analyze existing findings on athlete branding and constitutes the first step toward conducting a more fine-grained analysis of athlete brand building (Arai et al., 2014; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). The concept of athlete brand building and its social construction is also a connecting link to other research areas in

sport management, such as performance management, sports sponsorship (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Su et al., 2020) or career development (Ryba et al., 2015).

A major finding of this study refers to authenticity and the athlete core. The results add to knowledge about authenticity being a marketable asset of the athlete (Lobpries, J., Bennett, G., & Brison, N., 2018). Maintaining the athlete core is imperative for athletes. However, the typology shows that athletes interpret authenticity differently and mainly brand managers extend their brand to incorporate other aspects of life. The idea of brand core extension seems to be applicable for human brands (Koo, 2022) and, in the case of philanthropic activities, can result in positive brand image (Kunkel et al., 2020).

The present study focuses on individual athletes as important actors within a sports ecosystem and views them as embedded in a broader ecosystem of other actors (e.g., coaches, physiotherapists, club officials, family and friends, teammates). An athlete's ecosystem is an important aspect of athlete brand building because brand meaning is co-created by different actors (Brand et al., 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Therefore, this research also contributes to the recent development of a network-oriented branding approach that emphasizes the co-creation of brand meaning (Centeno & Wang, 2016)

2.1.5.2 Managerial Implications

The results indicate that athletes are heavily influenced by their sporting performance, with success often being the key to building a brand. However, social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has demonstrated that athletes can effectively build their human brands without traditional media exposure at sporting events. Athletes should be encouraged to use social media actively, as it allows them to manage their exposure directly.

This study is also significant for athlete managers, whose roles evolve in the process of athlete brand building. The framework of Osorio et al. (2020) was extended to provide practical implications for different types of athlete brands as a specific category of human brands. Managers must consider the type of athlete they work with, as each requires different support, particularly in collaboration with brand antagonists and supporters. Brand managers need support in aligning athletes' personalities with their brand image, while brand antagonists need motivation to engage in brand building.

Furthermore, social media training is crucial for Olympic athletes (Geurin, 2023), and a tailored approach is necessary to optimize brand-building efforts. Interaction with other athletes on social media can be beneficial (Doyle et al., 2020). Brand supporters require guidance on strategic matters and integrating social media into their lives, while brand managers, already

active on multiple platforms, need insights into new trends and technologies, like virtual reality. Athlete managers should support these activities and share best practices from leading influencers. Brand antagonists, on the other hand, need encouragement to participate in brand-building activities, as they typically avoid social media and public appearances. For these athletes, managers must convey the value of brand building and integrate them into networks with professional brand managers (Wong & Hung, 2023).

The rise of influencers within and beyond sports (Casaló et al., 2020; Williams & Newman, 2019) has heightened expectations for athletes seeking parallel careers (Hallmann et al., 2023). Active participation on social media is now standard for athletes but can negatively impact their training and performance. The key challenge, especially for those without professional guidance, is balancing brand building with training and competition. Therefore, teaching and training programs should focus on efficient brand-building strategies that fit within the time constraints of athletes' training, competition, and personal lives.

2.1.6 Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the selection of a single sport. However, athletics was found to be a suitable context for this study. As explained in the methodology section, athletics is at the core of the Olympic Games, but still in many facets, especially in Germany, a niche sport, which makes active brand building so important for athletes to find sponsors and finance themselves. Thus, future research should extend the concept of athlete brand building to other individual and team sports and focus on the wider context of brand building processes. A second limitation is that only Instagram data has been used to assess athlete activity in the brand building process on social media. Future research could analyze more platforms to gain a deeper understanding of engagement proliferation and enhancement, and to avoid the risk of fake followers on a single social media platform (Ren et al., 2023). A third limitation is that only German athletes were included in the sample. As outlined in this paper, athletes interact intensively with other actors in a sports ecosystem. The ecosystem, for example the sports finance and funding structures, may have an influence on how athletes engage in brand building. In addition, this study comprises a relatively small number of athletes.

However, a promising route for future research is to assess the robustness of the framework and investigate the antecedents of athlete brand building and to develop a quantitative measurement instrument. Another promising research endeavor may be to explore how athletes use their brand, approach sponsors, and coordinate all actors within their network on different platforms. Further research should explore the athlete brand building profiles more deeply as

this would allow for better education and support strategies. The role of personality factors has been highlighted in the human brand literature (e.g., Carlson & Donovan, 2013) and is part of the athlete core. Future research should further explore the role of pre-dispositional factors such as personality and shed light into the question how these factors can be leveraged.

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2.1.8 Appendix

Athlete No.	Gender	Occupation	Main income sources	Discipline
A1	male	Student & Police*	Salary	Decathlon
A2	male	Soldier*	Salary, Club	Sprint
A3	male	Part-time job	Salary, Club, Sponsorship	Sprint
A4	female	Soldier*	Salary	High jump
A5	male	Athlete & Student	Club, Sponsorship	Javelin
A6	female	Athlete	Club, Sponsorship	Sprint
A7	male	Soldier*	Salary	Hurdles
A8	female	Student	Club, Sponsorship	Hurdles
A9	female	Student	Parents	Heptathlon
A10	male	Full-time job in the automotive industry	Salary	Shot Put
A11+12	female	Athlete	Club, Sponsorship	Marathon
A13	male	Student	Club, Sponsorship	Discus Throw

* The German Armed Forces offer a special program for professional athletes. They have to serve as soldiers for six weeks per year and can focus the rest of the year on their sports. Athletes can join the sports development program if they are member of the national squad. The police offers a comparable program.

Table A1. Socio-demographic variables

Athlete No.	Gender	Discipline	Follower Instagram July 2018	Follower Instagram April 2021	Entries overall July 2018	Entries overall April 2021	Likes last 3 months July 2018	Likes last 3 months April 2021	Comments last 3 months July 2018	Comments last 3 months April 2021
A1	male	Decathlon	12,3k	18,1k	255	465	31,527	19,038	225	216
A2	male	Sprint	30,7k	24,4k	279	317	34,697	0	188	0
A3	male	Sprint	6,423	6,212	338	400	7,500	114	142	4
A4	female	High jump	18,6k	24,8k	225	389	37,279	24,116	397	308
A5	male	Javelin	55,4k	83,8k	294	873	346,911	180,686	2,766	822
A6	female	Sprint	21,4k	21k	293	322	46,618	14,450	331	822
A7	male	Hurdles	No Instagram account	No Instagram account	-	-	-	-	-	-
A8	female	Hurdles	33,5k	43,5k	389	679	95,783	53,347	777	882
A9	female	Heptathlon	No Instagram account	No Instagram account	-	-	-	-	-	-
A10	male	Shot Put	1,220	1,345	110	140	1,089	566	22	17
A11+12	female	Marathon	42,6k	48,9k	692	1419	92,251	135,527	751	2,440
A13	male	Discus	4,438	5,179	170	229	5,626	3,986	67	116

Table A2. Overview of the sample with selected Instagram figures in 2018 and 2021

2.2 Empowerment of human brands: Brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms

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Abstract

Digital engagement platforms empower human brands by enabling them to directly interact with various actors. Human brands, especially athlete brands, are about to outperform traditional brands on digital platforms. Drawing on literature from human branding, integrative branding, and performativity theory, this study identifies actors and analyzes their performances based on a case study of a professional athlete brand. We apply a multi-method approach using netnography and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of brand meaning co-creation. We contribute to existing literature by introducing the concept of integrative branding to the management of human brands. Additionally, we reveal three novel performance categories for the co-creation of human brands on digital engagement platforms. Our findings extend the literature by delivering in-depth insights into the brand meaning co-creation of athlete brands as a specific type of human brands. This study marks a starting point for further research on human brands.

Keywords: Human brand, Athlete brand, Brand meaning co-creation, Performativity theory, Performances, Brand management

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2.2.1 Introduction

Within the last few years, professional athletes have set new benchmarks in terms of brand marketing. Cristiano Ronaldo, a professional football player and one of the most popular human brands worldwide, reached more followers on Instagram in 2021 than all Premier League clubs combined and became the first human brand to amass over 500 million followers across all his social media profiles (ESPN FC, 2021; Marland, 2021). Although human brands have emerged as a relevant topic in brand management (Levesque & Pons, 2020), research in this area is still in its nascent stage. While the branding literature has addressed brand building and brand management of celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Johns & English, 2016; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), our study focuses on athletes as a specific type of human brands (Osorio et al., 2020). We chose this research context deliberately because by now athlete brands have outperformed traditional brands on digital platforms with regard to followership. Moreover, human brands are backed by a real person, which distinguishes the research subject of this study from traditional corporate brands in terms of branding dynamics and co-creation of brand meaning on multiple levels.

The development of digital engagement platforms (e.g., social media) empowers athletes by enabling them to interact directly with various actors, such as fans, sponsors, media, and clubs. With the advent of social media, athletes have begun to build, develop, maintain, and expand their brands (Appel et al., 2020; Liu & Suh, 2017). Athletes use their social media profiles, especially on Instagram and Facebook, to communicate publicly and freely accessible as well as to interact directly with their followers on a global basis (Casaló et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021). The top 10 players in FIFA World Cup 2022 accumulate more than 1.3 billion followers with an average follower growth rate of 32.4 % from August 2021 until July 2022 (Nielsen, 2022).

However, according to recent literature on the co-creation of brand meaning, athletes cannot autonomously build and control their brand. Rather, brands are conceptualized as dynamic social processes. Building on the concept of integrative branding, brand owners need to leverage dynamic branding capabilities to develop and communicate their personal brand identity as part of the first sub-process (building brand identity). Within the second sub-process (co-creating brand meaning) brand owners need to provide platforms and orchestrate the co-creation of brand meaning by other actors' performances (Brodie et al., 2017; Merz et al., 2009; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). Therefore, this study is the first to apply the concept of integrative branding to human brands and identify performances for the brand meaning co-

creation on different social media platforms. This background leads to the following research questions:

1. Which actors co-create the brand meaning of human brands on digital engagement platforms?
2. Which performances are initiated to co-create the brand meaning?

This study is based on a single case study analysis by applying a multi-method approach (Venkatesh et al., 2013). We followed the research proposal of Centeno and Wang (2017) as well as Hasaan et al. (2020) and examined the brand meaning co-creation of a professional female athlete from Germany, who is active in the seasonal niche sport of biathlon. We applied a netnographic approach by observing (Kozinets, 2019) and examining the performances of multiple actors on the athlete's digital engagement platforms within the world cup season 2020/2021. Furthermore, 25 semi-structured interviews with various actors related to the human brand were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding. Through the combination of these two methodological approaches, this study provides in-depth insights into the brand meaning co-creation of athlete brands as specific types of human brands.

Our study provides three main contributions to the field of brand management: (1) we apply the concept of integrative branding for the first time in the specific context of human brands by identifying actors and performances for the co-creation of a human brand's meaning; (2) we contribute to performativity theory by analyzing and comparing the examined performances related to human brands with the current research in brand management (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017); and (3) we mark a starting point for a more comprehensive understanding of human brands and further research by introducing the novel concept of *integrative human branding*. Moreover, the study enhances brand managers' knowledge of the dynamics of human branding, especially by using three different performance categories to build and maintain a unique and network-orientated human brand. The results can be applied to other human brand types, such as celebrities, entertainers, or influencers.

2.2.2 Theoretical background

2.2.2.1 Personal and human brands

Osorio et al. (2020) provide a systematic conceptualization of personal and human brands within their framework. Using the branding continuum, the authors describe the transformational process from personal brands to human brands. From this perspective, each person engages in individual self-branding activities daily and represents their own personal brand (Moulard et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2005). The objective is to coach or manage oneself, for example, for job interviews or projects, where personal branding can be useful to present unique

individual attributes and to convey a specific message or storyline (Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013). Moreover, personal brands act autonomously and without the influence of other actors, allowing the individual to maintain complete control over all branding decisions (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

Human brands are associated with traditional marketing and brand attributes. They do not evolve naturally; rather, they are the result of a strategic process of building, developing, and nurturing the brand over time (Osorio et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Due to increasing self-marketing and significantly raised attention, individual personas are transformed into commercialized brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Osorio et al., 2020). Human brands not only accomplish many of the functions, associations, and characteristics of traditional brands, they also provide enhanced opportunities for identification and emotional engagement (Arai et al., 2014; Thomson, 2006). Regarding source credibility and self-promotion, current research identified trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as relevant factors for building a distinctive human brand and engaging with various actors (Na et al., 2020; Ohanian, 1990). Therefore, human brands are often referred to as commercialized brands such as entertainers, musicians, or influencers on digital platforms, which pursue the overarching goal of managing a brand that is a real person and strategically enhancing their brand equity (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Thomson, 2006). Contrary to personal brands, human brands do not have complete control over branding decisions as they are co-created by multiple actors in a dynamic branding process (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

2.2.2.2 Athlete brands as particular types of human brands

Recent publications in brand management literature indicate increased significance as well as changing perceptions of athletes (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2020; Hasaan et al., 2020; Hasaan et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). However, the co-creation of an athletes' brand meaning remains unclear to this point. In general, athlete brands represent a specific type of human brands with unique personalities and characteristics in the field of sports (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Nevertheless, athlete brands are not restricted to this specific segment; they have achieved recognition far beyond the boundaries of sport (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Many athletes have recognized the relevance of branding and have actively begun developing their individual brands (Ratten, 2015), establishing their own symbolic meanings and values by using various unique elements, such as icons or acronyms (Arai et al., 2013). Consequently, professional athletes are currently the most successful human brands in terms of followers on social media. Manchester United superstar Cristiano Ronaldo became the world's first person to reach the milestone of 400 million followers on Instagram.

Only one account counts more followers, which is that of Instagram itself. During the last six months alone, Cristiano Ronaldo increased the number of followers on his social media profile by more than 163 million, doubling it in the last two years (Garcia, 2022).

Current research on athlete brand building can be summarized according to Arai et al.'s (2013) Model of Athlete Brand Image. Based on Keller (1993), the authors considered athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle to be the three main dimensions of building an athlete's brand. The model does not consider co-creation of brand meaning in a dynamic branding process. An athlete's brand is autonomously developed and controlled by the athlete (Arai et al., 2013; Keller, 1993).

Due to the digital transformation, the media presence, communication, and engagement of actors in digital ecosystems are changing (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Stegmann et al., 2021). Building on current research findings in the area of athlete branding, social media has become the most important and powerful branding platform (Doyle et al., 2020; Na et al., 2020). Nowadays, athletes use their own social media profiles to interact unfiltered and directly with fans, sponsors, media, or even other athletes (Hofmann et al., 2021; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). Social media is not only used for communication with various actors but has also emerged as a strategic marketing tool (Green, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015). Recent publications have discussed the creation of athletes' brand identity and the development of a unique and distinctive brand image (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012; Geurin, 2017; Hasaan et al., 2018; Hasaan et al., 2020). However, the role of digital engagement platforms for brand building and a consideration of brand meaning co-creation as dynamic and social process by relevant actors have not been examined. Table 1 provides an overview of human branding literature and its contribution to the concept of integrative branding.

Author and year	Methodology	Purpose	Findings and main contributions to existing literature
Arai et al., 2013	Quantitative	Testing the conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI)	Scale development and test of the introduced model of athlete brand image (MABI)
Arai et al., 2014	Conceptual	Developing a conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI)	Providing the first comprehensive conceptual framework of athlete brand image
Carlson & Donavan, 2013	Quantitative	Testing how human brands affect consumer's identification	Athletes as unique personalities; effect of athlete prestige and distinctiveness on identification affecting consumer behavior.
Centeno & Wang, 2016	Qualitative; Conceptual	Examining co-creation of human brands in a stakeholder-actor approach	Stakeholder-actors' participation in the co-creation process of celebrity's human brand identity
Doyle et al., 2020	Mixed Methods	Examining consumer engagement with athlete brands on social media	Development and testing of the Model of Athlete Branding via Social Media
Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019	Conceptual	Understanding and managing brands that are also persons	Conceptualization of person-brands; highlighting the interdependent relationship between the person and the brand
Hodge & Walker, 2015	Qualitative	Investigating the branding of professional athletes	Identification of branding challenges faced by professional athletes as well as marketing strategies
Kunkel et al., 2020	Quantitative	Examining athletes promoting philanthropic efforts on social media	Positive effect of athlete's promotion of philanthropic activities on brand image, strengthening the connection between athlete and followers
Osorio et al., 2020	Literature review, Conceptual	Conceptualization and distinction of human and personal brands	Summary of literature on human brands and development of a branding-by-individual continuum
Parmentier & Fischer, 2012	Qualitative	Examining the dynamic processes of personal branding	Conceptualization of professional image and mainstream media persona as two core elements of athlete brands
Preece & Kerrigan, 2015	Qualitative	Analyzing the brands of professional artists	Co-creation of human brands (artistic brands) based on a multi-stakeholder approach
<i>Our study</i>	<i>Qualitative, Conceptual</i>	<i>Identifying actors and their performances on digital engagement platforms</i>	<i>Revealing three novel performance categories for the co-creation of human brands from a multi-actor perspective on different digital engagement platforms</i>

Table 2.2-1: Literature review on human brands and its contribution to co-creation of brand meaning

2.2.2.3 Towards brand meaning co-creation of human brands

Conventional brand approaches build on a management-oriented perspective and perceive brands as static results of strategic management actions. Brand owners autonomously develop and communicate a clear and stable brand identity to create brand meaning (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008; Michel, 2017). Thus, consumers and other external actors are conceptualized as passive receivers of the brand identity conveyed through the brand owner's marketing initiatives. Brand meaning evolves through management-driven processes (Burmam et al., 2009; Keller, 2003). This management-oriented perspective is predominantly adopted in current research on human brands (Arai et al., 2014; Johns & English, 2016). For instance, Kristiansen and Williams (2015, p.371) detail how athletes endeavor to 'build and manage [their] personal brand equity through organization produced and controlled brand communication'.

The perception on brand development and brand management has evolved from such a management-oriented perspective towards a multi-actor perspective (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017), which emphasizes the active participation of multiple actors in brand meaning co-creation (Iglesias et al., 2020; Ind, 2014; Sarasvuo et al., 2022; Tierney et al., 2016). Brand meaning co-creation 'refers to a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more [actors] that influences a brand' (Sarasvuo et al., 2022, p.557). Drawing on performativity theory, multiple actors continuously perform brand meaning and thus constitute and co-create the social reality and meaning of a brand within these interactions (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Thus, the brand owner cannot autonomously build and control the brand. Rather, brands are perceived as dynamic and social processes that develop meaning in interactions of multiple actors (Merz et al., 2009; Woratschek et al., 2014). Accordingly, brand meaning cannot be determined by brand management alone but is always co-created by various actors that engage in collaborative brand co-creation performances (Brodie et al., 2017; Loureiro et al., 2020). The role of brand owners shifts from that of a "brand guardian" to that of a "conductor", who supports co-creative processes between multiple actors (Michel, 2017).

The concept of *integrative branding* offers an overarching framework to better capture and structure the dynamics of brands (Brodie et al., 2017; Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016). It conceptualizes brands as dynamic social processes among multiple actors that build on brand identity (Brodie et al., 2017; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). The concept consists of two interrelated processes: (1) building brand identity and (2) co-creating brand meaning (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Brodie et al., 2017; Brodie, 2017; Brodie & Benson-Rea,

2016; Evans et al., 2019). Building brand identity refers to management-oriented approaches to develop and communicate brand identity, which ensures brand awareness and builds the foundation for brand meaning co-creation processes. Brand meaning not only results from the brand owner's branding activities, as argued in current literature on human brands; rather, brand meaning is always co-created in interactions among multiple actors. Brand owners need to provide platforms to enable, facilitate, and orchestrate interactive brand meaning co-creation processes between multiple actors as well as to achieve brand engagement and brand equity (Pereira et al., 2022). However, co-creating brand meaning also occurs in contexts that are not controlled by brand management (Brodie et al., 2017; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016; Wider et al., 2018). Both sub-processes of integrative branding are interrelated. Although brand identity is typically controlled by the brand owner, based on the brand meanings emerging in interactions it must be constantly evaluated, adjusted, and then reinforced in brand communication. Thus, brand management adheres to an iterative process between building and adapting brand identity as well as co-creating brand meaning (Brodie et al., 2017).

Predominant research on human brands relates only to the first process of integrative branding. There is a lack of research that systematically maps relevant actors and, more importantly, *how* they co-create brand meaning of human brands. As indicated above, brand management literature increasingly builds on the sociological concept of performativity to better understand and explain how multiple actors co-create brand meaning (Da Silveira et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017). *Performativity theory* is concerned with performative constitutions of reality and argues that social objects are constituted by a set of performances (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1990). The fundamental premise for branding is that brand meaning is continuously co-created through the performances of multiple actors (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Brand meaning is – in line with the concept of integrative branding – not developed autonomously by brand management, but evolves through dynamic co-creation performances of multiple actors (Iglesias et al., 2020). So far, only three empirical studies identify specific performances of actors to co-create brand meaning and none of the existing research is carried out in the context of human brands. Initially, von Wallpach et al. (2017) identify seven performances through which the meaning of the brand identities of different actors are co-created. However, the performances identified are unique to the single case investigated. Similar applies to the work of Essamri et al. (2019), which focuses mainly on brand meaning co-creation performances initiated by the brand management. The authors identify three superordinate performances of the brand owner within a single case study in the context of a brand community. They neglect the relevance of other actors highly affecting and co-creating

brand meaning by integrating their resources. Lastly, Iglesias et al. (2020) identify four performances of multiple actors to co-create brand meaning in a B2B context. Since Iglesias et al. (2020) identified – in contrast to the work of von Wallpach et al. (2017) and Essamri et al. (2019) – brand meaning co-creation performances across multiple cases and by considering multiple actors, we draw on their work. They consider *communicating* as conveying brand identity within the network of actors. This performance is mainly performed by the brand owner and involves the traditional management-driven approaches. However, also other (external) actors may perform communicating. *Internalizing* is about bringing the brand identity to life by translating it into concrete brand behaviors. Management and employees need to be selected and trained according to the brand identity to ensure a consistent brand behavior. *Contesting* occurs when internal and external actors compare brand identity with their perceptions of the brand. They either reaffirm or challenge it with their own brand meanings. *Elucidating* refers to a conversational process where brand management, together with multiple actors, discusses and reconciles the diverse brand meanings to create a common understanding of the brand.

The development of digital engagement platforms not only empowers human brands to build their brands through management-driven processes but also entails direct interactions between multiple actors. We therefore emphasize the importance of a performative multi-actor perspective. The concept of integrative branding guides our study as an overarching framework. We thus introduce the notion of *integrative human branding* (cf. Figure 1), which encompasses management-oriented approaches to build brand identity as well as multi-actor approaches to co-create brand meaning. However, integrative human branding remains inaccurate to explain how multiple actors co-create brand meaning. We thus integrate performativity theory to our conceptualization of integrative human branding. Since brand co-creation performances are yet solely studied in the context of corporate brands, the questions arise whether the performances can be applied to human brands and whether additional performances are relevant to better understand the brand meaning co-creation of human brands. The framework of integrative human branding – as a combination of the three theoretical concepts *integrative branding*, *performativity theory*, and *human branding* – consequently serves as the theoretical background of our study.

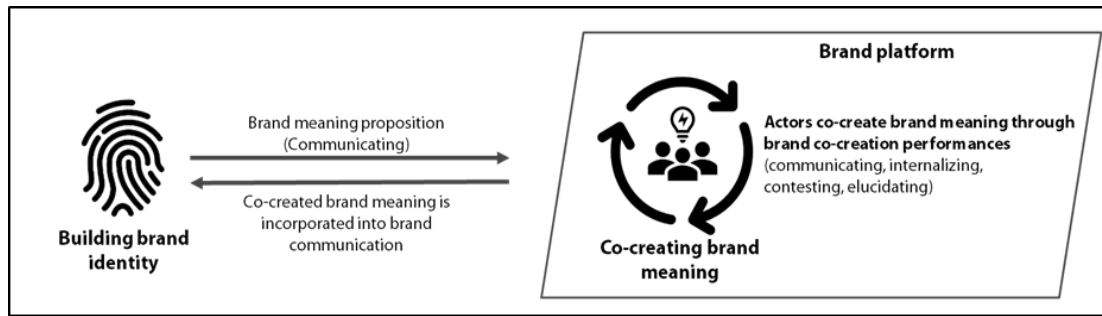


Figure 2.2-1: Integrative Human Branding (adapted from Griebel et al., 2020)

2.2.3 Methodology

2.2.3.1 Research design

As this study is the first to investigate brand meaning co-creation of human brands on different digital engagement platforms, we selected an exploratory research approach. We conducted a single case study by applying a multi-method approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2013) to gain first empirical insights regarding brand meaning co-creation performances of human brands (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). By systematic combining several qualitative research methods focused on the same human brand, we expand our database and gain deeper and more reliable insights regarding the brand meaning co-creation from a multi-actor perspective (Mingers, 2003; Mingers & Brocklesby, 1997). To obtain unique and novel results, this qualitative research builds on a systematic twofold research process (Creswell, 2014). First, a netnography was applied to a professional female athlete's brand by observing and examining the performances of multiple actors on different digital engagement platforms. By collecting and evaluating empirical data from digital engagement platforms during the survey period, we aimed to validate and strengthen our study. To further enrich our data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with various relevant experts of our actor groups related to the athlete brand, whom we identified in the first step of our methodology.

2.2.3.2 Netnography

We chose a systematic netnographic approach, which has proven its eligibility in the fields of digital engagement platforms and brand management research from a multi-actor perspective (Abeza et al., 2017; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Zaglia, 2013). Netnography refers to an ethnographic approach that enables the observation and investigation of social activities, resource integration, and interactions of multiple actors on digital platforms, such as public social media profiles (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Kozinets, 2019). Thus, it provides unique insights into various brand meaning co-creation performances initiated by multiple actors

online (Kozinets, 2002). Recent publications in the fields of human branding, actor engagement and co-creation have proven that netnography is a suitable method for systematic data collection and data analysis on social media platforms (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Kozinets, 2021; Pera et al., 2021). Our analysis focuses on the semantic aspects of the brand meaning co-creation process of the athlete brand on five different digital engagement platforms. We selected these five platforms since they are frequently used by the athlete and are furthermore among the most-used social media platforms worldwide (Hootsuite, 2022).

The netnographic approach was applied to a professional female athlete's brand from Germany, who is active in the seasonal niche sport of biathlon, by observing and examining the performances of multiple actors. The athlete brand has been active in the IBU World Cup for many years and has participated in numerous international competitions. Retrospective data collection for the netnography was conducted by recording all posts on the athlete brand's official Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn profiles. A total of $n_1=299$ posts (e.g., images, videos, and text) with more than $n_2=17,800$ comments across all five official profiles were identified and recorded manually. During the research period, the athlete had approximately 60,000 followers on her Instagram channel and approximately 90,000 followers on Facebook, representing the two major digital engagement platforms. We consciously did not select an athlete at an early career stage or with exceptional sporting success with a very large social media reach for our case study and deliberately focused on a more experienced athlete to avoid bias effects in terms of digital affinity and social media behavior among various actors. In addition, we selected a female athlete because she most likely faces various obstacles, such as limited media awareness or prejudices, which restrict her potential to build and maintain her own brand (Mogaji et al., 2020). The data collection period covered the IBU World Cup Season 2020/2021 from November 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021, including the pre-season from May 1, 2020, to October 31, 2020.

2.2.3.3 Interview study

To understand brand meaning co-creation performances on digital engagement platforms, it is crucial to know which actors are involved. Based on the results of the netnography and the interviews with the athlete herself, eight relevant actor groups related to the athlete brand were identified. They consist of competitors, fans, clubs and associations, equipment suppliers, inner circle (e.g., family and friends, management), media, sponsors, and agencies. To further enrich our understanding of brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of these actor groups. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with 23 experts (Bogner & Menz, 2009), including three

consecutive interviews with the athlete herself. Table 2 provides an overview of the sample. The experts for the qualitative interviews were identified from the netnography and from the interviews with the athlete herself. All interviews were conducted online between June and December 2021, using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or phone calls. The duration of the interviews varied between 19 and 62 minutes, with an average length of 36 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed. All respondents voluntarily participated in the study and received no financial compensation or other transactions associated with the interview participation. The respondents were informed transparently about the purpose of the data collection and agreed to its usage for scientific purposes. Personal data were further anonymized during the transcription.

No.	Date	Actor group	Actor	Length	Profession
1	23.07.2021	Agencies	Media Agency	45 min	Founder & CEO
2	03.08.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	50 min	Senior Vice President
3	11.08.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	56 min	Director
4	07.09.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	25 min	Managing Director & Partner
5	30.09.2021	Agencies	Media Agency	39 min	Co-Founder
6	10.06.2021	Athlete	Athlete	20 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
7	17.08.2021	Athlete	Athlete	23 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
8	21.10.2021	Athlete	Athlete	30 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
9	12.07.2021	Club & Associations	National Federation	62 min	Managing Director
10	28.07.2021	Club & Associations	International Federation	32 min	Head of Digital Marketing
11	04.08.2021	Club & Associations	Club	32 min	Executive Board Member
12	05.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	26 min	Digital Marketing
13	13.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	42 min	Marketing Manager
14	18.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	26 min	Marketing Manager
15	07.07.2021	Equipment Supplier	Team Supplier	41 min	Sports Marketing Manager
16	04.12.2021	Fans	Supporters Club	27 min	Founder
17	08.12.2021	Fans	Supporters Club	33 min	Founder
18	14.12.2021	Fans	Athlete Fan	24 min	Student
19	17.12.2021	Fans	Biathlon Fan	27 min	Fan; former Athlete
20	09.08.2021	Inner Circle	Management	61 min	Manager
21	22.12.2021	Inner Circle	Family & Friends	19 min	Friend; former Athlete
22	23.07.2021	Media	Social Media	31 min	Marketing Manager
23	05.07.2021	Sponsors	Individual Sponsor	40 min	Marketing Manager
24	12.07.2021	Sponsors	Individual Sponsor	44 min	Marketing Manager
25	13.07.2021	Sponsors	Team Sponsor	45 min	Marketing Manager
ø average length				36 min	

Table 2.2-2: Sample characteristics interview study

Semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide and were conducted by two experienced researchers, leaving sufficient freedom for additional comments and aspects from the interviewed actors. The interview guide comprised four major parts that were slightly adjusted depending on the questioned actor group and pre-tested. First, actors were asked to describe themselves and how they use digital engagement platforms, followed by questions about the shared content on social media as well as the expected value and objectives of digital engagement platforms. The second section of the interview focused on the relationship with the human brand. Questions regarding the collaboration with the athlete brand and the perceived values and attributes of the athlete brand were also addressed. The next section included questions about social media channels and the general advantages and disadvantages of these platforms. Furthermore, participants were interviewed about their social interactions with the human brand and about other actors involved. The respondents discussed various types of communication and interaction as well as different formats that they use. In addition, the mutual interaction between other actors and the human brand is discussed, followed by broader questions on current challenges and future opportunities associated with human branding on digital platforms.

Throughout the data collection period, we conducted three semi-structured, guided interviews with the athlete herself, which were built on each other thematically. Interview one related to her general understanding of athlete marketing and self-marketing, perceptions of her athlete brand and her own brand management on digital engagement platforms. The second interview provided a detailed discussion on the use of her social media channels, the concept of integrative human branding, and brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms. In the last interview, the athlete was subsequently confronted with preliminary results and reports from the netnography of her social media posts during the research project. This was followed by a retrospective summary of the study, which left space for open questions.

2.2.3.4 Data analysis

We conducted a three-stage research procedure. In the first step, we used an inductive and open coding process in the netnography to identify the relevant actor groups and the performances they initiate on the five digital engagement platforms. The actor groups formed the basis of our interview study in step two (Qu & Dumay, 2011). We used open coding to organize and categorize the collected data from our netnography and our interview study before comparing it to the existing literature (Kozinets, 2019). We examined the existing literature that addresses the co-creation of brand meaning on digital platforms in the context of brand

management. In this third step, we focus on performativity theory. This included a deductive data review and a comparative analysis with the pre-existing literature based on the identified performances (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017).

The entire data collection and data analysis were carried out in German, and the relevant quotes were translated into English. To ensure the credibility and quality of the results, all data were coded independently by two researchers using MAXQDA 2020 (Creswell, 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Patton, 1990). The data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Perreault & Leigh (1989), we determined intercoder-reliability for the netnography ($r = .86$) as well as the interview study ($r = .86$), indicating both good matches. In the case of incoherent coding, the researchers checked for inconsistencies and discussed them.

2.2.4 Results

2.2.4.1 Brand meaning co-creation performances

With regard to previous literature studying performances in brand management research, we identified the four brand meaning co-creation performances introduced by Iglesias et al. (2020) on the digital engagement platforms of the studied human brand (*communicating*, *internalizing*, *contesting*, and *elucidating*). However, in contrast to corporate brands, we identified additional brand meaning co-creation performances that seem to be unique to the specific research subjects of human brands and digital engagement platforms. These new performances (i.e., *cooperating*, *reinforcing*, *individual loving*, and *individual hating*) were initiated by various actors within the brand network. Across these eight types of performances, we recognized three generalizable categories that vary regarding the level of its brand-meaning co-creation that is given by the specific context of both theories of brand co-creation (e.g., multi-actor perspective such as co-branding processes) and human brands (e.g., interweaving of the athlete as an individual person and its brand). To be more precise, we differentiated between (1) network-related performances (i.e., *cooperating*) that emphasize the collaboration of actors regarding the co-creation of brand meaning; (2) human brand-related performances (i.e., *reinforcing*, *communicating*, *internalizing*, *contesting*, and *elucidating*) that describe activities that are considered to directly affect the athlete brand; and (3) person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving*, and *individual hating*) that mainly target the individual person behind the human brand. A visual summary of the identified categories is shown in Figure 2.

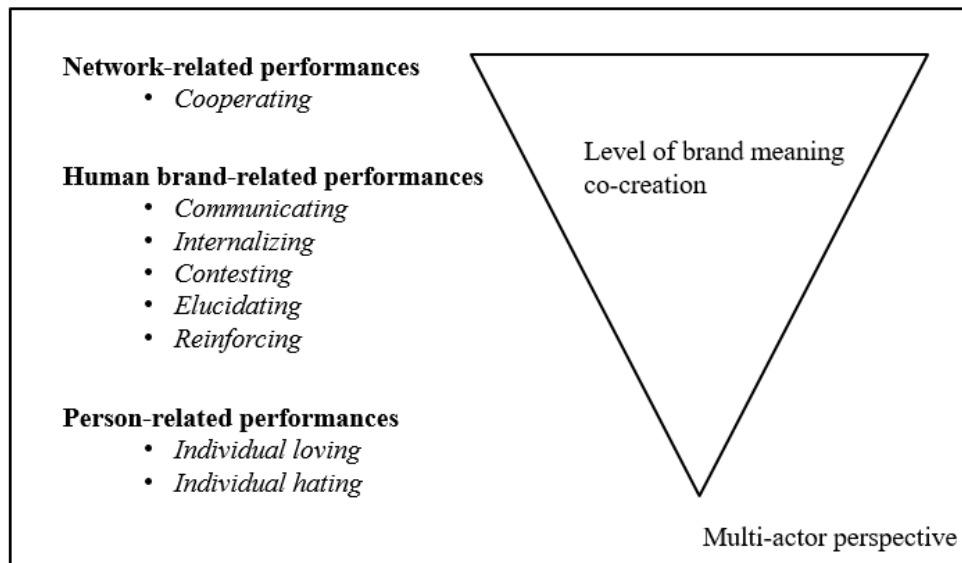


Figure 2.2-2: Brand meaning co-creation performances on human brands

Network-related performances

In line with the theoretically outlined idea of the multi-actor perspective, we identified performances that reveal the relevance of integrating and collaborating with other actors to co-create the meaning of a human brand:

Interactions such as likes, comments, but also linking with sponsors, clubs or associations. [...] In their own content, where simply the idea of partnership actually arises everywhere.

(Sponsor, Team Sponsor, 13.07.2021)

Specifically, we identified *cooperating* performances on the digital engagement platforms of the studied human brand, for example, when the athlete brand was connected with the brand of a sponsor:

At home, I want to feel good. Natural and healthy materials are the basis. At [Sponsor], the quality of the indoor air is even specially certified by TÜV - perfect indoor air with letter and seal. 😊🔄 #FollowYourFire #betterbuilding

(Athlete, Facebook, 06.10.2020)

However, not only *cooperating* performances with sponsors, but also with other actors have been identified to co-create the meaning of the human brand. Especially, we identified various *cooperating* performances with other athletes, clubs or associations, where multiple brands make use of collaborating with each other:

I think you can picture a network there and meanwhile also more than just that. So work is already being done, also in this direction, to connect athletes, clubs, associations, and sponsors with each other.

(Association 1, 2021)

Training session in the best company. 🏋️ Still fit as ever, bro! 🏠 #Followyourfire #Winterfans #[Friend Athlete] @[FriendAthlete]@[Sponsor] @[Sponsor]

(Athlete, Facebook, 19.09.2020)

Finally, we also revealed *cooperating* performances with fans of the brand, when the athlete requested her fans to search for “*a suitable name for my little lucky charm on the drinking belt*” and the fans answered:

- Voittaja - Finnish word for winner! 🍀😊 I think this is fitting for a sporty good luck charm.

(Fan, Instagram, 04.01.2021)

The co-creation of brand meaning occurs without the influence or agreement of the brand owner or other actors involved:

There are no agreements of any kind, it all happens without the involvement of other actors.

(Fans, Supporters Club, 04.12.2021)

Human brand-related performances

First, we identified the performance of *communicating* that describes the transmission of the brand identity within the brand community, for example, when the brand owner writes social media posts on what her brand stands for. Although any actor within the brand network may perform *communicating*, we identified it to be majorly brand owner-led. The athlete communicated several facets of her brand identity, for example, when she described her dissatisfaction with her last competition results, how important family, animal protection, or sustainability is to her, or when she posts about the World Women’s Day:

#followyourfire #winterfans Happy #WorldWomen'sDay to all the wonderful women out there. [...] All you women and girls, no matter whatever your profession, hobby or sport, are a huge inspiration for me as an athlete and help to push my limits! 🍀

(Athlete, Instagram, 08.03.2021)

Additionally, the athlete engaged in the performance of *communicating*, when she advertised a campaign of one of her partners and combined the communication with her own brand identity (e.g., regional food to foster sustainability):

Fresh from the field into my #retterbox 😊☺ You want to become a vegetable saver too?

(Athlete, Instagram, 14.05.2020)

In summary, almost all 25 experts from the interview study independently described the athlete's brand identity in the same terms. These included keywords such as *sustainable, environmentally friendly, animal welfare, family and friends, ambitious and determined, athletic, passionate, fair, positive mindset, well balanced, and future-oriented*.

Beyond the transmission of the brand identity by *communicating* the various facets to the athlete brand community, bringing them to life by *internalizing* was a second brand meaning co-creation performance that we identified in this particular case. *Internalizing* describes the translation of communicated words into concrete brand behavior that reflects the brand identity. The athlete co-created the brand meaning, for example, by sharing a post with members of her family, where they enjoyed their joint time or with a thermos bottle, while she recovered from an illness and posted:

🔥👊 #followyourfire #winterfans Hot water bottle has always helped! I treat myself to a little rest, a chamomile tea and fingers crossed for the girls now, make it like the boys.

(Athlete, Facebook, 20.12.2020)

Internalizing performances, however, are not only limited to being demonstrated by the brand owner, but also by other actors in the brand network. Fans of the athlete, for example, reacted to a vegan food post of the athlete asking for the recipe or when a fan reacted to a post in which the athlete communicated her regeneration regime and shared it with her followers:

Fruits mixed with coconut water and bath with salt from Jentschura 😊

(Fan, Instagram, 01.09.2020)

In addition, *internalizing* performances lead to specific actions performed by the brand owner herself or in collaboration with other actors, such as sponsors, agencies, or associations:

I took my clothes off for an animal welfare company a few years ago. As a person and a brand, I am completely committed to it. I think very few people would do that, but it also has something to do with my conviction.

(Athlete, 10.06.2021)

This is also part of our partnership. The athlete likes to draw attention to animal welfare. And when she started travelling regularly to Romania to the animal shelter, she naturally received our support.

(Sponsor, Team Sponsor, 13.07.2021)

Next to *communicating* and *internalizing* performances, especially by verbalizing and demonstrating behaviors to co-create brand meaning, the results also indicate different forms of reactive behavior of brand community actors towards the brand owner. First, in contrast to the research framework (Iglesias et al., 2020), we inductively identified *reinforcing* performances that occur when actors of the brand community provide support – and therefore co-create brand meaning – in a shared understanding with the athletes' brand identity. On digital engagement platforms, various actors from the athlete's network engage in *reinforcing* performances, for example, when a fan reinforced her as a role model in general or even more specifically regarding her engagement with animals:

On my 17th birthday, I wrote a long Instagram post describing of how she [the athlete] influenced me as a role model and idol during the last years.

(Fans, Supporters Club, 08.12.2021)

Hello, I would regret if it would not work [to visit an animal shelter in Rumania]. I admire your commitment to animal welfare! 🐾😊🐾

(Fan, Instagram, 04.10.2020)

However, not only fans of the athlete engaged in *reinforcing* performances but also other actors from the network. We also identified sponsors and partners, such as animal rights activists, that *reinforced* the athlete's brand identity.

We as animal welfare activists and animal rights activists find your commitment to the street dogs wonderful and important! The terrible misery of these dear fellow creatures must end. [...] Thank you very much for your commitment! ❤️

(Sponsor, Facebook, 27.01.2021)

A contrasting performance to *reinforcing* has been identified as *contesting*, which is generally understood as the statement of incongruent perceptions of the brand identity by members of the brand community. In general, two main forms of *contesting* were identified. First, the network of actors *contested* the brand meaning itself and therefore contributed to its co-creation, for example, by criticizing how the brand owner raised her voice to promote the wearing of masks during the pandemic or with regard to the distribution of the athlete's effort:

If you leave all your energy in the social media, the power is missing on the track and at the shooting range.

(Fan, Facebook, 03.03.2021)

Second, we also identified engagement in *contesting* performances to co-create the brand meaning that is not directly targeted at the brand but rather to the network of the brand, especially to sponsors:

[Sponsor] no longer works at all!

(Fan, Facebook, 07.06.2020)

Honestly, how can you disfigure yourself as a handsome person like that with advertising ([Sponsor])?

(Fan, Facebook, 13.10.2020)

Finally, we identified *elucidating* performances that refer to the conversational process of the brand owner and other actors to discuss and reconcile distinct brand meanings to create a shared understanding of the brand meaning. There has been such a conversational process introduced with the athletes' posting of a fully black picture posted on Instagram with the hashtag “#blackouttuesday” to express her support against racism and police violence. An actor from the network commented on the post and stated:

During the 2015–16 public New Year's Eve's celebrations in Germany, over 1,250 women [...] have been sexually assaulted with 24 of them raped, in most cases by men with non-European background. [...] When black migrants rape white women, this is certainly not racism. Yes?

(Fan, Instagram, 02.06.2020)

The brand owner has responded to present and explain her perspective and understanding of brand identity with the following comment:

It is not racism; it is rapping what is just as bad. Black people have to face racism every day. They are confronted that they do not “look right” to other human beings, have it harder to get jobs, are judged and treated badly. [...] Black people are just as worth as everyone else!

(Athlete, Instagram, 02.06.2020)

Person-related performances

In contrast to previous literature on corporate brands, we identified a special characteristic of human brands represented in two forms of person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving* and *individual hating*). Both types refer to the brand community's activities that are directed towards the person behind the brand, instead of towards the brand itself. *Individual loving*, for example, has been identified when fans express how much they like the physical attractiveness of the athlete; honor their physical performance in competitions, or when they phrase their admiration of the athlete. In addition, *individual loving* or *individual hating* affects actors' engagement in co-creation processes and has an impact on their loyalty towards the brand (Kaufmann et al., 2016):

You are such a lovely person, sweetie. I keep my fingers crossed for you for the next competitions and wish you continued success and especially good health. Keep your fun in biathlon and have a great time with your sister. 🏂😊

(Fan, Facebook, 08.12.2020)

In contrast, fans also express themselves by engaging in negative performances towards the human brand on an individual level. We identified such performances as *athlete hating*. Most of the identified comments were related to the athlete's sporting performance:

The same phrases every time, they are beginning to look untrustworthy, sorry. After the end of the season, ask yourself whether it still makes sense to pursue this beautiful sport in this form.

(Fan, Facebook, 20.01.2021)

Moreover, the athlete herself increasingly experiences extreme engagement fostered by the characteristics of social media. *Individual* loving and *Individual* hating refer to private and personal comments on her:

There is a lot of frustration and it becomes very personal. Both positive and negative comments turn out to be very private.

(Athlete, 21.10.2021)

Category	Performance	Sample post from digital engagement platform
Network-related performances	Cooperating	One round after the other! 🤖 For the classic complex today, I got an expert in this field 100😊 #Followyourfire #Winterfans @[Athlete friend] @[Sponsor] @[Sponsor] @[Sponsor] To Be A sport (Athlete, Facebook, 09.10.2020).
		My shooting today: ☹️ But for that Floggie has cleared everything today. 100 I'm very happy for you, @[Athlete friend] 😊 #followyourfire #winterfans #friends (Athlete, Instagram, 12.03.2021).
		Time for a running session? ♀ These shoes in the brilliant color are only meant for sun. 😊 🏃☀️ #followyourfire #winterfans #running #eattrainssleeprepeat #adidas #colorful #smile #thesebootsaremadeforrunning @[Sponsor] @[Sponsor] (Athlete, Instagram, 08.07.2021).
Human brand-related performances	Communicating	It was so nice with you, Twin! ❤️ After 2 weeks at home and in Ruhpolding, it's now on to the next World Cup in Oberhof. I am looking forward to the home World Cup and will miss you fans very much #followyourfire #winterfans (Athlete, Facebook, 05.01.2021).
		A used day! After 2 mistakes in the 1st shooting it was very difficult for me to roll up the field from behind. In addition, I felt very bad physically today. Let's forget the race, put my feet up for the next 2 days and attack again on Friday #followyourfire #winterfans #timetoplay #notmyday #needmoreenergy (Athlete, Instagram, 14.12.2020).
		Mask Ball! 🦺😞 I wear the mask for my grandma, my parents, for all people who belong to the risk group and to contribute a part to contain Covid-19. It is important that we stick together now and stay consistent ❤️ #StillTogetherAgainstCorona (Athlete, Facebook, 29.08.2020).
	Internalizing	Recharge your vitamin D! I'm still enjoying the last moments of summer before the cold season starts again soon. How do you spend the last warm days? #FollowYourFire #Winterfans #sunnyday #summervibes (Athlete, Instagram, 11.09.2020).
		Massage in the sun! ☺️☀️ Could you relax better? #followyourfire #winterfans #timetorelax #seiseralm #thxmichi #legday (Athlete, Instagram, 30.07.2020)
	Reinforcing	Family day with our bro. ❤️ #homesweethome #followyourfire (Athlete, Facebook, 24.05.2020).
		First, it is good that you are giving yourself a break and listening to your body! I hope that you can now recover well and take something from the winter, despite the problems. Then the next season will certainly be as good as the current one has started (Supporters Club, Instagram, 18.03.2021).
		So nice to see you in the World Cup again. Have lately rarely in the sport so cheered along, as now this weekend with you. I'm already looking forward to the next races and congratulations for the already fulfilled WC-Nomination (Fan, Instagram, 29.11.2020).

	This is a very nice idea with the vegetable box. A beautiful message for all. Good luck for your preparation! (Fan, Instagram, 14.05.2020)
Contesting	You can try it, but how the sporting "development" goes as a vegan, you have seen with others. The performance drops dramatically. As a vegetarian, top performances are still possible in the endurance area, as a vegan rather not (Fan, Facebook, 24.07.2020). Thanks. No. I prefer my burger with real meat (Fan, Instagram, 09.12.2020). You are like [another athlete], you are overtrained so you lack speed, it will come. Good luck. (Fan, Instagram, 20.01.2021).
Elucidating	Yes, the shooting was top again. I'm just a little worried about your runtime... somehow the material doesn't seem to fit. Stay relaxed, have fun and then something will happen in the chase. It's not that far to the top 10-15, you can easily make it if you are stable and consistent in your shooting (Fan, Facebook, 18.12.2020). Why do you always and everywhere have sunglasses on...? Necessary, show or because of sponsors? (Fan, Instagram, 03.08.2020) How satisfied are you with the shoe? What distances on what surfaces do you run with it? I run regularly myself and am grateful for shoe tips. Answer Athlete: I like to run in different shoes. However, [this one] is perfect for forest floors. (Fan and athlete, Instagram, 08.07.2020)
Individual loving	Finally found your site and glad to pass on my thoughts and greetings to you. I "follow" you since you are in the World Cup! In Finland was great and after your long injury can not go well yet! Then good luck in Hochfilzen and am of course on the TV and press everything I have, so that it goes great for you. (Fan, Instagram, 11.12.2020). You have a SUPER RACE 😊made and well presented 🥰👏! Too bad that in the end it was only this blink of an eye that has deprived YOU of the deserved place on the podium 😔! But this is great to build on, because next time it's YOUR turn again🥰👏🌸 (Fan, Instagram, 13.12.2020).
Person-related performances	My beautiful twin ❤️ (Sister, Instagram, 12.02.2021)
Individual hating	You're so bad, just stop and go to the kitchen or the office. You're getting paid for this, if I worked the way you work, I'd get immediate dismissal... (Fan, Facebook, 03.03.2021). Alcohol before training I know from the district league (Fan, Instagram, 05.07.2020). You really want to add another season? But then please in the IBU Cup. There you will also have a few successes. There you can even compete at the top halfway (Fan, Instagram, 18.03.2021).

Table 2.2-3: Brand meaning co-creation performances of human brands

2.2.4.2 Multi-actor perspective on human brands

Our results confirm recent research findings on the multi-actor perspective in brand management literature. Although several authors have already discussed brand meaning co-creation of corporate brands by internal and external actors (Merz et al., 2009; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017; Woratschek et al., 2020), this approach has been neglected in the context of human brands.

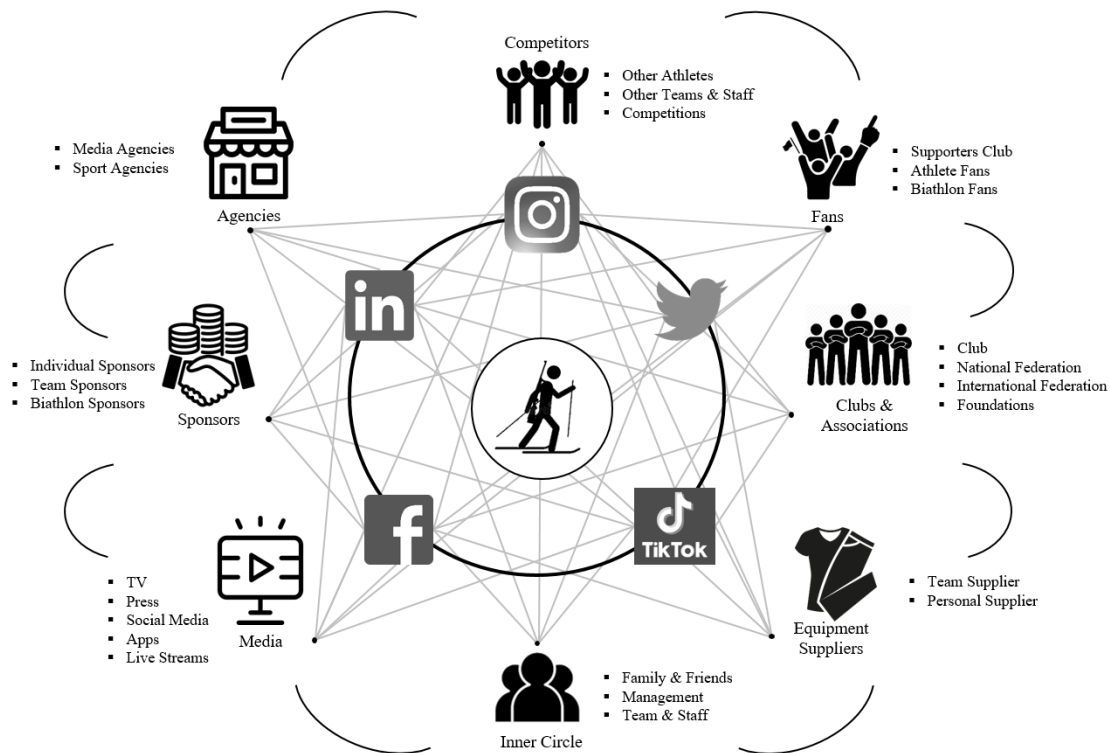


Figure 2.2-3: Digital engagement platforms and relevant actors.

According to this study's results, it is evident that a heterogeneous network of actors (cf. Figure 3 for an overview of digital engagement platforms and relevant actors) co-creates the brand meaning of the athlete under investigation by engaging in different performances (Table 3 summarizes the additional results of the study). Although the athlete is a focal actor within her brand community and thereby contributes to the co-creation of her brand meaning, for example, by engaging in *communicating* performances, the athlete cannot fully control the co-creative processes leading to development and changes in her brand meaning (e.g., Merz et al., 2009; Michel, 2017). Accordingly, this implies that all brand community members (cf. Figure 3) may be facilitated by the nature of the digital context of social media platforms (cf. Stegmann et al., 2021) and contribute to the co-creation of the human brand meaning by integrating their resources within performances (e.g., by *reinforcing* or *contesting* the brand meaning of the athlete). Therefore, the network of actors may participate not only in the collaborative process

of brand meaning co-creation in direct interactions with the human brand but also among themselves. Indeed, this study's findings indicate that all actors in the multi-actor network are considered relevant within the process of brand meaning co-creation:

I don't have the impression that one actor is extremely underrated or perhaps not considered at all. But I wouldn't say that one actor is more important than all the others. So if you really break out one part of this overall construct or one part of this puzzle, then you see the gap.

(Club & Associations, International Federation, 28.07.2021)

2.2.5 Discussion

2.2.5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes three important contributions. First, it extends existing research on brand management and human branding literature by conceptually combining human branding, integrative branding, and performativity theory. We expand the concept of integrative branding towards integrative human branding by identifying actors who co-create human brand meaning through their performances. Accordingly, the results of our study especially contribute to the understanding of the second sub-process of integrative human branding and demonstrate how it offers unique propositions for the co-creation of brand meaning. In so doing, studying actors' engagement in performances such as *contesting* shapes the brand meaning of a human brand, which consequently could be incorporated – through the first sub-process of integrative human branding – in the brand identity of the human brand. Similar applies regarding the co-creation of brand meaning undertaken by the engagement in performances on a network-related level (i.e., *cooperating* that may lead to co-branding processes in which the human brands' meaning may be co-created). Finally, the brand meaning of an athlete brand is also co-created through performances on the person-related level (e.g., individual hating as a form of *contesting* that challenges the individual human behind the brand). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically analyze the brand meaning co-creation of athlete brands, as particular types of human brands, from a multi-actor perspective in brand management through different performances on digital engagement platforms. These platforms enable and empower human brands to build their brands through management-driven processes, but also enable direct interactions between multiple actors relevant to the brand in an integrative human branding process. Our findings are consistent with previous research on the co-creation of corporate brands (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017). However, we were able to identify additional performances on digital engagement platforms in the specific

context of human brands. This study can serve as a link between various fields such as brand management, marketing, sports management, and sociology, all of which focus on the different roles of actors involved in the brand-building process of human brands.

Second, our results contribute to the emerging field of human and athlete branding literature, which has so far focused mainly on athlete brand identity and image (Doyle et al., 2020; Hofmann et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020; Na et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study extends the current state of research by investigating performances that co-create the brand meaning of human brands on digital engagement platforms.

Third, our findings reveal eight relevant actor groups (*competitors, fans, clubs and associations, equipment suppliers, inner circle, media, sponsors, and agencies*) that co-create the brand meaning through several performances on the five social media platforms. In contrast to corporate brands, we identified additional brand meaning co-creation performances that are unique to the specific research subjects of human brands (i.e., cooperating, reinforcing, individual loving, and individual hating). Across these eight types of performances, we recognized three novel and generalizable categories for the brand meaning co-creation of human brands. We differentiated among network-related performances (i.e., *cooperating*) that emphasize the multi-actor perspective of the co-creation of brand meaning, human brand-related performances (i.e., *reinforcing, communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating*) that describe activities considered to directly affect the athlete brand and person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving, and individual hating*) that mainly target the individual person and thus only indirectly affect the human brand. Consequently, it can be argued that the co-creation of brand meaning cannot only be considered on the virtual level of the brand meaning (such as in corporate brands) but rather also in terms of collaborating forms of behavior (i.e., *cooperating*) and regarding the individual behind the human brand as well.

2.2.5.2 Managerial implications

This study provides manifold implications for brand management practice and enhances brand managers' and athletes' knowledge on the dynamics of integrative human branding. It contributes to the analysis of different performances on digital engagement platforms, enabling athletes and brand managers to interact specifically with different actors based on our results and to build, develop and maintain a unique brand through strategic marketing concepts.

First, it advises brand owners that they cannot autonomously control their brands and branding decisions. Instead, they must be aware that brand meaning is always co-created by multiple actors in heterogeneous networks on different engagement platforms. However, these

actors can change according to the dynamics of integrative human branding. It is crucial to consider digital engagement platforms (e.g., social media channels) as enablers and facilitators for the co-creation of brand meaning. Therefore, brand managers should take advantage of the benefits of digital engagement platforms and encourage interactions among various actors.

Second, brand managers should analyze which actors are relevant and involved in the brand meaning co-creation of human brands on their respective platforms. Various digital engagement platforms can be used to reach specific actor networks and actors with the targeted content. In doing so, brand managers must be aware that the use of selected digital engagement platforms must be strategically planned for the integrative branding process of human brands. For example, the actors on the social media channels Instagram and LinkedIn vary, with the latter specifically targeting business contacts. Furthermore, it must be understood through which performances different actors engage and how they co-create the brand meaning of the human brand. Network-related performances refer to strategic, long-term partnerships with corporate brands, such as sponsors and equipment suppliers. This leads to financial revenues, a targeted positioning of the brand's core and the building of a post-career life. The purpose of human brand-related performance is to share and communicate the brand's identity with the community. For instance, a practical application is the activism of athletes who use social media to clearly express their positioning on social issues and concerns, e.g., against racism or for gender equality and climate change. Person-related performances should look behind the scenes of the brand, focusing on the individual. Sharing private content on social media, such as pictures with family and friends, leisure activities or content without sports facilitates individual loving and strongly engages with the brand's community. This enables brand managers to specifically apply or promote various performances among different levels to facilitate the co-creation of the human brand.

To summarize, it is necessary for human brands to understand the process of co-creating brand meaning to identify, engage, and interact with all actors involved on their respective platforms. By recognizing and embracing the role of the various actors involved in the brand meaning co-creation process, human brands can establish a meaningful and authentic brand that resonates with their respective target audiences and leads to leveraged brand engagement, sustainable relationships with all actors as well as improved brand advocacy. By engaging in or enabling of different performances, human brands can increase their brand loyalty, enhance their brand reputation and develop a unique brand. Therefore, our study provides a significant contribution for human brand management.

2.2.6 Limitations and future research

As with any empirical study, this study has several limitations that need to be considered. Primarily, this research focuses on a single case study examining the brand meaning co-creation of one human brand. It is essential to extend the case and examine additional human brands (e.g., athletes, influencers, entertainers, coaches) to avoid individual case exceptions and ensure external validity and generalizability. Furthermore, it might be critical to refer the results back to traditional corporate brands. It seems reasonable that future research should examine human brands in other sports, differences between athletes and other types of human brands as well as comparing human and corporate brands regarding brand meaning co-creation performances. Brand meaning co-creation performances of a single-sport athlete can be certainly different from those of team sport athletes. Further research should investigate human brands with smaller and bigger followership on social media to determine similarities and contrasts with respect to the identified performances that contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning. In addition, a cross-cultural analysis would be valuable for identifying differences across various cultures and countries as well as gender and nationality of the athlete.

Second, we focused on five different social media channels and neglected other digital engagement platforms (e.g., brand communities, websites, and other social media platforms) as well as physical engagement platforms such as competitions, sports venues, or events. We encourage researchers to explore additional digital and physical engagement platforms to illustrate the diversity and heterogeneity of different actors and their brand meaning co-creation performances. In particular, other innovative digital engagement platforms (e.g. metaverse or web3), offer various novel possibilities for the empowerment of human brands, which could be examined in detail.

Third, this study represents a starting point for more research, as it is the first to examine various performances of brand meaning co-creation of human brands from a multi-actor perspective. Therefore, future studies should examine how and which actors initiate performances that co-create brand meaning on digital engagement platforms. A promising path for future research would be to conduct surveys or experiments with fans or sponsors in order to study the determinants of actors' performances.

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2.3 Unpacking brand co-creation: A single case study and empirical consolidation of brand co-creation performances following qualitative meta-synthesis

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Abstract

An increasing body of research adopts a performative perspective of brands, assuming that multiple actors co-create brands in interrelated brand co-creation performances (BCCP). While gaining traction in branding research, empirical work identifying BCCP is scarce (N=3). BCCP have yet been discussed in single research contexts, evolving largely independent and leading to disparate findings. Initially, this research aims to expand existing empirical work. Using the unusually revelatory ‘over-over-the-top’ context of the sport brand FC St. Pauli, we apply semi-structured interviews, internal brand-related documents, media content analysis, and social media analysis to identify BCCP in a novel research context. Building on this single case study and existing research on BCCP, we empirically consolidate these primary studies (N=4) following qualitative meta-synthesis to unpack brand co-creation in various contexts. The empirical consolidation results in eight interrelated BCCP (i.e. communicating, implementing, contesting, developing, negotiating, facilitating, social listening, and assimilating), which are divided into direct brand co-creation performances (dBCCP) and enabling brand co-creation performances (eBCCP). This research contributes to branding literature by unpacking how (i.e. through which BCCP) multiple actors co-create brands. Additionally, it provides brand managers with an enhanced understanding of their brand and the influence of multiple internal and external actors.

Keywords: brand co-creation, brand co-creation performances, brand identity, brand meaning

2.3.1 Introduction

Brands are commonly acknowledged as an organisation's most valuable asset (Forbes, 2020), making it essential to comprehend the processes through which they develop. Conventionally, brands are conceived as bundles of static, enduring components consciously determined by the brand owner (Aaker, 2002; Keller, 1993). However, in today's 'hyperconnected world' (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020), this logic is considered insufficient (Merz *et al.*, 2009; Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). Various actors create brand-related content, influence marketing decisions, and share their own brand meanings. Consequently, branding research increasingly adopts a multi-actor-dominant logic, perceiving brands as social constructs that dynamically evolve in interactions among the brand conductor and multiple actors. More specifically, brands are conceptualised as sign systems initially forming a unique identity, which initiates and facilitates processes to co-create brand meaning (Brodie *et al.*, 2017). The exchange of co-created brand meanings ultimately creates value for actors and the brand (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015). Therefore, brands are co-created constructs that cannot be controlled by the brand conductor (Merz *et al.*, 2009; Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022). Rather, the brand conductor becomes a facilitator of brand co-creation processes (Michel, 2017). While this logic is gaining traction (e.g. Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Kornum *et al.*, 2017; Voyer *et al.*, 2017), current research on *how* actors specifically co-create brands in interactions is fragmented.

To unpack brand co-creation, we draw on performativity theory (Butler, 1990), positing that social reality is continuously constituted and produced through recurrent linguistic and socio-material performances of actors (Orlikowski, 2010). Accordingly, brands are socially constructed entities co-created through brand co-creation performances (*BCCP*) of multiple actors in interactions (Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015). While an increasing body of research adopts a performative perspective of brands (Kristal *et al.*, 2020), only three empirical studies investigated specific *BCCP* of actors in the context of one B2C brand (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a), five B2B brands (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020), and one human brand (Anderski *et al.*, 2023). This research has evolved largely independent, leading to disparate findings. It is necessary (1) to examine *BCCP* in novel research contexts and (2) to empirically consolidate *BCCP* to obtain a more comprehensive conceptualisation of *BCCP* (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020) and unpack brand co-creation. Thus, this research aims to answer the subsequent overarching research question: *Through which brand co-creation performances do multiple actors co-create brands?*

Building on the limitations of previous research, this research follows a two-pronged approach to address the overarching research question. First, we expand on existing empirical work through a qualitative single case study in a novel research context. We use the unusually revelatory ‘over-over-the-top’ context of the sport brand FC St. Pauli applying semi-structured interviews, internal-brand related documents, media content analysis, and social media analysis to identify *BCCP*. Second, building on the case study and previous research on *BCCP*, we ‘empirically consolidate’ (Hoon, 2013, p. 527) these primary studies (N=4), following qualitative meta-synthesis. This approach, comprising case specific analysis and synthesising processes on an across-study level, results in eight interrelated *BCCP* (i.e. communicating, implementing, contesting, developing, negotiating, facilitating, social listening, and assimilating), which are divided into direct brand co-creation performances (*dBCCP*) and enabling brand co-creation performances (*eBCCP*).

Overall, this research contributes to branding research by unpacking *how* (i.e. through which *BCCP*) multiple actors co-create brands in various contexts. In addition, it provides brand managers with an enhanced understanding of their brand and the influence of multiple internal and external actors.

2.3.2 Brand co-creation

Conventionally, the perception of branding is grounded in a brand owner-dominant logic, assuming that brand owners autonomously and strategically develop and communicate a consistent brand identity (i.e. set of static brand components) (Aaker, 2002; da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Ward *et al.*, 2020). This logic considers brands as rigid, firm-controlled properties and customers as passive recipients of unilateral brand communication, serving as the sole source of brand meaning (i.e. set of actors’ brand associations) (de Chernatony, 2006; Kapferer, 2008; Keller and Lehmann, 2003). Consequently, the brand-owner dominant logic conceptualises brands as static results of conscious management decisions (Burmman *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 1993). Recent branding research responds to an increasingly dynamic, interactive, and interconnected environment by embracing a broader relational, social, experiential, and cultural perspective (Brodie *et al.*, 2017). The logic of branding has shifted fundamentally towards a multi-actor-dominant logic, conceptualising brands as dynamic and interactive social processes involving multiple actors (Brand *et al.*, 2023; Iglesias *et al.*, 2013; Merz *et al.*, 2009). Rather than being stable and exclusive products of unilateral management efforts (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017b), brands are understood as social constructs that are always in flux and in a constant state of becoming (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a; Voyer *et al.*, 2017). Beside the organisation (i.e.

management, employees), customers, media, B2B partners, and other actors co-create brands in mutual interactions on institutional or emergent brand engagement platforms (Baker *et al.*, 2022; Ind, 2014; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Sarkar and Banerjee, 2021). Particularly the emergence of social media has empowered actors to actively co-create brands (Le *et al.*, 2022; Tajvidi *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, brand owners need to accept a loss of control, shifting the role of the brand owner from a brand 'guardian' to a 'conductor' of interactive brand co-creation processes (Cooper *et al.*, 2019; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Ind *et al.*, 2020; Michel, 2017; Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Siano *et al.*, 2022).

Despite increasing academic attention, research within the domain of brand co-creation is largely heterogeneous (Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022). First, research adopts various different but interlinked theoretical approaches. The concept of *brand experiences* is used to understand how customers co-create individual brand meanings through cumulative brand-related interactions across various direct or indirect encounters. In addition, research following an organisational perspective focuses on the role of the brand conductor to facilitate the co-creation of brand experiences (Andreini *et al.*, 2018; Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Payne *et al.*, 2009; Stach *et al.*, 2019). *Service-dominant logic* is a pivotal theoretical pillar for brand co-creation (Ind and Schmidt, 2019; Kovalchuk *et al.*, 2023; Merz *et al.*, 2009). This research stream examines the role of customers in the process of brand value co-creation (Merz *et al.*, 2018), especially in digital contexts such as brand communities and social media (Chapman and Dilmperi, 2022; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Simmons and Durkin, 2023), and aims to understand the fundamental conditions that drive brand value co-creation (Mingione and Leoni, 2020). In addition, service-dominant logic is used to adopt a macro-level ecosystem perspective on brands and understand institutional arrangements in brand co-creation (Baker *et al.*, 2022; Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2021). Building on the overarching service-dominant logic, a comprehensive body of research has developed around the concept of *customer brand engagement*, referring to customers' cognitive (i.e. mental processing and contemplation related to a brand) and behavioural activity (i.e. explicit behavioural manifestations in relation to a brand occurring beyond purchase) related to specific brand interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). Similar, *social practice theory* is applied to understand social processes among members of brand communities (Schau *et al.*, 2009), examine branding strategies as practice (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2018), and theoretically conceptualise the process of brand meaning co-creation (Tierney *et al.*, 2016). Other research draws on *stakeholder theory* to understand the active role of multiple actors in brand co-creation (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). This is linked

to *role theory*, which pertains to the examination of how actors proactively adopt and enact various roles in brand-related interactions (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018; Veloutsou and Black 2020). Within the theoretical realm of *user-generated-content*, research aims to understand how such content (e.g. user-generated-advertisements; branded social media posts) contributes to brand meaning (Burmam and Arnhold, 2008; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2011; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2012; Koivisto and Mattila, 2020; Teresa Borges-Tiago *et al.*, 2021). In addition, research taking an organisational perspective sheds light on how to integrate user-generated-content in the overarching branding strategy (Gensler *et al.*, 2013; Shulga *et al.*, 2023).

Second, brand co-creation research is differentiated according to the perspective (Brodie *et al.*, 2017). Research taking a customer/actor perspective aims to understand how customers or other actors co-create individual and collective brand meanings (e.g. Tjandra *et al.*, 2021). Research taking an organisational perspective aims to understand the role of the brand conductor and internal actors in facilitating and managing the comprehensive brand co-creation process among all actors (e.g. Essamri *et al.*, 2019).

Third, the conceptual outcomes of brand co-creation remain ambiguous (i.e. brand value, brand identity, and brand meaning) (Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022). Building on the distinction made by Michel (2017) and Brodie *et al.* (2017), and in order to consider both customer/actor and organisational perspectives, this study refers to brand identity and brand meaning as essential concepts in brand co-creation (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Koporcic and Halinen, 2018). Brand identity initiates processes to co-create collective brand meaning, which develops through the social interactions of actors with the brand and other actors. This dynamically evolving collective brand meaning is a key determinant of strategic advantage and brand value – conceptualized as the perceived use value that is solely attributable to a brand (Brodie *et al.*, 2017; Merz *et al.*, 2018). In other words, all actors interested in the brand ‘bring brand value to life through the collective sharing and negotiation of brand meaning’ (Simmons and Durkin, 2023, p. 617) and the brand owner facilitates these processes through the development and communication of brand identity. Therefore, the constructs of brand identity and brand meaning are the underlying drivers of brand value (Baker *et al.*, 2022; Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015).

2.3.3 Brand identity

Brand identity is a managerial concept, representing the intra-organisational and ideal understanding of what the brand is, providing a sense of direction and the strategic impetus for the development of brand meaning (Burmam *et al.*, 2009; Iglesias *et al.*, 2013). However, based on the multi-actor-dominant logic, brand identity is co-created intra-organisational (Chung and

Byrom, 2021). Findings by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) and Dean *et al.* (2016), demonstrate how employees co-create individual brand meanings through their brand experiences and social interactions with management, colleagues, and customers. This learned brand meaning is reflected in the employees' development and communication of brand identity. Thus, brand identity co-creation refers to the brand conductor's activity of absorbing opinions, inputs, and influences of external actors to dynamically adapt brand identity (Brodie *et al.*, 2017; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). In addition, Brand *et al.* (2023) and Juntunen (2012) find that management and employees constantly assess and develop brand identity within co-creative internal interactions. Furthermore, research indicates the active role of business partners and customers in developing and communicating brand identity. The involvement of external actors in organisational processes comprises the development of innovative products (e.g. France *et al.*, 2018; Mäläskälä *et al.*, 2011; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), the company's branding strategy (e.g. Lindstedt, 2015; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2018), the engagement in collaborative marketing activities (e.g. Essamri *et al.*, 2019; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), the provision of brand-related feedback (e.g. Essamri *et al.*, 2019; France *et al.*, 2018; France *et al.*, 2020; Mäläskälä *et al.*, 2011), and the involvement in the creation of brand nomenclature (i.e. brand name and logo) and brand communication materials (e.g. Juntunen, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2018).

2.3.4 Brand meaning

Brand meaning represents a socially constructed concept, co-created in mutual interactions where multiple actors integrate and exchange resources (e.g. perceptions or opinions of the brand) to develop a collective understanding of the brand (Tierney *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, the brand conductor cannot control the process (Wider *et al.*, 2018) and brand meaning is neither uniform among actors nor over time and might deviate from brand identity (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). Actors co-create brand meaning in social interactions (e.g. Dwivedi *et al.*, 2016) and through brand-related experiences (e.g. Millspaugh and Kent, 2016; Tjandra *et al.*, 2021). In particular, brand promoters actively support, defend, advocate, and reinforce intended brand meanings (e.g. France *et al.*, 2018; France *et al.*, 2020; Mangiò *et al.*, 2023; Mäläskälä *et al.*, 2011; Simmons and Durkin, 2023; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018). They become opinion makers and active co-creators of brand stories and meanings (e.g. Oliveira and Panyik, 2015; Üçok Hughes *et al.*, 2016). However, such brand engagement can be valenced negatively as well (e.g. Dong *et al.*, 2024), when brand offenders transform brand meaning by sharing alternative and potentially negative brand meanings (Mangiò *et al.*, 2023; Simmons and

Durkin, 2023; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). From an organisational perspective, the brand conductor initiates, facilitates, and coordinates interactions among actors, such as participating in brand communities, integrating brand experiences, or sharing user-generated-content (e.g. Essamri et al., 2019; Gensler et al., 2013; Kahiya et al., 2023; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). However, as described above other actors also initiate interactions outside of the brand conductor's sphere of control (Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022).

2.3.5 Performativity theory as midrange theory to unpack brand co-creation

Although the different theoretical approaches shed light on particular phenomenon of the dynamic interplay between actors and brands, the understanding of brand co-creation remains fragmented. Previous research lacks an overarching and consolidated perspective on *how* multiple actors co-create brands. For instance, Tierney *et al.* (2016) call for research to uncover the practices between multiple actors contributing to the co-creation of brand meaning. Similar, von Wallpach, Voyer, *et al.* (2017) or Iglesias *et al.* (2020) claim that research should aim to enhance the understanding of the complex and dynamic processes underlying brand co-creation.

We utilise performativity theory (Butler, 1990) as a midrange theory to unpack brand co-creation. Midrange theories provide a theoretical bridge between theories with a high level of abstraction and empirical findings (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Performativity is a sociological theory rooted in the broader theoretical framework of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003), which is pivotal to a co-creative understanding in brand management (Ind and Schmidt, 2019). The core notion of performativity theory holds that seemingly stable phenomena (e.g. identity) do not exist but are rather characterised by an ontological reality; i.e. social processes that continuously constitute social objects (Gond *et al.*, 2016). Thus, social objects are an ongoing process of production as actors continuously constitute, challenge, and stabilise them in recurring linguistic and socio-material performances (i.e. doing of an activity within a situated context) (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Law and Urry, 2004; Orlikowski and Scott, 2014).

Building on the perspective of brands as dynamic social constructs evolving in social interactions among multiple actors, performativity theory provides a rich theoretical approach to enhance and specify the understanding of *how* brands are co-created (da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a). Following a performative logic, brands have no final stable stage. Rather, brands are dynamically constituted through linguistic and socio-material *BCCP* of multiple actors in social interactions (Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015; Onyas and Ryan, 2015; von

Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a). Therefore, to unpack how brands are co-created, it is crucial to identify the underlying *BCCP* enacted by multiple actors that are constitutive of the brand (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). This performative logic allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of brands and the intricate process of brand co-creation (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a).

Performativity theory has been applied in prior branding research (e.g. da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Törmälä and Gyrð-Jones, 2017). However, this research seldom focuses on pinpointing specific *BCCP* (Kristal *et al.*, 2020). Only three studies identified 15 distinct *BCCP*. First, von Wallpach *et al.* (2017a) identified seven *BCCP* in a single case study of LEGO. Each *BCCP* is crucial in developing the identities of the brand and the actors involved. Although *playing and liking* (i.e. putting together LEGO sets) strongly relates to the studied brand and the development of a customer's identity, the other six performances are relevant for any brand. *Basement building and showcasing* relates to customers demonstrating their affiliation to the brand on online platforms or offline events by sharing their creations. *Creating and innovating* describes how customers exchange knowledge, discuss building techniques, and ultimately collaborate with the brand in product development. *Community building and facilitating* includes the development and maintenance of spaces for interactions initiated by the brand conductor or customers to enable social relationships among LEGO customers. *Brand storytelling* and *missionizing* refer to customers narrating, recommending, and defending the brand. Finally, *marketplace developing* describes how customers and the brand conductor initiate platforms to collect and re-sell brand-related products. While providing an initial approach to *BCCP* of customers and the brand conductor, the study largely neglects other actors, lacks an internal organisational perspective, and focuses on the development of actors' identities.

Second, within a multi-case study (N=5), Iglesias *et al.* (2020) identified four *BCCP* in B2B contexts. *Communicating* refers to linguistically transmitting brand identity and is particularly performed by the brand conductor, involving traditional management-driven approaches. However, also other actors (i.e. customers, B2B partners) communicate brand identity among their network. *Internalizing* is concerned with implementing brand identity into actual behaviours of the management and employees of the respective brand. Therefore, brand trainings are of high importance to ensure their consistent behaviour. In *Contesting*, actors (i.e. customers, employees, B2B partners) contrast brand identity with their perceptions of the brand. They either reaffirm or challenge brand identity with their own brand meanings. *Elucidating* refers to the conversational process by which the brand conductor, together with multiple actors

(i.e. customers, employees), discusses and reconciles diverse brand meanings to build a common understanding of the brand. Iglesias *et al.* (2020) emphasise that their study is only representative for B2B brands and call for future research analysing brand co-creation in the context of B2C brands.

Third, Anderski *et al.* (2023) utilised the approach of Iglesias *et al.* (2020) to examine *BCCP* on social media platforms within the realm of human brands. Their findings were similar to those of Iglesias *et al.* (2020). However, four additional *BCCP* were discovered. *Cooperating* involves the brand conductor collaborating with other actors (i.e. customers, B2B partners) to communicate brand meanings. *Reinforcing* occurs when customers and B2B partners support brand meanings that correspond with brand identity through posts and comments on social media. *Brand hating* and *loving* refer to customers' activities (i.e. comments on social media) to express their love or hate with the person behind the human brand, thus being very specific to human brands. Anderski *et al.* (2023) consider exclusively *BCCP* on digital platforms and focus on the co-creation of brand meaning, thus lacking an internal organisational perspective.

2.3.6 Single case study: Method

The empirical investigation builds on a qualitative single case study, enabling the examination of complex phenomena that lack strong existing theory (i.e. *BCCP*) (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018). Building theory from case studies requires the application of theoretical sampling to identify a significant case to analyse (Eisenhardt, 1989). To replicate, refine, and extend emergent theory, it is reasonable to select extreme contexts in which the phenomena investigated become 'transparently observable' (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 275). Sport brands provide exceptionally rich contexts to examine *BCCP*: they attract diverse and highly engaged actors (e.g. fans, employees, B2B partners, media, civic organisations, etc.), who actively participate in *BCCP*.

2.3.6.1 Research context

The German football club brand FC St. Pauli (FCSP) is an unusually revelatory 'over-over-the-top' case to examine *BCCP*. Especially recognised for its skull and crossbones symbol, FCSP is one of the strongest sport brands worldwide. Today, it is popular for taking a stance on social topics, social activism, and values such as solidarity and anti-discrimination. These brand meanings did not result from the club's management, but emerged from the fans and other actors surrounding the brand. Only twenty years ago, the club started to manage its brand actively. Today, the club perceives the brand as a 'product of luck, coincidences, and passion' (ID-4), as a 'platform of possibilities' where 'people can be creative and things can arise'

(Zimmer, 2018), and acknowledges the participation of multiple actors (e.g. B2B partners, media, civic organisations, fans, employees, etc.) in brand co-creation.

2.3.6.2 Data collection and analysis

Data collection followed the principles of case study research. To achieve detailed empirical descriptions and ensure validity and reliability, we employed multiple data collection methods (i.e. semi-structured interviews, internal brand-related documents, media content analysis, and social media analysis, see table 1) (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Data Sources	Interviews/ Documents/ Posts	Interview length/ Comments
Semi-structured interviews	26	Ø66 min
Board Member	5	Ø61 min
Management	4	Ø56 min
Employee	8	Ø65 min
Partner/Sponsor	3	Ø66 min
Media	2	Ø84 min
Fan	4	Ø76 min
Internal brand-related documents	5	
Media content analysis	36	
Social media analysis	77	3.944
Facebook	34	1.542
Instagram	43	2.402

Table 2.3-1: Data sources

We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews between November 2021 and March 2022 with various actors, including board members, managers, and employees as well as partners, media, and fans. Interviewees were selected based on theoretical considerations and exchanges with the Managing Director Brand to ensure diverse perspectives and limit bias in our research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). All interviews were conducted online, lasting between 46 to 104 minutes in length, with an average duration of 66 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed verbatim. Drawing on theoretical considerations and previous examples of interview guides (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020), we asked our interview partners to explain how they and other actors participate in branding activities, leading to rich subjective descriptions of *BCCP*.

Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews followed the process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We repeatedly read the entire data set to familiarize with the data. Thereupon, the research team inductively coded the whole data set in an iterative and discursive process to generate first order codes. We constantly assessed our coding within the research team and adapted the emerging codebook, but still followed an open process to inductively add new codes emerging from the data ($N_{\text{codes}}=65$; $N_{\text{codings}}=1.817$) (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Using axial coding, we aggregated codes into nine overarching second-order themes that represent the data at a higher level of abstraction (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We then clustered the themes to generate a thematic map to identify interrelationships (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Both, axial coding and generating the thematic map included iterative discursive processes among the research team to reach consensus that conclusions are representative of the data.

To deductively enrich and validate our interpretation of the interviews, we gathered data from additional sources of evidence (i.e. internal brand-related documents, media content analysis, and social media analysis). FCSP provided us with internal brand-related documents ($N=5$) showing the brand's current strategy and the internal understanding of branding processes. Additionally, media content analysis and social media analysis were carried out to enrich and validate themes emerging from the interviews with a supplementary 'outside' perspective. We specifically collected media data ($N=36$, e.g. newspaper articles) that provide further context for narratives from the semi-structured interviews. Social media analysis is a valuable method to approach brands from a multi-actor-dominant logic (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). Thus, after an initial screening of a total of 1.000 posts and 42.348 comments during pre-season and the first half of the Bundesliga season 2021/2022, we deliberately selected 77 brand-related posts including 3.944 comments. All of the additional data were deductively coded to provide evidence for our thematic map. The process of data collection and data analysis is summarised in figure 1.

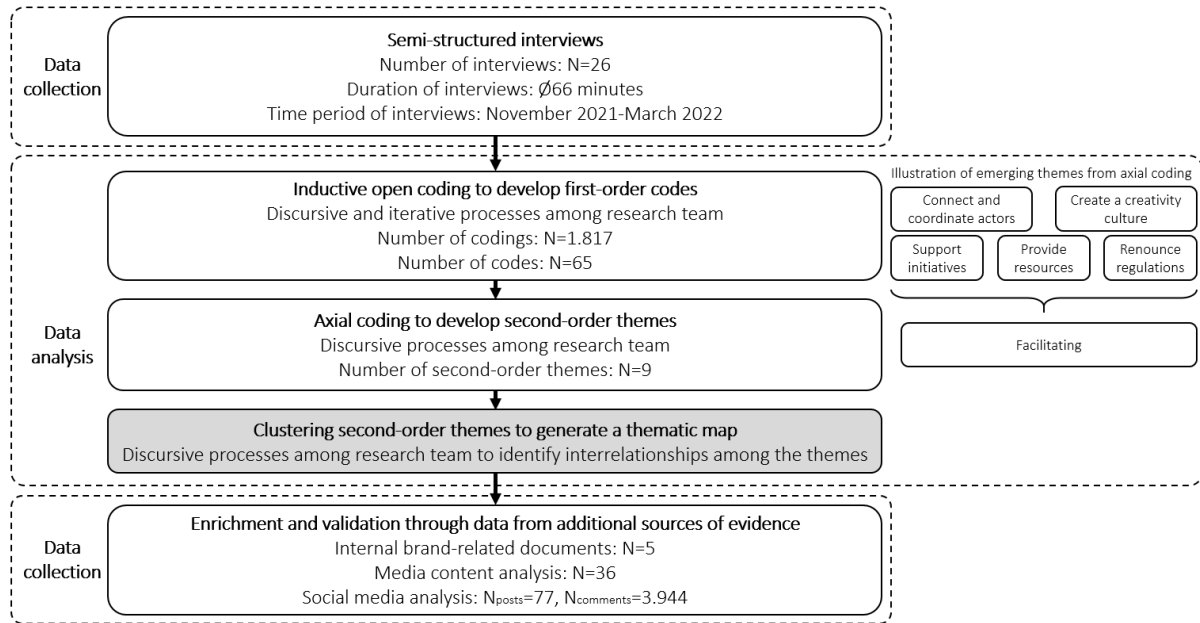


Figure 2.3-1: Data collection and analysis

2.3.7 Single case study: Findings

2.3.7.1 Communicating

Communicating comprises the linguistic transmission of brand identity and brand meanings. Primarily the brand conductor employs various channels to convey brand identity to external actors. Especially social media are significant, allowing to pursue ‘erratic moments’ (I-2, Management) and ‘docking on trends initiated by external actors’ (I-10, Employee). For instance, FCSP responded to the ban of the rainbow flag during the UEFA EURO 2020: ‘No international federation should prevent solidarity and an expression of opinion that speaks out in favour of a diverse society. [...] Love whoever you want!’ (FCSP, Instagram, 22.06.2021).

Besides the brand conductor, other actors communicate as well. Fans utilise blogs and social media to share individual narratives and independently convey and reinforce brand meaning: ‘each [fan] talks about FCSP and thus creates the brand’ (I-22, Partner). Partners, celebrities, and media also communicate brand meanings via their own channels to a wider audience. Especially media ‘are quite decisive for the brand meaning of FCSP’ (I-2, Management), but celebrities are also important multipliers. For instance, a member of a popular German band supported FCSP’s decision to produce its own sportswear via Instagram: ‘My favourite club is no longer interested in fast fashion!’ (ED-36).

2.3.7.2 Bringing brand meanings to life

This performance refers to the socio-material transmission of brand meaning (i.e. behaviour) to underpin the brand. It is performed by the brand conductor to provide evidence that the communication of brand identity is not just a ‘platitude’ (I-25, Sponsor) or ‘empty shell’ (I-20, Media). For instance, implementing gender balanced staffing or social projects brings intended brand meanings such as diversity and solidarity to life: ‘There are many projects, with children and young people; we do much for refugees. This is brand-building’ (I-23, Employee). Frequently, FCSP collaborates with other actors to bring brand meanings to life. Especially partners ‘reinforce and support the brand by occupying values that make up the brand’ (I-25, Sponsors) with concrete initiatives. For instance, partners initiated a music school for socially disadvantaged children within the stadium or use the stadium to organise ‘Millerntor-Gallery’, a socio-cultural art festival, where ‘all the work is done by [partner]’ and FCSP ‘benefits extremely and presents itself as a street-like brand’ (I-1, Management). This manifestation of bringing brand meanings to life is also evident in a Facebook post by FCSP (09.07.2021): ‘Artistically designed banners with important messages adorn the fence at the [stadium]. 🌀 Many thanks to @[sponsor] for the redesign. Together against racism!’

Beside partners, other actors are consciously involved in bringing brand meanings to life. For instance, fans, athletes, and social institutions took over the brand’s social media channels to elevate consciousness about racism. Furthermore, actors frequently engage in this *BCCP* independently from the brand conductor. For instance, fans organise (political) choreographies, initiate socio-political activities (e.g. running event to raise money to fight fascism), and represent the brand in different contexts (e.g. Christopher Street Day (CSD)). This independence is reflected in the following quotes: ‘[The CSD commitment] was not the result of a marketing round, but it came from fans’ (I-19, Employee), who ‘participated in self-designed black [shirts] with rainbow skull and ‘Love whoever you want’ on the back’ (I-9, Board Member).

2.3.7.3 Criticising

Criticising refers to linguistically and socio-materially challenging brand identity, branding processes, and brand meanings. Fans, in particular, are ‘critical observers’ (I-24, Fan) and a ‘corrective’ (I-23, Employee) of the brand. They defend established brand meanings and criticise progressive branding initiatives. Fans express their criticism predominantly online (i.e. blogs, websites, social media fan pages, or social media comments). For instance, they criticised the implementation of FCSP-Shop-TV (Instagram, 06.12.2021): ‘SELLOUT’; ‘What are you

doing? Cut the crap'; 'Not funny. Not in any way. I feel a little ashamed!' or the replacement of the club flag on the stadium roof with a rainbow flag: 'Please leave the club flag hanging. Just like our armband. The captain should wear a skull and crossbones and not a rainbow armband! Tolerance and solidarity is ok, but not in a cramped way and everywhere' (User, Instagram, 23.06.2021). Further, fans criticise through boycotts or protests when they hoist banners in the stadium. Media takes up those critics and distributes them, but also criticises independently using its reach to set 'brand boundary pillars' (I-20, Media). In order to funnel criticism, the brand conductor initiates exchange formats with fans.

Criticising also occurs internally. Several employees describe an internal conflict between two groups. While one group wants to preserve the established brand and criticises progressive branding initiatives, the other group criticises the passivity of the brand, arguing for the potential for improvement in brand communication and demanding more communication about the brand values. Similar, partners perform criticising in discrete interactions with the brand conductor. They challenge current branding strategies and demand more progressive branding decisions: 'the club must place value themes on an equal footing with the sporting themes to reach younger target groups' (I-25, Partner).

2.3.7.4 Negotiating

Negotiating comprises the process of harmonising diverging perspectives on the brand. First, it refers to an organisational perspective, where internal actors discuss directions for brand identity and its communication and implementation. This ensures that branding decisions 'are better informed because wide varieties of opinions are incorporated. Ultimately, this participatory approach characterizes the brand. It is an eternal struggle to do the right thing' (I-13, Employee). Second, negotiating comprises boundary-spanning processes. Progressive leveraging activities of partners often have to be adapted or discarded by the brand conductor; opinions and criticisms of fans are considered in internal negotiation processes; or the brand conductor negotiates brand meanings directly with fans through exchange formats. These negotiation processes are reflected in the following quote:

I approached the club and asked them how they see themselves in gaming. There were very heated discussions because FCSP was convinced that this would meet with resistance in the fan scene, because gaming is polarising. However, in intensive discussions, a strategy was developed together with the fans. [...] We always find a joint solution. (I-25, Partner)

Negotiating results in two dimensions: reinforcing emerging brand meanings and adjusting brand identity or deliberately refusing and challenging them. For instance, the brand conductor

adapted the slogan ‘love whoever you want’ to its brand communication in response to fans using it for CSD (see above). Similarly, after receiving criticism from fans, the brand decided to terminate Shop TV (see above). Negotiating processes also occur among external actors only when they negotiate shared brand meanings. For instance, fans rejected a fan group that demanded less political positioning of the brand conductor and its environment. This is reflected in the discussion among fans in relation to the political banners within the stadium (Instagram, 09.07.2021):

User A: why do you send such derogatory smileys when it comes to a campaign against racism?

User B: not everything is discriminatory just because I don't think much of this campaign. “Football shouldn't be political” doesn't make it directly discriminatory [...]

User A: but that doesn't matter. St.Pauli is not just a sport club like any other club and if you want to see good football and you are only interested in the “sporting” side of things, I question your choice of club

2.3.7.5 Initiating brand development

This performance refers to giving impulses for the development of the brand. Predominantly internal actors engage in this *BCCP*. At *FCSP*, there is an inner circle of employees (i.e. ‘brand-tribe’), that initiates brand development processes (ID-2). Deriving from internal negotiating processes, the brand conductor ‘gives impulses’ (I-4, Club Official) and ‘sets the scope and direction’ (I-18, Employee) for the development of the brand.

External actors also engage in initiating brand development. Members of the club submit and vote on motions at the general meeting, which can result in ‘fundamental changes to the brand’ (I-8, Club Official). For instance, a motion prompted the brand to develop an overarching sustainability strategy as one interviewee explains: ‘[The members] have a very strong influence via the general meeting. We would not be so notable on the path of sustainability today if a corresponding motion had not been made in 2016’ (I-2, Management). Further, partners initiate brand development as an interviewee describes: ‘We are a driving force. That was the case with eSports, but it is also the case with digitization. We [...] try to open up new fields from time to time’ (I-25, Sponsor).

2.3.7.6 Implementing brand development

Implementing brand development refers to turning impulses for brand development into concrete concepts and initiatives. This is a main task of the brand conductor. However, often

FCSP intentionally includes various actors to access their expertise in different fields. In order to elaborate strategic concepts, FCSP regularly ‘mobilises [actors] around a topic’ (I-4, Club Official) and lets them ‘carry [the brand] along the way’ (I-5, Management). For instance, various actors were involved in conceptualising the brand’s digitalisation, diversity, and sustainability strategy: ‘We called on our members, fans, and interested parties to think about sustainability with us. We then held a series of workshops where we were able to involve interested actors and they created a catalogue of measures’ (I-4, Club Official). Additionally, implementing brand development refers to the brand conductor using actors’ expertise to receive feedback. One interviewee explains this process: ‘The brand conductor always gets the separate opinion from the fan club spokesman council [...]. There are people who have trust in us and say: Here is an idea that just popped up, what do you say?’ (I-16, Fan).

2.3.7.7 Facilitating

Facilitating refers to the support and promotion of interactions. One interviewee (I-22, Partner) explains: ‘The brand conductor has the responsibility to moderate, coordinate, stimulate and also structure the co-creation process’. Therefore, facilitating comprises the creation of ‘a breeding ground’ (I-13, Employee), ‘an enclosure like a greenhouse’ (I-20, Media), and a culture for creativity to facilitate *BCCP*. In particular, the brand conductor provides brand engagement platforms, to consciously involve actors in brand co-creation. For instance, the ‘brand-tribe’ offers a platform to facilitate internal exchanges and the brand conductor provides additional platforms such as town hall meetings. Similarly, FCSP enables participatory processes to initiate and develop the brand’s sustainability strategy together with multiple actors (see above). Further, offering its social media channel to other actors to elevate consciousness about racism describes a digital brand engagement platform.

Over the past few weeks, foundations, initiatives, clubs, groups and individuals have taken over the channels of FC St. Pauli and our partner @sponsor as part of the "No place for racism" campaign. [...] Thank you for enriching this campaign with your content and information and for sharing your experiences with us (FCSP, Instagram, 09.06.2021).

One interviewee explains: ‘That is what is so special [...]. We do not have to do everything ourselves [...]. We sometimes just need to see ourselves as facilitators’ (I-5, Management). However, brand engagement platforms also emerge out of the brand conductor’s sphere of control, when external actors engage in facilitating (e.g. events, online forums, or social media fan pages).

2.3.7.8 Social listening

Social listening refers to recording developments in broader society and the direct context of FCSP. Mainly the brand conductor engages in this performance, but also other actors function as intermediaries that take up currents and approach the brand conductor. For instance, the brand conductor consciously reads fan blogs, keeps up to date on social media, or exchanges with key actors. Further, the brand conductor maps macrolevel societal developments to continuously adjust the brand and steer it towards new directions (ID-2). The brand conductor needs to be aware of currents to react, dock on them, and potentially adjust branding processes as one interviewee explains: ‘The cosmos of all the currents and opinions that come to us centrally is then reflected in the implementation’ (I-10, Employee).

2.3.7.9 Assimilating brand meanings

This *BCCP* refers to the psychological process by which actors understand the brand. One interviewee underscores its importance for the consistent communication and behaviour among actors: ‘It is essential that there are people at work who understand what the brand stands for’ (I-2, Management). Assimilating commences with the selection of new actors. The brand conductor consciously selects new hires and partners who align with brand values. For instance, the brand conductor uses a tool called ‘CSR check’ to evaluate and select potential partners. Further, the brand conductor facilitates assimilating processes through internal brand communication. Employees are confronted with posters, captions, and relics within the office space to ensure that they constantly ‘bathe in the brand’ (I-15). Partners, however, receive explicit explanations to sensitise them for the brand. An interviewee reflects on this process: ‘We are always in exchange. Especially in the beginning, a lot was explained’ (I-25, Sponsor). However, while formal processes are important, mostly informal interactions with senior employees or external actors initiate assimilation processes.

You get feedback from the fans. What do they think is good? What suits FCSP? Because many people write ‘That is exactly why I like the club [...]’. Then you also get more and more a feeling for the [brand]. (I-12, Employee)

Beside internal actors and partners, every actor is involved in assimilating. These actors constantly assess existing brand meanings based on their interactions, assimilate those brand meanings, and integrate them into their *BCCP*.

2.3.8 Empirical consolidation of BCCP following qualitative meta-synthesis

The outcomes of our single case study add a novel and rich empirical context to existing research on *BCCP*, which comprises isolated work and reaches disparate conclusions. Qualitative meta-synthesis offers a powerful method to accumulate and empirically consolidate rich qualitative evidence from primary case studies to develop a generic theoretical understanding grounded in a broad range of contextual conditions. It comprises the systematic extraction, analysis, and synthesis of qualitative evidence and the interpretations of the original researchers of case studies to build theory and contribute beyond the original studies. Thus, qualitative meta-synthesis essentially encompasses the in-depth analysis of qualitative case studies and their synthesis on a cross-study level (Hoon, 2013).

First, following an extensive literature review, we included four qualitative case studies in our meta-synthesis (i.e. Anderski *et al.*, 2023; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a; this study). The articles were selected based on three specific criteria. *Constructs* – only articles building on performativity theory within the context of branding research. *Methodology* – only articles building on qualitative case study research with primary data sources. *Content* – only articles providing insights into the specific *BCCP* of multiple actors. Second, all members of the author team carefully read and analysed each case study to identify core themes on a case-specific level. In the following, overarching cross-study patterns and themes were developed and synthesised in mutual discussions among the whole author team.

The qualitative meta-synthesis resulted in eight generic and interrelated *BCCP*, which are distinguished into direct brand co-creation performances (*dBCCP*) and enabling brand co-creation performances (*eBCCP*) (see table 2). Within *dBCCP* (i.e. communicating, implementing, contesting, and developing), actors directly co-create brand identity and brand meaning. These *dBCCP* require *eBCCP* (i.e. negotiating, facilitating, social listening, and assimilating), which are foundational for brand co-creation, eventually enabling *dBCCP* and making them possible.

Von Wallpach et al. (2017a)	Iglesias et al. (2020)	Anderski et al. (2023)	This study	Empirically consolidated BCCP	BCCP category
Basement building and showcasing Missionizing Brand storytelling	Communicating	Communicating Cooperating Reinforcing Brand loving	Communicating	Communicating	Direct Brand Co-Creation Performances (dBCCP)
Missionizing Brand storytelling	Internalizing	Internalizing	Bringing brand meanings to life	Implementing	
	Contesting	Contesting Brand hating	Criticising	Contesting	
Creating and innovating			Initiating brand development Supporting brand development	Developing	
	Elucidating	Elucidating	Negotiating	Negotiating	Enabling Brand Co-Creation Performances (eBCCP)
Community building and facilitating Marketplace developing			Facilitating	Facilitating	
			Social listening	Social listening	
	Internalizing		Assimilating	Assimilating	

Table 2.3-2: Empirical consolidation of BCCP

2.3.8.1 Direct BCCP

Communicating: Consistent with previous research, this study highlights the linguistic transmission of brand identity and brand meanings through internal and external actors. Especially internal actors, acting on behalf of the brand conductor, are pivotal in communicating as they transmit brand identity via various channels (e.g. social media, traditional media, website, corporate videos, or press releases). They make use of storytelling and communicate in relation to other actors or incidents (Anderski *et al.*, 2023; this study). However, also external actors communicate brand meanings. They engage in word of mouth (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a); express their brand love (Anderski *et al.*, 2023); reinforce intended brand meanings by commenting and producing content on social media (Anderski *et al.*, 2023; this study) and blogs (this study); advocate the brand when being criticised; write articles to endorse the brand; and develop brand-related narratives (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a). Our results confirm previous research highlighting the linguistic dimension of *dBCCP*. Therefore, we conceptualise *communicating* as the linguistic transmission and reinforcement of brand identity and meaning by internal and external actors. This conceptualisation is also in line with the understanding of user-generated-content as relevant activity in the formation of brand meaning (Shulga *et al.*, 2023). In addition, it highlights the participation of other actors in brand communication (Essamri *et al.*, 2019; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018).

Implementing: Internal actors convey brand identity through its implementation in subsequent behaviour - consistent brand behaviour breathes life into brand identity and is a crucial success-factor. This is reflected in this study and the work of Anderski *et al.* (2023) and Iglesias *et al.* (2020). However, external actors also implement brand meanings into their behaviour. This expands beyond the conceptualisation of Iglesias *et al.* (2020), perceiving internalizing as an internal performance, and follows the results of Anderski *et al.* (2023) and von Wallpach *et al.* (2017a). External actors create drawings, videos, or other socio-material artefacts such as brand merchandise, initiate joint activities in the context of the brand, and therefore breathe life into brand meanings. Therefore, *implementing* refers to internal and external actors participating in socio-material branding activities that reinforce brand identity and brand meanings. This conceptualisation is not specifically addressed within the broader body of research on brand co-creation.

Contesting: This study and previous research highlight how actors linguistically and socio-materially contest branding processes, brand identity, and brand meanings. While Anderski *et*

al. (2023) restrict contesting to customers as external actors, this study and Iglesias *et al.* (2020) indicate its internal dimension (i.e. employees contest the brand internally). Additionally, this study expands the understanding of external actors beyond customers to every actor engaging with the brand (i.e. partners, civic organisations, media, etc.) and highlights the socio-material dimension of contesting. Contesting occurs in emergent (e.g. fan blogs) and institutional contexts (e.g. brand-owned social media, exchange formats between brand conductor and actors). Building on Iglesias *et al.* (2020), Anderski *et al.* (2023), and this study, we define *contesting* as linguistic or socio-material performances of internal and external actors to challenge existing branding processes, brand identity, and brand meanings. This conceptualisation relates to the role of brand offenders (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013), negative valenced customer brand engagement behaviour (Dong *et al.*, 2024), and brand-related feedback activities (France *et al.*, 2018; Mäläskälä *et al.*, 2011).

Developing: *Developing* comprises to the process of initiating new strategic directions. Actors set impulses, develop novel ideas, and drive the brand towards emerging topics. This strategic dimension is missing in previous research. While internal actors continuously develop the brand, external actors also give impulses. This study highlights the brand conductor's deliberate involvement of external actors to access their resources (e.g. expertise) in brand development. von Wallpach *et al.* (2017a) also describe how customers participate in lead-user workshops to innovate products and provide feedback to the brand conductor. However, this study expands on this, illustrating how the brand conductor deliberately includes various actors in the development of branding strategies (e.g. sustainability strategy for the brand). This strategic dimension of brand co-creation is also in line with the broader body of research (Ind *et al.*, 2017; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2018).

2.3.8.2 Enabling BCCP

Negotiating: Anderski *et al.* (2023), referring to Iglesias *et al.* (2020), call this performance elucidating and describe it as conversational process between brand conductor and external actors to reconcile distinct brand meanings and negotiate a shared understanding of brand meaning. Internal and external actors engage in those processes when negotiating contestations or impulses for brand development as well as when collaborating with partners in branding initiatives. However, as found in this study, negotiating not only occurs between internal and external actors - it also expands among internal and external actors only. Internal actors negotiate strategic directions, how to communicate and implement brand identity, or they internally negotiate contestations to adapt brand identity. External actors engage in negotiating,

when they discuss common positions towards the brand. Therefore, we define *negotiating* as ongoing conversational process of harmonizing diverging perspectives on the brand among internal and external actors and among internal and external actors only. This perspective is hardly discussed within the broader body of research. Only Essamri *et al.* (2019) describe the brand conductor's exchange with a brand community to 'bridge' diverging brand meanings.

Facilitating: *Facilitating* refers to the provision of infrastructural conditions for *dBCCP*. First, it involves the development and maintenance of brand engagement platforms where multiple actors can engage in *dBCCP*. This is also reflected in the work of von Wallpach *et al.* (2017a), where especially customers facilitate discussions about the brand. However, this study highlights the brand conductor's role, but also the role of various other actors (e.g. partners) in providing brand engagement platforms to connect actors and encourage *dBCCP*. It shows how the brand conductor facilitates, supports, and promotes actor-initiatives by providing various resources (e.g. financial resources, network resources). Considering the broader body of research on brand co-creation, *facilitating* relates to the organisational perspective of brand co-creation (Essamri *et al.*, 2019; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016).

Social listening: *Social listening* comprises the brand conductor's recording of macrolevel developments in broader society and within the direct context of the brand. Therefore, it is a prerequisite for *dBCCP* (e.g. developing). Even when considering the broader body of brand co-creation research, this *eBCCP* is not addressed.

Assimilating: *Assimilating* comprises the fundamental psychological processes to enable an understanding of the brand. This *eBCCP* is indicated in Iglesias *et al.* (2020), however, this study enhances and highlights the conceptualisation of assimilating. In contrast to Iglesias *et al.* (2020), assimilating includes not only internal actors, but refers to every actor interacting within the context of the brand. Assimilating is an important *eBCCP* since an actor's individual understanding of the brand determines its *dBCCP*. This understanding is also reflected in research on brand experiences (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Tjandra *et al.*, 2021), highlighting the development of individual brand meanings through co-created brand experiences.

2.3.9 Contributions

2.3.9.1 Theoretical contributions

First, this study empirically consolidates *BCCP* from previous research and a single case study. It offers an overarching approach to examine brand co-creation in various contexts by conceptualising eight generic *BCCP*. The first six *BCCP* are derived from an empirical

consolidation of previous *BCCP* research (Anderski *et al.*, 2023; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017a; and this study). Although these *BCCP* are not entirely new, we take into account their different manifestations in previous research to conceptualise them in a uniform manner. For instance, building on von Wallpach *et al.* (2017a) and this study, we extend on the strategic dimension of brand co-creation (i.e. *developing*). While not occurring in Anderski *et al.* (2023) and Iglesias *et al.* (2020), this conceptualisation is supported by the findings from Törmälä and Saraniemi (2018) and Vallaster and von Wallpach (2018), who highlight the participation of multiple actors in designing a branding strategy. This conceptualisation also refers to the strategic approach to brand co-creation (Ind *et al.*, 2017). Social listening and assimilating emerge as novel *BCCP* from our case study. While *social listening* is not found in previous *BCCP* research, it is consistent with the findings of Sarasvuo *et al.* (2022), who highlight the brand conductor's process of absorbing opinions, inputs, and influences of external actors to adapt brand identity. *Assimilating* is an individual *BCCP* and refers to the traditional psychological approaches to branding (Keller, 2003; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020) and brand experience research (Stach *et al.*, 2019). Referring to research on internal branding (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2021; Dean *et al.*, 2016), the brand conductor aims to facilitate assimilating processes of internal actors to ensure their consistent communication and implementation of the brand. However, also external actors engage in assimilating to develop an understanding of the brand, which they integrate in their *BCCP*.

Second, this study enhances the understanding of the complex interrelationships and consecutiveness among *BCCP* (see figure 2). We categorise *dBCCP* (i.e. communicating, implementing, contesting, developing) and *eBCCP* (i.e. negotiating, facilitating, social listening, assimilating). Within *dBCCP*, actors directly co-create brands, while *eBCCP* eventually enable *dBCCP*. In *communicating* and *implementing* internal and external actors linguistically and socio-materially transmit and reinforce brand identity and brand meaning. Additionally, actors transform the brand in *dBCCP*. In *developing* actors collaboratively initiate innovative and potentially transformative branding strategies. However, actors not only reinforce and innovate existing brand meanings, but also *contest* them. Therefore, *dBCCP* are situated on a continuum between the two dimensions of reinforcing and transforming. Both dimensions are also emphasized by Simmons and Durkin (2023). In order to engage in *dBCCP*, actors first have to *assimilate* the brand and develop an individual brand meaning, which is manifested when actors engage in *communicating*, *implementing*, *developing*, or *contesting*. Further, all *dBCCP* can only occur if there are spaces for interactions. Brand conductors provide brand engagement platforms to *facilitate dBCCP* of various actors. For instance, events

facilitate *communicating* and *implementing* performances, exchange formats with customers facilitate *contesting* performances, and workshops facilitate *developing* performances. However, also external actors engage in *facilitating*. *Social listening* is an *eBCCP*, where actors record developments in broader society and the specific context of the brand, to utilise them in *dBCCP*. *Negotiating* is a key *eBCCP*, often prompted by *contesting*. In *negotiating*, actors constantly balance perspectives on the brand that are reflected within *dBCCP*. For instance, internal actors negotiate *communicating* or *implementing* tactics based on *contesting* performances of external actors and developments in the wider society, derived from *social listening*. Thus, *dBCCP* require preceding *eBCCP* but also prompt successive *eBCCP*. There is a constant interaction between *dBCCP*, which can be either reinforcing or transforming, and *eBCCP*.

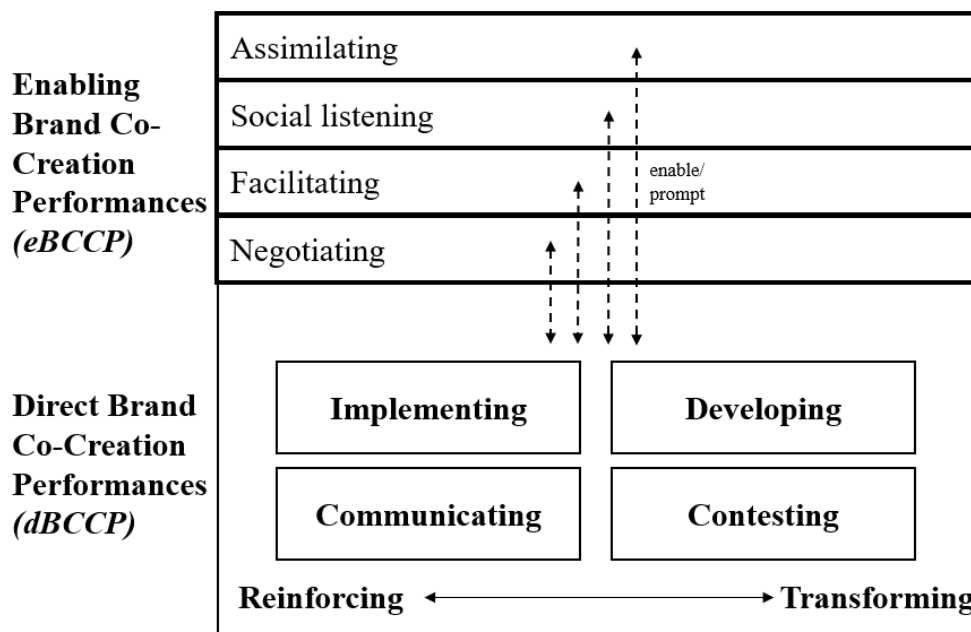


Figure 2.3-2: Interrelationships among BCCP

Third, this research specifies the actors engaging in particular *BCCP* (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Kristal *et al.*, 2020). It highlights interactions among internal actors to co-create brand identity. This dedicated organisational perspective, underscoring the heterogeneous composition of the brand conductor and the *BCCP* of internal actors (i.e. negotiating, contesting), has been neglected yet (Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022). However, it is consistent with the findings of Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2019), who suggest that internal actors are not a homogenous actor collective, but rather a co-mingled group of actors, participating in individual *BCCP*. This research acknowledges the complexity of internal branding processes. Beside this organisational perspective, this research underscores the active role of various actors in brand co-creation.

BCCP occur among the brand conductor and external actors, among external actors only, and among internal actors only.

2.3.9.2 Managerial contributions

This study offers brand managers an enhanced understanding of their brand, by unpacking *how* multiple actors co-create the brand. First, this study shows that brand managers need to communicate the brand, implement brand identity into brand behaviours, and continuously develop strategic directions for the brand. This is still an important source of brand meaning. Further, brand managers must appreciate the importance of contesting performances of internal actors, which leads to constant internal assessments of the brand. Thus, brand managers must also acknowledge the *dBCCP* and the influence of other actors on the brand.

Second, brand managers must engage in *eBCCP* to enable *dBCCP*. They need to facilitate *BCCP* of internal and external actors. Especially internal brand engagement platforms acknowledge the heterogeneity of internal actors and offer opportunities to raise criticism and develop branding tactics and strategies. However, brand managers must also facilitate interactions among internal and external and external actors only. Additionally, brand managers must engage in internal and boundary-spanning negotiating processes to balance brand identity and brand meaning. Brand managers need to remain open for adaptations of brand identity and accept the imperfect perfection of brand building. They take the role of negotiators, balancing and uniting diverging perspectives in the dynamic and infinite process of brand co-creation. Brand managers must further promote assimilating processes to ensure consistent *dBCCP* of internal actors. Since actors engage in *BCCP* also in contexts outside the brand conductor's sphere of control, brand managers must constantly engage in social listening to pick up currents and involve them in *dBCCP*.

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Chapter 3: The Role of Athlete Brands within the Sports Brand Ecosystem

3.1 Athlete Sustainability Index: A Measurement Framework

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Abstract

The Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI) measures athletes' sustainability across ecological, social, and economic dimensions. Based on a literature review, 38 expert interviews, and an initial application to professional football players, the ASI links athletes' actions in sports and private life to sustainability goals, allowing adaptable weightings to meet specific needs across different contexts.

3.1.1 Introduction

Major football associations are increasingly emphasizing the importance of sustainability, with organizations such as the Deutsche Fußball Liga (DFL) recently establishing comprehensive sustainability guidelines (DFL, 2024). These efforts align with broader global trends, where sustainability has become a critical focus across industries (McCullough et al., 2020). Nevertheless, existing sustainability initiatives predominantly target sports organizations, venue operators, and event organizers (Collins & Flynn, 2008; Gerke et al., 2024), largely neglecting the role of individuals, such as players, coaches or managers, as key stakeholders within the sports ecosystem (Brand et al., 2023). Athletes, in particular, can play a dual role (in a positive or negative manner): they influence the functioning of the sports industry and can serve as powerful role models capable of promoting sustainable behavior (Panthen et al., 2024). The environmental impact of Brazilian football stars Marquinhos and Roberto Firmino exemplifies this duality, with their 2019 travel emissions reaching 53.5 and

49.5 tons of CO₂, respectively. Marquinhos' emissions are equivalent to 835 tree seedlings grown for 10 years, while Firmino's emissions match the energy use of six homes for one year, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for fostering sustainability at the individual level (Guest, 2022). Similar trends can be observed in other major football leagues. For instance, the English Premier League has integrated sustainability metrics into club operations, with initiatives such as carbon offsetting programs and athlete-led environmental campaigns (EPL, 2023). Beyond Europe, Major League Soccer (MLS) in the United States has launched its "Greener Goals" initiative, focusing on environmental education and community-driven sustainability projects involving athletes as key ambassadors (MLS, 2024).

Bridging the gap between organization-focused sustainability metrics and the individual sustainability perceptions and behaviors in sports is crucial. As sports increasingly serve as a platform for promoting environmental awareness, the European Union's Green Deal framework (European Commission, 2023) underscores the importance of sustainability in sports (European Commission, 2023). The growing need for a scientifically grounded framework to evaluate individual sustainability behaviors has been underscored by rising demands from key stakeholders, including sponsors, clubs, players, and NGOs. Such a framework would provide consistency in assessment while ensuring that athletes' behavior align with the broader sustainability goals established by governing bodies like the DFL and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Müller et al., 2021). Moreover, as described above, sports organizations, such as clubs in the German Bundesliga, are increasingly required to report on their sustainability efforts and adopt proactive measures to meet environmental and social accountability standards. Consequently, integrating comprehensive environmental sustainability plans into their development strategies has become essential.

Despite the growing demand, no framework currently evaluates or promotes sustainability behaviors at the individual level. This paper addresses this gap by introducing the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI), the first measurement framework of its kind. The ASI is based on a systematic literature review of sustainability in sports and general indices across various fields, complemented by 38 expert interviews conducted in two rounds with stakeholders from the German football ecosystem, focusing initially on professional football players. Although primarily developed using German football as a case study in an exploratory research context, the ASI is applicable beyond team sports, offering a structured approach to evaluating sustainability behaviors among individual athletes across various disciplines and international markets.

This study makes a significant contribution to the intersection of sustainability and sports management by introducing the ASI, a novel framework to evaluate individual athletes' sustainability behaviors. By addressing the three established dimensions of sustainability (ecological, social, and economic), the ASI bridges a critical gap in existing sustainability frameworks, which have largely overlooked individual contributions. The inclusion of multiple subcategories and an adjustable weighting system allows stakeholders, such as sponsors, clubs, and agents, to tailor the index to specific groups, ensuring detailed and context-sensitive assessments. Practically, the ASI provides stakeholders with a customizable framework to align athletes' behavior with established sustainability goals. Additionally, the ASI helps organizations track individual contributions to sustainability targets, complementing broader reporting and accountability efforts within the sports ecosystem.

3.1.2 Theoretical Background and Literature Review

3.1.2.1 Athlete Brands and Sustainability in Professional Sports

Athlete brands have become an integral part of the sports industry, extending their influence beyond performance metrics to encompass broader societal issues, including sustainability (Kunkel et al., 2020). As human brands, athletes hold a unique position to promote sustainable practices both on and off the field (Arai et al., 2014). Based on the multi-actor perspective, athlete brands interact with diverse stakeholders, including fans, sponsors, and organizations, across several physical and digital engagement platforms such as in the stadium, at training centers or press conferences, and on social media. Through these collaborative interactions, athletes co-create brand meaning and drive sustainability efforts, creating a significant spillover effect that amplifies their influence within and beyond the sports ecosystem (Anderski et al., 2023).

Sustainability has emerged as a key component of branding, aligning personal values with public actions to foster authenticity and engagement (Cury et al., 2023). Athletes who champion sustainable practices, such as endorsing eco-friendly products, participating in environmental campaigns, or advocating for reduced carbon emissions, enhance their brand value while shaping sustainability narratives in sports (Dohlsten et al., 2021). These actions align with dynamic branding capabilities, enabling athletes to adapt and integrate sustainability into their branding strategies to stay relevant in evolving markets (Panthen et al., 2024).

Athletes serve as powerful catalysts for change within the sports ecosystem due to their high visibility, global reach, and direct engagement with various actors (Anderski et al., 2024). Beyond individual efforts, athlete brands drive organizational and systemic transformation.

Their advocacy for sustainability can influence clubs, leagues, and sponsors to adopt eco-conscious policies (O'Neill et al., 2023). In the league context, for instance, athlete branding is identified as a key driver for international marketing, with players' off-field initiatives enhancing the global appeal and narrative of leagues and clubs (Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). These efforts align with international initiatives, positioning athletes as crucial contributors to achieving industry-wide sustainability goals (European Commission, 2023). Ultimately, sustainability-focused athlete brands extend beyond personal branding to embed sustainability into the core identity and (business) operations of the sports industry. Athletes have embraced plant-based diets to reduce their environmental footprint (e.g., Alex Morgan), while others have opted for more sustainable transportation choices, such as cycling to home games and training (e.g., Arjen Robben). Additionally, high-profile athletes have actively supported sustainability initiatives, including tree-planting campaigns (e.g., Héctor Bellerín) and the establishment of climate-focused organizations (e.g., Morten Thorsby) (Mabon, 2023). By leveraging their influence, athletes contribute to the creation of a cohesive framework that aligns individual and organizational efforts toward shared sustainability goals. This research highlights the necessity of a structured framework, such as the ASI, to assess and enhance these efforts systematically.

3.1.2.2 Sustainability Indices

Sustainability indices are a powerful and complex framework for advancing sustainable practices by systematically evaluating multidisciplinary aspects such as ecological, social, and economic dimensions (Sala et al., 2015). These frameworks provide measurable insights, enabling stakeholders to assess progress, identify gaps, and make evidence-based decisions (McCullough et al., 2020; Trendafilova et al., 2013). Widely used frameworks such as the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) index demonstrate the effectiveness of indices in transforming complex sustainability challenges into actionable metrics (Singh et al., 2007).

The need for such an index stems from the dual impact of sports. On one hand, professional sports contribute significantly to environmental challenges through travel, infrastructure, and large-scale events. On the other, athletes have the capacity to inspire millions to adopt sustainable practices, making their actions key to advancing sustainability goals. A framework like the ASI bridges this gap by linking individual behaviors to broader organizational and global objectives, fostering accountability while driving continuous improvement across the industry.

3.1.3 Methodological Approach

3.1.3.1 Research Design

Our explorative research design employs a two-fold research approach (Creswell, 2014), combining (1) a systematic literature review and (2) semi-structured expert interviews. The literature review established a robust theoretical foundation by analyzing sustainability frameworks across various levels and industries, while the expert interviews provided practical, context-specific insights from stakeholders in professional sports, especially German football.

3.1.3.2 Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review provides the theoretical foundation for the development of the ASI. Adhering to rigorous academic standards, the review prioritized peer-reviewed articles, highly cited works, and publications in leading marketing, sustainability and sport management journals within the last 20 years. Key search terms included "sustainability indices," "sustainability assessment," "sports and sustainability," "ecological sustainability," "athlete sustainability metrics", and "individual sustainability metrics", all connected with "OR". Following the PRISMA approach (Tricco et al., 2018), an initial pool of 9,294 articles was identified, from which 5,784 duplicates were removed. After title and abstract screening, 3,270 irrelevant articles were excluded. The remaining 240 full-text articles were reviewed, resulting in 74 final publications deemed suitable for in-depth analysis. These publications focused on the period between 2007 and 2023, reflecting the growing relevance of sustainability research.

The review highlighted key frameworks for sustainability indices across different industries, dimensions and contexts, which are summarized in table 1. However, a significant gap was identified: the absence of indices tailored to professional sports, especially at the individual level. This gap directly informed and shaped the subsequent interview study.

Index	Authors	Dimensions	Context
Environmental Performance Index (EPI)	Wendling et al. (2018)	Environmental Health, Ecosystem Vitality	Communal
Strong Environmental Sustainability Index	Usubiaga-Liaño and Ekins (2021)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Communal
SAM Sustainability Indices	Díaz Díaz and García Ramos (2020)	ESG, Economic, Ecological, Social	Communal
SDG Report	Sachs et al. (2021)	SDGs	Communal
Proposal of a Sustainability Index for the Automotive Industry	Salvado et al. (2015)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Sectoral
Overview of Sustainability Assessment Methodologies	Singh et al., 2007	Organizational Leadership, Economic, Ecological, Health & Safety	Sectoral
Assessing Impacts: Overview on Sustainability Indicators and Metrics	Tokos et al. (2012)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Sectoral
Global Health Security Index	Wang and Lyu (2023)	Social, Political	Sectoral
Global Sustainability Index	Grecu (2015)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Sectoral
Dow Jones Sustainability Index	Denuwara et al. (2022)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Sectoral
Municipality Sustainability Index	Caldas et al. (2022)	Political	Sectoral
Product Sustainability Index	Shuaib et al. (2014)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Products
Evaluation of Sustainable Manufacturing at Product and Process Levels	Badurdeen et al. (2017)	Economic, Ecological, Social	Products
Ecological Footprint	Blättel-Mink (2021)	Ecological	Individuals
EIGE Gender Equality Index	Schmid and Elliot (2023)	Individuals	Individuals

Table 3.1-1: Overview identified indices across industries

3.1.3.3 Interview Study

The second phase consisted of 38 semi-structured expert interviews (average interview duration 46 min) conducted online (via MS Teams and Zoom) between November 2023 and May 2024. As we developed the ASI in the context of professional football players, we interviewed experts from the German football market, including representatives from its clubs (first and second division), leading associations, corporate entities, sport business agencies, and academia (sustainability experts and sports). These interviews provided diverse and practical insights into sustainability in professional sports (football), ensuring the ASI's relevance and applicability (cf. table 2).

No.	Length	Stakeholder	Classification	Profession
1	41 min	Club	Semi-Professional	Sustainability Manager
2	77 min	Club	2 nd Division	B2B and Event Manager
3	32 min	Academia	Consultant	Sustainability Expert
4	51 min	Agency	Sport Business	Manager Purpose, Strategy & Communication
5	52 min	Corporate	Sponsoring	Teamlead Corporate Sponsoring & Donations
6	53 min	Academia	University	Head of the University Sports Centre
7	27 min	Academia	University	Program Coordinator Physical Activity & Health
8	43 min	Agency	Sport Business	Sustainability Manager
9	32 min	Agency	Sport Business	Senior Sustainability Manager
10	35 min	Club	1 st Division	Head of Academy
11	48 min	Club	1 st Division	Director Corporate Social Responsibility
12	49 min	Club	2 nd Division	Board Member
13	74 min	Academia	University	Professor Sustainability and Sport Sciences
14	40 min	Club	1 st Division	Project Manager Corporate Social Responsibility
15	48 min	Club	2 nd Division	Director Corporate Social Responsibility
16	43 min	Corporate	Media	Project Manager Sports
17	41 min	Corporate	Consultant	Senior Consultant Sport and Sustainability
18	51 min	Corporate	Consultant	Consultant Athlete Branding
19	53 min	Club	2 nd Division	Sustainability Manager
20	44 min	NGO	International	Project Manager
21	37 min	Corporate	Sportswear Manufacturer	Global Sports Marketing Manager
22	58 min	Corporate	Sportswear Manufacturer	Sports Marketing Manager
23	24 min	Agency	Sport Business	Player Agent

24	29 min	Agency	Sport Business	Senior Director Global Athlete Management
25	22 min	Agency	Sport Business	Player Agent
26	24 min	Agency	Sport Business	Senior Director Sustainability
27	64 min	Corporate	Association	Managing Director German Ski Association
28	49 min	Academia	University	Professor Sports Ecology
29	56 min	Academia	University	Assistant Professor Sports Ecology
30	46 min	Academia	University	Research Assistant Sports Sciences
31	51 min	Academia	University	Research Assistant Sports Management
32	54 min	Corporate	Association	Sustainability Officer
33	78 min	Corporate	Association	Sustainability Committee German Bundesliga
34	46 min	Corporate	Association	Social Responsibility Committee German Bundesliga
35	36 min	Corporate	Association	Chairman Commission Social Responsibility German Bundesliga
36	41 min	Corporate	Association	Brand Manager German Bundesliga Foundation
37	44 min	Corporate	Association	Senior Manager German Bundesliga Foundation
38	38 min	Club	1 st Division	Brand Manager

Table 3.1-2: Interview and participant characteristics

The interview guideline, developed based on insights from the literature review, comprised 23 open-ended and five quantifiable scale questions. It focused on key areas such as best practices in sustainable behavior, the influence of private and professional settings on sustainability, and the role of data sources in measuring behaviors. Additionally, it explored the development of actionable and measurable indicators, derived from the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability. Follow-up questions were designed to elicit specific insights into the sustainability practices of professional football players, providing a nuanced understanding of their impact within the sports ecosystem.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004), ensuring a systematic identification of recurring themes, patterns, and dimensions of sustainability behavior. This second phase complemented the theoretical insights from the literature review, grounding the ASI in both conceptual rigor and practical relevance. By integrating these two approaches, the ASI is uniquely positioned to address the challenges and opportunities of embedding sustainability within the sports ecosystem, providing a robust framework for evaluating individual contributions to sustainability.

3.1.4 Results

Reviewing the literature on sustainability indices, we identify indices at four different levels, i.e. 1) for nations, regions, or cities (e.g., Wolf et al., 2022), 2) for industries or sectors (e.g., Singh et al., 2007), 3) for products (e.g., Shuaib et al., 2014), and 4) for households or individuals (e.g., Wicker, 2019). We identified three primary domains for the index: (1) athletes' sustainable behavior in their professional life, (2) their sustainable behavior in their private life, and (3) behaviors that do not clearly fit into either category.

The ASI is structured around four main behavioral categories: (1) Social media presence, (2) sponsoring, (3) initiatives, and (4) carbon conservation. Social media presence evaluates how athletes use their platforms to advocate for sustainability, including campaigns, collaborations, and messaging. Sponsoring assesses the alignment of athletes' sponsorship deals with sustainability values, focusing on partnerships with environmentally conscious or socially responsible brands. Initiatives measure athletes' involvement in sustainability projects, such as environmental programs or community outreach efforts. Carbon conservation quantifies efforts to reduce ecological impact. Each category includes specific subcategories:

(1) Social media presence includes follower count, ratio of sustainability-related posts, and engagement rate based on likes, comments, and shares on sustainability posts.

- (2) Sponsoring covers image analysis, sustainability reporting, and industry alignment.
- (3) Initiatives include foundations, funds, investments, and aid projects, categorized by whether they are independent efforts or partnerships.
- (4) Carbon conservation encompasses mobility, nutrition, waste management, energy consumption, housing, and conscious consumption.

Each category and subcategory is evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale, which is widely used in the behavioral and social sciences due to its balance between granularity and ease of use. The scale provides sufficient sensitivity to capture meaningful differences in behaviors while reducing ambiguity between adjacent ratings, making it reliable for scientific evaluation and comparison of sustainability profiles. The results can be visualized using a diamond diagram, effectively showcasing multi-dimensional profiles and enabling quick athlete comparisons, a method commonly utilized in video games to assess and compare athlete attributes. An additional feature of the ASI is its customizable weighting system, allowing stakeholders to adjust the importance of the categories based on their specific needs. For example, player agents may prioritize "sponsoring" by aligning deals with sustainable brands, while NGOs might focus on "initiatives" that promote environmental programs and community efforts. Sponsors may prioritize "Social media presence," while clubs might focus more on "carbon conservation." Additionally, the ASI is adaptable to different contexts, such as professional versus semi-professional athletes, or varying league tiers, ensuring its applicability across diverse settings. While the ASI was developed through insights from the German football ecosystem, its underlying structure and principles make it adaptable to assessing sustainability behaviors among individual athletes in a variety of international sports contexts.

3.1.5 Discussion

3.1.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by developing the ASI, a first framework designed to systematically assess athletes' sustainability across ecological, social, and economic dimensions (McCullough et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2007). The ASI offers a novel, modular framework that allows for adaptability across sports disciplines and stakeholder priorities. Beyond its immediate application in football, the ASI offers a flexible framework that can be extended to individual sports, allowing researchers and practitioners to evaluate sustainability engagement across a range of athletic disciplines. Its integration of subjective weighting and customizable features reflects the diverse needs of sponsors, clubs, and

governing bodies, setting a foundation for future studies on sustainability metrics in professional sports. By combining theoretical insights from a systematic literature review with practical inputs from expert interviews, this study advances the theoretical understanding of sustainability assessment and operationalization at the individual level, providing a replicable model for other industries and professions.

Moreover, the ASI contributes to the emerging discourse on athlete branding and sustainability by highlighting how individual actions can influence systemic change (Anderski et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2020). This focus on athlete-level behaviors strengthens the theoretical bridge between personal accountability and industry-wide objectives, underscoring the importance of evaluating and fostering sustainability practices in high-visibility professions like sports to enhance spillover effects in society.

3.1.5.2 Managerial Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for stakeholders in professional sports, particularly clubs, athletes' agents, NGOs, sponsors, and governing bodies. For clubs, the ASI provides a robust framework to evaluate and improve athletes' sustainability practices, helping align individual efforts with organizational sustainability goals and industry standards (Collins & Flynn, 2008). By identifying areas for improvement, clubs can implement targeted strategies to enhance athletes' behaviors, fostering a culture of sustainability within teams (Müller et al., 2021). For sponsors, the ASI enables informed decision-making by assessing the alignment between athletes' actions and brand values. This is particularly valuable for sponsors seeking partnerships that reinforce their commitment to sustainability (Panthen et al., 2024). The ability to visualize athletes' performance through the ASI's diamond diagram facilitates transparent communication and strengthens sponsorship relationships. For governing bodies, the ASI offers a benchmark for integrating individual sustainability metrics into broader reporting frameworks, complementing organizational-level assessments. Its modular design ensures applicability across varying contexts, such as professional and semi-professional leagues or first- and second-tier clubs, enabling standardized evaluations and progress tracking (McCullough et al., 2020). By empowering sponsors, clubs, and governing bodies to incorporate sustainability into their strategic planning, the ASI promotes accountability, transparency, and progress toward a more sustainable future in sports and beyond (European Commission, 2023).

3.1.6 Limitations and Future Research

While the ASI provides a novel framework for evaluating sustainability behaviors in professional sports, it has several limitations. First, the development of the ASI relied on qualitative studies, which may reflect subjective interpretations and contextual biases. Future research should complement this with quantitative studies to validate the ASI's reliability and generalizability across broader contexts.

Second, the current study focuses on professional football players within the German Bundesliga, potentially limiting the applicability of findings to other sports or markets. Expanding the research to include diverse sports contexts and geographic areas will enhance the ASI's adaptability and relevance.

Finally, while the ASI integrates insights from stakeholders such as clubs and sponsors, it does not yet incorporate athletes' perspectives. Future studies should involve athletes directly to ensure the index captures their motivations, constraints, and unique contributions to sustainability efforts.

3.1.7 Summary

This study develops the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI) to assess athletes' sustainability behaviors across ecological, social, and economic dimensions. Based on a systematic literature review and 38 expert interviews, the ASI offers a modular framework with customizable weighting, tailored to stakeholder needs. It links individual actions to sustainability goals, fostering accountability and supporting strategic decision-making in professional sports and beyond.

3.1.8 Key Aspects

- The ASI evaluates individuals' ecological, social, and economic sustainability behaviors.
- The modular framework allows customizable weighting for tailored stakeholder assessments.
- It links individual actions to sustainability goals, fostering accountability in sports and beyond.
- The index supports informed decisions for clubs, sponsors, and governing bodies.

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3.2 It Takes a Network and More: Athlete Activism and the Co-creation of Athlete-Brand Meaning

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At the time of publication of this dissertation, this research article has been under review in *Australasian Marketing Journal*. Thus, I provide an extended abstract.

Extended Abstract

Athlete brands are among the most visible and influential human brands in the contemporary media environment, extending their impact well beyond the boundaries of sport into culture, politics, and commerce (Arai et al., 2014; Bloxsome et al., 2020). Athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Michael Jordan, and Serena Williams exemplify how sporting figures have become household names with broad societal relevance, achieved not only through sporting performance but also through digital engagement, endorsements, and social interventions (Garcia, 2024; O'Neill et al., 2023; Warner, 2020). Within this context, activism has emerged as an increasingly important dimension of athlete branding. Athlete activism can be defined as the use of an athlete's fame, visibility, and credibility to highlight, support, or campaign for social and political causes (Cooper et al., 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). A symbolic illustration of its potential influence is Colin Kaepernick's protest against racial injustice in 2016, which sparked both solidarity and controversy, demonstrating the ability of athlete activism to reshape public discourse and brand meaning simultaneously (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

Despite the prominence of athlete activism in public debate, research has mostly examined it through dyadic relationships, analyzing either its impact on the activist athlete or on directly linked entities such as teams and sponsors (Batista et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2022; Fleischman et al., 2024; H. C. Schmidt, 2018; Wang & Sant, 2022). This approach underplays the complexity of brand co-creation, as contemporary branding research emphasizes the role of multiple actors in shaping meaning (Brand et al., 2023; Merz et al., 2009). Brands are increasingly understood as dynamic processes, co-created by a heterogeneous set of stakeholders through ongoing interactions and performances (Sarasvuo et al., 2022; Stegmann et al., 2021). For athlete brands, this implies that teammates, fans, sponsors, clubs, federations, media, and even political actors jointly participate in constructing meaning. Thus, to fully understand athlete activism, one must adopt a multi-actor perspective that accounts for the variety of performances and relationships that shape activist identities (Anderski et al., 2023).

This study investigates athlete activism during three global mega sporting events, the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympics, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, and the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup, focusing on 608 German athletes. Germany represents an ideal case given its established sporting culture and diversity of both high- and lower-profile athletes. Importantly, most research has concentrated on globally renowned stars, yet the majority of athletes exist outside this elite group and may experience different risks and opportunities when engaging in activism. The aims of the study are threefold: to identify which actors contribute to the co-

creation of brand meaning for activist athletes; to introduce a new scope of brand meaning co-creation performances based on the number of actors involved; and to examine whether the number of actors engaged in activism influences how athlete brand meaning is co-created. In doing so, the study not only offers empirical insights into the prevalence of activism among German elite athletes but also develops theoretical contributions that extend co-creation and human branding frameworks.

The study builds on existing conceptualizations of activism and brand co-creation. Activism has been defined as intentional action to promote social change through individual, collective, informal, or institutional means (Presley et al., 2016). In sport, activism ranges from symbolic acts and advocacy organizations to direct protests and boycotts (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Cooper et al. (2019) proposed a typology that distinguishes symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, sport-based, and economic activism, while Vredenburg et al. (2020) demonstrated that authenticity and credibility are key to whether brand activism enhances or harms perceptions. For athletes, authenticity is similarly decisive, with research showing that congruence with audience beliefs enhances credibility and loyalty, whereas incongruence generates backlash (Mudrick et al., 2019; Thomas & Fowler, 2023). At the same time, associations between activist athletes and linked brands can transfer positively or negatively, underscoring the interdependence of brand networks (Park et al., 2020; S. H. Schmidt et al., 2018). However, the literature rarely considers the layered involvement of multiple actors and their varying performances in shaping athlete brand meaning during activism.

To address this gap, the research employs a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), supplemented by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Instagram was chosen as the data source due to its prominence as a platform for athletes to communicate unfiltered messages and mobilize networks (Caliandro & Graham, 2020; Doyle et al., 2020). Data were collected for all posts from German athletes across the events, including two weeks before and after, yielding over 84 activism-related posts by 65 athletes. Activism posts were identified using textual and hashtag analysis, excluding sponsored or advertisement content to ensure authenticity. The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers, followed by theme development and validation through peer debriefing and triangulation.

The descriptive results reveal that activism is rare among German athletes at mega events. Only 11% of the athletes posted activism-related content, and only 1.47% of their total posts were activism-focused. Gender differences were negligible, with both male and female athletes equally likely to engage. However, the themes of activism varied: female athletes were more

inclined to address female empowerment, health, and peace, while male athletes posted more frequently about equality, human rights, and anti-war issues. The most common topics across all athletes included equality (26%), peace and anti-war (23%), female empowerment (15%), health and healthcare (13%), and human rights (12%). Yet, engagement levels did not correspond to posting frequency. For instance, while only 12% of posts were related to human rights and racial justice, they generated the majority of comments and likes, underscoring that some topics resonate far more strongly with audiences than others.

Addressing the first research aim, the study identifies ten actor groups involved in co-creating the brand meaning of activist athletes: brand managers, organizing committees, fans, institutions (clubs, federations, leagues), media, rivals, sponsors, corporations, the athlete's inner circle, and actors beyond the sporting network such as politicians, NGOs, and governmental bodies. These findings expand Anderski et al.'s (2023) earlier framework of eight actor groups by highlighting the significance of organizing committees and beyond-network actors. This broader conceptualization demonstrates that activism engages actors situated outside the immediate sports context, thereby extending the boundaries of athlete branding into political and societal arenas.

To address the second research aim, the study introduces a four-level scope of brand meaning co-creation in athlete activism: autonomous activism, collaborative activism, sports-network activism, and beyond-network activism. Autonomous activism occurs when athletes act independently without explicitly engaging other actors, such as by sharing personal reflections or statements. Collaborative activism involves cooperation with a single actor, such as a sponsor or fellow athlete, in a joint campaign. Sports-network activism refers to mobilizing multiple sport-related actors simultaneously, such as associations, clubs, sponsors, and fans, to amplify a cause. Beyond-network activism extends activism beyond the sports ecosystem, involving external organizations, governments, or institutions. These categories extend existing co-creation theory by revealing both the absence of explicit collaboration (autonomous activism) and the integration of extra-sport actors (beyond-network activism). They also demonstrate that activism varies not only in content but in scale and complexity of actor involvement.

In relation to the third aim, the study finds that the number of actors involved influences both audience reactions and the co-creation of brand meaning. Autonomous activism often generated polarized responses, with some commenters praising athletes' courage while others criticized them for stepping outside their sporting role. Collaborative activism elicited support

but also criticism directed at the chosen partner. Sports-network activism amplified reach but also attracted both positive and negative scrutiny of multiple actors involved. Beyond-network activism sparked strong reactions, especially when sensitive societal institutions such as religion or government were implicated. Importantly, audiences were acutely aware of how many and which actors were engaged, and they explicitly referenced these factors in their evaluations of the athlete's activism. This underscores that activism outcomes cannot be reduced to message content alone; rather, the scope of actor involvement plays a decisive role in shaping meaning.

The study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it shows that activism among athletes is relatively rare, contradicting popular media portrayals that may overstate its prevalence. This finding cautions against overemphasizing activism in athlete brand management research and highlights the need to study other brand-building practices in parallel. Second, it expands the conceptualization of actors in co-creation by identifying organizing committees and beyond-network actors as integral to the activist brand ecosystem. Third, it introduces a novel typology of activism performances, adding autonomous and beyond-network categories to the established framework. Fourth, it demonstrates that activism is a double-edged sword: actor involvement generates both positive and negative co-creation, and even well-intentioned activism can trigger backlash, depending on context and alignment with audience expectations. These findings nuance prior literature that has largely emphasized positive outcomes of co-creation (Essamri et al., 2019; von Wallpach et al., 2017).

Managerial implications derive from these insights. Athlete brand managers should treat activism as one component of a diversified branding strategy rather than its central pillar, given its rarity and risks. Activism can differentiate athletes, especially those outside the global superstar category, by enhancing authenticity and creating deeper connections with fans. However, this differentiation may diminish as activism becomes more widespread, reducing its novelty and impact. Athletes and managers must carefully consider the choice of collaborators, as secondary associations can transfer unintended meanings. Autonomous activism may safeguard authenticity, while beyond-network activism can extend reach but carries higher reputational risks. Comprehensive risk management, including scenario planning and crisis communication strategies, is essential to mitigate potential backlash. Finally, athletes should be educated about the possible consequences of activism, enabling informed and strategic engagement.

Like all studies, this research has limitations. The data derive solely from Instagram, limiting the analysis to a single platform and excluding ephemeral or image-only posts. Future research should extend to other platforms and offline contexts to capture a more holistic picture. The focus on German athletes at three events constrains generalizability, and cross-cultural or longitudinal studies could yield additional insights. Moreover, this qualitative study should be complemented by experimental or survey-based designs that test audience responses more directly and quantitatively. Despite these boundaries, the findings provide a valuable empirical foundation for theorizing athlete activism as a multi-actor co-creation process.

In conclusion, athlete activism is a relatively rare but highly consequential element of athlete branding. When athletes do engage, their activism is shaped not only by the issues they address but by the number and type of actors involved in co-creating brand meaning. By identifying a broader set of actors, introducing a four-level typology of activism performances, and highlighting the ambivalent consequences of activism, this research advances understanding of how athlete brands are constructed in the contemporary media landscape. It demonstrates that activism is not merely an individual act but a networked performance with implications across sport and society. As such, both scholars and practitioners should approach athlete activism with a multi-actor perspective, appreciating its potential to both enhance and endanger the brands of athletes and their partners.

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3.3 The role of athlete brands for the international marketing of professional sports leagues: A case study of the German Bundesliga in Asia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the role of athlete brands for the international marketing of professional sports leagues by examining how athlete brands contribute to initiatives of football leagues.

Design/methodology/approach: Through a single case study of the German Bundesliga underpinned by 17 semi-structured interviews with league, club, and media executives, we identify specific brand co-creation opportunities of athlete brands and the sports league brand.

Findings: Our findings reveal that athlete brands play a significant role in enhancing league visibility, engaging global audiences, and unlocking new markets. Moreover, we identify specific opportunities for co-creating league brand meaning through strategic partnerships and athlete endorsements.

Originality: This research contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of athlete brands in sports league marketing and offering insights for practitioners on innovative marketing strategies. Using a multi-actor perspective, this study provides valuable insights by revealing how sports leagues can pursue innovative marketing strategies by considering the role of athlete brands, thereby offering new ways for fans and sponsors to engage with the sports league.

Keywords: Brand co-creation, athlete brands, brand ecosystem, brand management, sports leagues

3.3.1 Introduction

European football leagues are actively pursuing international marketing initiatives to expand their global reach and unlock global markets (Buck and Ifland, 2023). The English Premier League, the Spanish La Liga, and the German Bundesliga have recently intensified their efforts to engage fans beyond their domestic borders. These initiatives often include strategic partnerships with international media outlets for broadcasting rights, scheduling matches in different countries, and leveraging social media platforms to connect with fans across the globe (Rohde and Breuer, 2017). So far, research on international marketing of national leagues has predominantly focused on how leagues directly engage in international marketing efforts. This is reflected in studies examining the different brand development strategies that professional leagues can implement to increase customer satisfaction (Kunkel et al., 2014), or studies focusing on sport fan segmentation (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015). However, studies emphasizing the highly relevant role of other actors within the brand ecosystem (cf. Brand et al., 2023) remain scarce. One such actor are the individual athletes. The transfers of elite/celebrity athletes (e.g., Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo to the United States and Saudi Arabia respectively) highlight the relevance of such athletes for league marketing. Although there is recent research on athlete brands in other contexts (e.g., Anderski et al., 2023; Cocco et al., 2023; Bredikhina et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2021; Wong and Hung, 2023), there is limited evidence on the role of athlete brands in the international marketing of sports leagues.

Accordingly, this study examines (1) the current role and potential of athlete brands in marketing sports leagues internationally and (2) the co-creation of sports leagues' brand meaning by athlete brands. To answer these research questions, we followed the research design of Brand et al. (2023) developing an integrative sport brand ecosystem and conducted a qualitative case study. The case study centers on the German Bundesliga. Reflecting an exploratory research approach, we conducted 17 interviews with executives from the league and its international offices, Bundesliga clubs, and media partners. We selected these actors as they are primarily responsible and actively involved in the current decision-making process of the international marketing.

Our study offers four main contributions. The study (1) identifies the role of athlete brands within the sport brand ecosystem in promoting sports leagues, (2) identifies specific brand meaning co-creation opportunities for sports leagues focusing on the role of athlete brands, (3) identifies prevailing conditions for successful brand meaning co-creation of sports leagues and

(4) discusses impact and consequences for sports leagues' brand ecosystems. Using a multi-actor perspective, this study reveals how sports leagues can pursue innovative marketing strategies by considering the role of athlete brands, thereby offering new ways for fans and sponsors to engage with the sports league.

3.3.2 Literature review

3.3.2.1 Sports leagues within the brand ecosystem

Sports leagues comprise a governing body, affiliated teams/clubs, as well as individual actors (e.g., athletes, managers, and club officials). Within such a particular sport brand ecosystem co-branding is a consequence of passive spillover effects between actors (cf. Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Spillover effects imply that several actors co-exist within the same ecosystem impacting each other due to a transfer of brand meaning (Wong and Hung, 2023). This results both from collaborative actions and from being perceived by other actors as either vertically or horizontally connected (Baker et al., 2022), the latter including the outer brand ecosystem (e.g., sponsors, media) and the event brand ecosystem (e.g., events). Based on recent literature, there has been evidence that sport clubs have a major impact on customers' perception of a league. For instance, Kunkel et al. (2013) examined brand relationships between sports leagues and teams from a consumers' perspective, revealing brand architectures provide a reliable and valid tool for sport spectator segmentation. The authors found that three different drivers within the relationship of leagues and clubs influence consumers' involvement, loyalty and behavior. These drivers consisted of a league dominant driver, a team dominant driver, and a codominant driver. In addition, Kunkel et al. (2014) examined sports league development strategies recommended by consumers, revealing a close relationship between clubs and league.

Recent research draws on the logic of value co-creation (e.g., Buser et al., 2022; Woratschek et al., 2014a). Based on a multi-actor dominant logic, actors not only passively influence brand meaning through spillover effects, rather co-creation evolves through active resource integration. In particular, coaches, athletes, managers, sponsors, media outlets, broadcasters, and fans co-create the brand meaning of a league. Their collective actions, public narratives, endorsements, and engagements shape the league's identity, values, and overall perception (Anderski et al., 2023; Brand et al., 2023). Brand et al. (2023) introduced the Integrative Sport Brand Ecosystem extending the knowledge on brand meaning co-creation processes within sport ecosystems. This new perspective on brand ecosystems implies that the process of co-creation of brand meaning emerges between all actors involved assuming that brands, such as a sports league, cannot be built and controlled independently by the brand

owner. Instead, brands are considered as dynamic and social processes in which brand meaning emerges from interactions of different actors on various engagement platforms (Merz et al., 2009; Woratschek et al., 2014b). According to this perspective, brand meaning is not exclusively dictated by, for example, a sports league's brand management, rather it is constantly co-created through collaborative branding activities involving various actors such as fans, sponsors, media, clubs, athletes or other brands. In this dynamic process, different actors collaboratively contribute to shaping the perception, values, and identity of the league brand on various engagement platforms (Brand et al., 2023; Breidbach and Brodie, 2017; Brodie, 2017).

Characteristic forms of such engagement platforms in the context of a sports league are sporting events, such as league competitions or tournaments, which can be classified as offline engagement platforms. Heterogeneous actor networks, e.g., teams, athletes, sponsors or media, integrate and exchange resources in the context of a sporting competition (Buser et al., 2022; Grohs et al., 2020; Woratschek et al., 2014a). Athletes are key actors in these offline platforms, with their performances and personal branding creating emotional connections that resonate with fans and drive engagement. For example, athlete-focused fan meetings or athlete-led charity events provide direct interaction points, amplifying brand meaning through personal engagement (Bredikhina et al., 2022). However, the scope of engagement platforms within the context of sports leagues is broader and could also contain other offline platforms (e.g., press conferences, sponsoring events, fan meetings).

In addition, digital engagement platforms enable actors to interact publicly, freely accessible and directly on a global basis (Stegmann et al., 2021; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). Athlete brands are particularly effective on these digital platforms, because athletes often act as influential content creators, generating massive online engagement through personal updates, behind-the-scenes content, and user-generated interactions on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. These platforms allow athletes to communicate directly with their fan base, thus enhancing the co-creation of brand meaning by shaping the league's narrative in real time (Anderski et al., 2023). Based on the co-creation of brand meaning on these various engagement platforms, brand conductors must continuously adapt the brand identity based on the brand meanings that arise in these resource integrations and interactions, as both sub-processes are interrelated. Although brand identity is usually controlled by the brand owner, it must be constantly evaluated, updated, and then re-communicated. In particular, the ability of athlete brands to influence brand meaning on both offline and online engagement platforms requires brand conductors to be agile in their branding strategies, continuously aligning the league's identity with the evolving narratives shaped by these athlete-driven engagements.

Athletes with strong global or regional followings are ambassadors, creating culturally relevant connections with fans, media or sponsors by aligning their personal brands with the league's identity. Through localized social media campaigns, targeted content, and region-specific appearances, leagues can enhance their visibility and appeal in different markets. This global-local dynamic allows leagues to maintain a consistent global identity while adapting to cultural nuances. Moreover, athletes' digital presence on diverse and cross-cultural digital platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Weibo) enables deeper fan engagement and brand loyalty (Anderski et al., 2023). By co-creating content and experiences that reflect local interests, leagues can strengthen brand equity and foster authentic connections with international audiences. Understanding how athletes co-create a league's brand meaning is essential for crafting successful international marketing strategies.

3.3.2.2 International marketing initiatives of sports leagues

As sports leagues increasingly look beyond their domestic markets, international marketing initiatives are essential for expanding global reach and building lasting fan bases. These initiatives, including overseas events, digital engagement, and culturally tailored brand strategies, aim to capture the attention of diverse international audiences while fostering long-term loyalty. Recent research provides insight into the varied strategies sports leagues employ to achieve these goals. Nalbantis and Pawlowski (2023) provide a foundation for understanding how overseas exhibition games, particularly English Premier League (EPL) preseason tours, drive short-term consumer demand in foreign markets. Their findings show that these events significantly increase viewership and consumer willingness to pay for TV subscriptions, particularly in the U.S. market. However, their research also highlights the temporary nature of these effects, with consumer interest fading over time. This observation contrasts with the longer-lasting impact of brand-building strategies explored by Balachander and Ghose (2003). In their study, they examine how the advertising of brand extensions can create reciprocal spillover effects, where the success of the extension boosts the core brand and vice versa.

The importance of digital engagement as a parallel to live events is explored by Trivedi et al. (2021), whose study of the Pro-Kabaddi League in India shows how social media strategies can significantly enhance fan engagement. Their findings demonstrate that user-generated and firm-generated content can drive game attendance and purchase intentions, showing the critical role that digital platforms play in global fan engagement. This aligns with Koenig-Lewis et al. (2018), who also emphasize fan interaction. Their research shows that spectator-to-spectator interactions during sports events enhance satisfaction and team identification, driving word-of-

mouth promotion. Together, these studies underscore the need for sports leagues to integrate both digital and physical engagement strategies to build a comprehensive fan experience that sustains interest across various international markets.

Cultural adaptation is a key consideration in these international marketing initiatives. Ratten and Ratten (2011) emphasize the need for sport organizations to tailor their branding and corporate social responsibility efforts to the defining cultural and economic conditions of each market. This insight is expanded upon by Weisskopf and Urich (2024), who introduce the concept of bicultural brand positioning. Their study, focused on the NFL's international strategies, shows that blending home-country and target-country cultural elements can increase perceived brand authenticity and drive stronger fan engagement. This theme of cultural sensitivity is further echoed in the work of Behrens et al. (2022), who find significant differences in fan responses to brand positioning strategies in Germany and China. These studies collectively emphasize the critical importance of cultural adaptation in international marketing efforts. While Ratten and Ratten (2011) offer a broader perspective on the need for cultural relevance, Weisskopf and Urich (2024) and Behrens et al. (2022) provide specific examples of how leagues must tailor their approaches to international markets in order to attract a new fan base.

3.3.2.3 Increasing relevance of athlete brands

Our understanding of athlete brands is built upon Osorio et al. (2020), who presented a systematic conceptualization of personal and human brands. According to Moulard et al. (2015) and Shepherd (2005), individuals engage in daily self-branding activities to coach or manage themselves, particularly in contexts like job interviews or projects. Lair et al. (2005) and Parmentier et al. (2013) emphasize the utility of personal branding in presenting unique individual attributes and conveying specific messages. In contrast, human brands are linked to traditional marketing and brand attributes (Osorio et al., 2020). They result from a strategic process of building, developing, and nurturing the brand over time (Mogaji et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Driven by increased self-marketing and attention, individual personas are transformed into commercialized human brands (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2023). Human brands, such as entertainers, musicians, or digital influencers, encompass functions, associations, and characteristics linked to traditional brands, offering enhanced opportunities for identification and emotional engagement (Levesque and Pons, 2020; Arai et al., 2014). Contrary to personal brands, where the individual is in full control over the branding decisions, human brands experience co-creation by multiple actors in a dynamic branding

process, limiting the individual's control (Centeno and Wang, 2016; Anderski et al., 2023; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015). Rather than evolving organically, human brands are deliberately created through a strategic branding process that involves the development, maintenance and extension of the brand over time (Anderski et al., 2023).

Recent contributions in marketing and sport management literature highlight athlete brands as a unique and distinctive subset of human brands (Anderski et al., 2023; Bredikhina et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2023; Hasaan et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020). Athlete brands transcend the confines of traditional sports, extending their impact beyond conventional boundaries (Carlson and Donovan, 2013; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012). Athletes actively participate in shaping their individual brands, incorporating unique elements like icons or acronyms to establish symbolic meanings and values (Arai et al., 2014). Notably, professional athletes, exemplified by Cristiano Ronaldo's Instagram milestones, have ascended as highly successful human brands with substantial social media followers (Bredikhina et al., 2022; Garcia, 2022). Due to the digital transformation, social media has evolved into a key platform superboosting athlete branding, facilitating direct engagement with diverse actors, such as fans, media, clubs, associations or non-sports related participants and thus increasing their relevance within the sport brand ecosystem (Na et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2020; Cocco et al., 2023). Athletes utilize platforms like Instagram or TikTok for unfiltered interactions with fans, sponsors, media, and fellow athletes, signifying a shift in media presence and communication dynamics (Su et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Hofmann et al., 2021).

In today's sports landscape, athletes have become key drivers of international league marketing, leveraging their influence far beyond the field. As global brands with substantial social media followings, endorsement deals, and personal narratives (Anderski et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2020; Taniyev and Gordon, 2022), athletes play a crucial role in expanding a league's visibility in international markets. Their star power not only attracts their own fan base but also serves to increase global awareness of the league itself. By sharing their personal stories of success and perseverance, athletes create emotional connections with fans that transcend borders, fostering deeper loyalty not just to the athlete but to the league they represent. Star athletes often become the face of the league, drawing the attention of their personal fan base and consequently increasing the league's profile in global markets (Richelieu, 2008). Bodet et al. (2020) highlights the significant role of star athletes in attracting international fans. Among the key attraction factors, star players emerged as one of the most influential. The presence of these athletes enhances the global appeal of football clubs, making them more attractive to foreign markets. This underscores the critical role athletes play in shaping international fan

engagement and driving the global brand expansion of sports clubs. Through their sporting performances, personal behaviors, and off-field activities, athletes can act as ambassadors amplifying the league's brand, engaging new fans, leveraging stadium attendance, and attracting new markets (Shapiro et al., 2017). Fans who initially follow athletes for their personal appeal often develop a deeper connection with the league, thereby expanding its reach and fostering broader engagement (Richelieu, 2008; Richelieu and Webb, 2021). As such, athlete brands can significantly contribute to the co-creation of a league's brand meaning.

With regard to previous literature, so far, research focused only on single star players, such as Shapiro et al. (2017) indicated David Beckham's positive impact on MLS stadium attendance and the league's brand equity, confirming previous results of Jewell (2017). In addition, practical cases such as the impact of South Korean footballer Son Heung-min's transfer to the English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur underline our research aim. Son Heung-min's popularity in South Korea has led to approximately 12 million people, nearly a quarter of the entire population, becoming fans of his club Tottenham Hotspur and the EPL. Son's achievements also serve as a catalyst for grassroots development programs and youth academies across Asia, motivating young players to pursue careers in professional football and showcasing the potential of Asian talent on the international stage (McIntosh, 2022; Eccleshare, 2022). These findings suggest that the spillover effect of athlete brands on leagues can be profound, as star athletes not only attract local attention but also serve as pivotal figures in international marketing efforts. This showcases the capacity of athlete brands to not only enhance league visibility but also contribute to its international expansion by attracting diverse markets and fostering cultural connections across regions (Richelieu, 2008). Based on these considerations, we aim to further extend previous findings acknowledging the potential influence of athletes on marketing efforts of leagues (Daniels et al., 2019) by examining how brand meaning can be co-created focusing on athlete brands. We specifically investigate how these athlete-driven brand strategies can enhance the international marketing reach of leagues, contributing to global market reach and fan behaviour, while also helping to establish cultural relevance in new regions.

3.3.3 Methods

3.3.3.1 Research design

Considering that this study is among the first to examine how athlete brands co-create brand meaning of a sports league brand, we adopted an exploratory research design and a qualitative single case study approach. We examined the potential of athlete brands to support

the marketing of the German Football Bundesliga in Asia. The Bundesliga differs from other top leagues in terms of league structure, financial principles and fan engagement strategies. Unlike the EPL and its high-profile international transfers, the Bundesliga prioritizes the development of local talents via its renowned youth academies. In addition, the Bundesliga is characterized by the exceptional "50+1 rule", a governance structure that ensures majority fan ownership and finance regulations of the clubs (Schubert et al., 2016). Thus, the Bundesliga has remarkable attendance records, co-creating a unique atmosphere in the stadiums (Oediger, 2023; Woratschek et al., 2014b). While the EPL is often associated with high finance and takeovers by international investors, the Bundesliga's commitment to grassroots development, as well as fan and stakeholder engagement, leads to a distinctive identity in European football (Wagner et al., 2022). The Bundesliga's strategic focus on the Asian market underscores the league's efforts to expand beyond the traditional German/European fan base. The Bundesliga is the leading league for Asian players, with the highest number of Asian athletes compared to any other European football league. Therefore, the Asian market, with its rising football interest, growing middle class, and increasing investment in sports, presents a significant opportunity for the Bundesliga to expand its global footprint.

3.3.3.2 Data collection and sample description

We conducted 17 interviews with executives from the Bundesliga governing body and its international offices, Bundesliga clubs, and media partners. The interviewees were located both in Germany and in Asia. The selection of interview partners was reflected by theoretical considerations in recent literature (e.g., actors within the sports brand ecosystem; actors identified in brand meaning co-creation literature), preliminary advice from Bundesliga, and insights gained from the ongoing iterative interview process. The interviewed media actors were all based in Asia, specifically in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Indonesia. These media actors were chosen because they hold the broadcasting rights for the German Bundesliga in key target markets across the Asia-Pacific region. Although we acknowledge that we have not included all relevant actor groups (e.g., fans, sponsors or athletes), we deliberately focused on a limited number of actors to improve the feasibility of the in-depth thematic analysis, and also promote a more detailed and insightful set of practical recommendations. The decision to exclusively interview the league, clubs, and media executives was driven by a sport governance perspective aimed at elucidating the distinct roles and responsibilities to shape the internationalisation of the German Bundesliga. League governing bodies play a pivotal role in establishing league-wide policies, overseeing compliance with international standards, and setting strategic directions for marketing endeavours. Clubs, as integral components of the

league structure, contribute to marketing efforts through their engagement with fans, development of brand partnerships, and implementation of localized promotional activities, such as media campaigns or promotion tours. Additionally, media organizations are crucial intermediaries, responsible for broadcasting matches, generating content, and amplifying the league's visibility across diverse platforms. By applying this triangular approach, we captured a diverse and comprehensive range of perspectives. Table I provides an overview of interview and participant characteristics.

No.	Date	Length	Actor	Classification	Profession
1	19.06.2023	28 min	Club	1 st Division	Senior Manager Sales
2	20.06.2023	30 min	Club	1 st Division	Senior Manager Communication
3	21.06.2023	40 min	Club	1 st Division	Head of Asia & Pacific
4	21.06.2023	46 min	Club	1 st Division	CCO
5	21.06.2023	29 min	Media	Broadcasting Indonesia	CCO
6	22.06.2023	40 min	Club	1 st Division	Marketing Manager
7	23.06.2023	39 min	Club	1 st Division	Senior Marketing Manager
8	24.06.2023	43 min	Media	Broadcasting Republic of Korea	Marketing Manager
9	26.06.2023	29 min	Media	Broadcasting Japan	Manager Sports Business
10	27.06.2023	27 min	Club	1 st Division	Marketing Manager
11	27.06.2023	22 min	Club	2 nd Division	Senior Marketing Manager
12	06.07.2023	34 min	Club	2 nd Division	Senior Manager Communication
13	13.07.2023	33 min	Association	HQ New York City	Senior Manager Content Creation
14	17.07.2023	24 min	Association	HQ Beijing	Marketing Manager
15	18.07.2023	23 min	Association	HQ Singapore	Head of Asia & Pacific
16	19.07.2023	25 min	Association	HQ Germany	Senior Marketing Manager
17	08.09.2023	25 min	Association	HQ Germany	Social Media Manager
ø average length		32 min			

Table 3.3-1: Interview and participant characteristics

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions provided sufficient freedom for additional comments and aspects. The interview guide was pre-tested with the league management and comprised three main sections. First, actors were asked about the sport brand ecosystem of the German Bundesliga, including questions about relevant actors and platforms. The second section focused on athlete brands and their role within the ecosystem. Questions regarding existing and future collaboration, the importance of local Asian athletes, as well as their potential for the international league marketing were addressed. Based on the theoretical framework of integrative branding, interviewees were asked about social interactions and resource integration within the ecosystem to co-create brand meaning of the league. This part included questions regarding the usage of various digital platforms and future fan engagement activities. In the third section, we explored the mutual interactions and joint collaborations between other actors (e.g., clubs, sponsors or media), followed by broader questions on current challenges and future opportunities regarding the international marketing of the league. Questions were adapted slightly depending on the actor questioned. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were afforded the opportunity to delve into additional topics of interest and engage in open discussion.

Data collection was conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams between June and September 2023. The duration of the interviews varied between 22 and 46 minutes, with an average length of 32 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewees.

3.3.3.3 Data analysis

We used qualitative inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Hence, we applied open and inductive codes to structure and categorize the raw data. At Phase 1 of the analysis, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data. This step included taking notes and writing down first impressions. During Phase 2, initial codes were generated to systematically structure the dataset. To ensure credibility, consistency, and quality of the findings, two researchers coded and structured all data independently using MAXQDA 24 (Lombard et al., 2002; O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Coder I recorded 568 codings, while coder II registered 587 codings across all 17 interviews. Researcher triangulation was carried out to minimize the influence of the personal biases of coders (Tobin and Begley, 2004). This consisted of 1,155 codings in total across 40 unique codes. To ensure the quality of the data, intercoder reliability was determined for the entire data set. The intercoder reliability of $r = .85$ indicated a good match (Perreault and Leigh, 1989). In

Phase 3, the researchers searched for themes and reviewed them (Phase 4) in relation to the findings of Phase 1 and Phase 2. In this phase, the second independent researcher was used to minimize the influence of personal bias. Subsequently, themes were developed and named in Phase 5, resulting in a preliminary number of seven different categories. In Phase 6, themes were peer-checked by two independent researchers and discussed with the authors. During Phase 6, four final themes were selected and named to structure the findings of the study. This step aims to generate clear and precise definitions to address the aforementioned research gaps with the literature. Lastly, descriptive quotes from the raw data were extracted by the authors to better illustrate the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data collection and analysis was conducted in its original language and corresponding quotations were subsequently translated into English. Figure 1 provides an overview of the data analysis procedure.

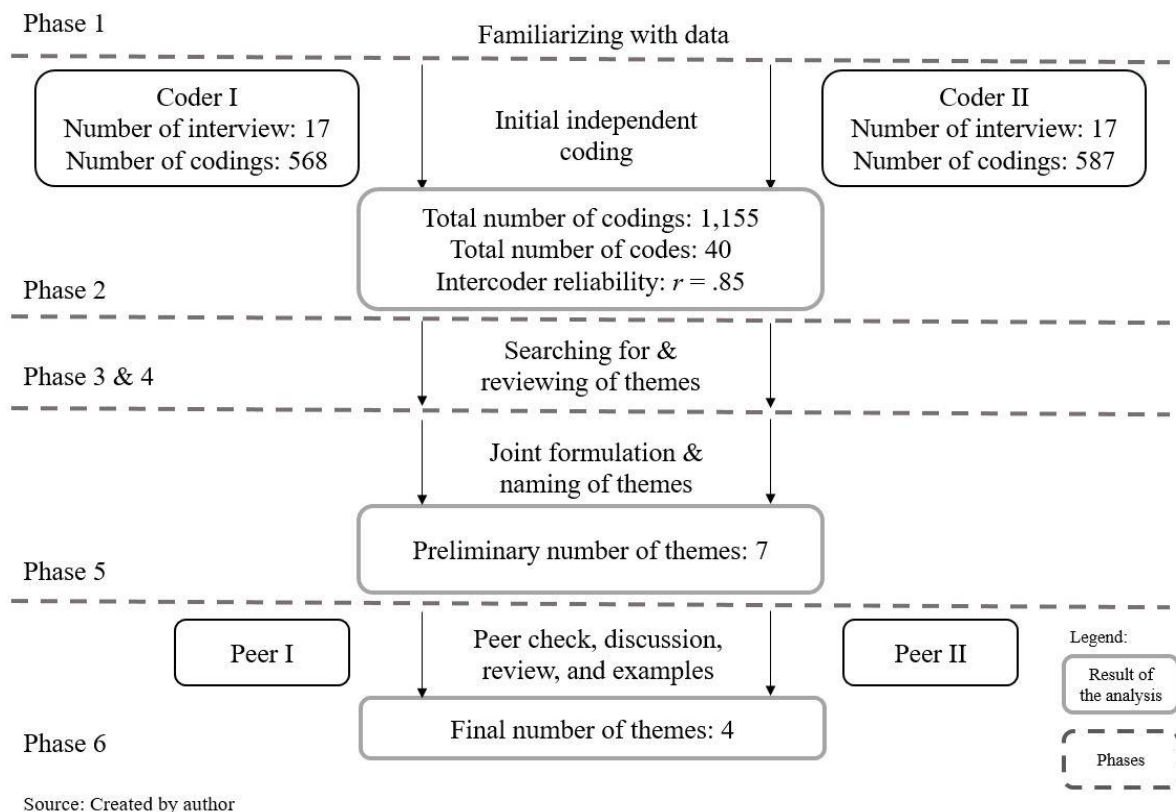


Figure 3.3-1: Data analysis procedure

3.3.4 Findings

3.3.4.1 Role of athlete brands in international league marketing

In contrast to previous studies, the findings attest to a diversified role of athlete brands in the context of international marketing of a domestic league. Athletes are embracing the internet as their primary platform for engaging with fans worldwide. Through digital channels, they share not only their athletic achievements but also their unique personalities and compelling narratives. In so doing, sports fans in international markets in particular have started to identify strongly with individual athletes, regardless of which club they play for. These effects can be especially seen among younger target groups, such as Generation Z. Fans, particularly in international markets, are increasingly identifying with athletes independently of teams, which marks a contrast to previous research on fan identification (e.g., Wu et al., 2012; Yoshida et al., 2015).

“We are aware that the younger generations, in particular Gen Z, are more likely to follow and identify with individual players than with certain clubs.” (Head of Asia & Pacific, Club, 1st Division, 21.06.2023)

This shift in fan identification and fan behaviour, especially among younger generations like Gen Z, demonstrates that fans are more attached to individual athletes than the clubs they represent. This becomes particularly evident for Bundesliga’s international marketing in Asia as they primarily have focused on promoting through club level in the brand ecosystem making use of summer tours, media partnerships, and sponsorships. Similarly, two club representatives concluded that fans are more likely to follow the players, which highlights their role within the international marketing of leagues:

“If [athlete] will be transferred to [club], for example, then fans would also follow him or her to [club]. The Asian football market is predominantly player-focused.”

(Senior Manager Communication, Club, 2nd Division, 06.07.2023)

“I mean, fans always follow the players, never the club. [...] It’s that way all over the world and I do not think this will ever change.”

(Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 27.06.2023)

In international league marketing, it is not only the identification with any player that leads to the co-creation of brand meaning of sports leagues, but in particular, the data shows evidence for a “local player” factor describing the identification of fans with athletes from their own country or region. Driven by national pride or consumer ethnocentrism (e.g., Storm and

Jakobsen, 2020; Shankarmahesh, 2006), Asian fans often prioritize supporting their local heroes, even if they are not playing for the best and most successful teams in the league:

“If you look at the statistics in the international markets, you sometimes wonder why this game is now in the top three. You will notice that two Japanese players are playing against each other and that this is sometimes rated higher by the fans than, for example, the top match of FC Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund. Simply because the local player factor and the identification with these athletes is so high in these markets.”

(Senior Marketing Manager, Association, HQ Germany, 19.07.2023)

This quote highlights, fan interest in Asia is heavily tied to individual athletes, particularly local stars. When high-profile Asian players are present in the Bundesliga, fan engagement in the Asian market flourishes. Therefore, athlete brands possess the potential to attract new international markets, also drawing the interest of new sponsors for the league, expanding media partnerships with new league broadcasters, and attracting a broader fan base:

“When he joined us [German Bundesliga], we suddenly gained massive interest in Asia. [...] That opened the doors for us to attract new markets. The interest was there. People suddenly knew the Bundesliga and [club]. [...] Over the years it has of course become more difficult to find local partners, now that we no longer have any Japanese or Asian players in the squad, definitely!” (Head of Asia & Pacific, Club, 1st Division, 21.06.2023)

Without these players, maintaining local partnerships becomes more challenging. This presents an opportunity for the Bundesliga to shift its strategy, leveraging star athletes directly as the primary point of connection for Asian fans, rather than relying on clubs. By focusing on athlete brands, the Bundesliga can establish stronger media partnerships and sponsorship deals centered around players, enhancing its presence in Asia and building deeper fan engagement without depending solely on clubs as intermediaries. However, putting athletes in the center of (international) marketing strategies is also risky. Beyond the risk of injury and poor performance (which can be reinforced by the high expectations) there is the possibility of player transfers to another league, and the consequential decline in fan, media, and sponsor interest. This is particularly evident in those international markets, such as Asia, where fans are more likely to follow individual athletes than the clubs or the Bundesliga itself.

3.3.4.2 Brand meaning co-creation of sports league brands

Fans build, develop, and maintain a deep emotional connection to specific athletes, associating the qualities, values and narratives embodied by these athletes with the league's brand and thus co-creating its meaning through their interactions and resource integrations on

various platforms. The identification with athletes leads to fan behavior such as following them on social media, engaging with their content, and ultimately connecting with the league they represent. As fans interact with athlete-driven content, they are exposed to the league's values, traditions, and overall narrative, influencing their perception and loyalty toward the league. By sharing personal stories, match highlights, and other content, athletes shape fans' perceptions of both the club and the league. This is evident when local players participate in significant moments, which fans associate not only with the player or the club but with the league as a whole:

“At [our club] it's really the case that the Japanese players also transfer their values to our club. That's because [athlete] and [athlete] have been involved in crucial situations of our clubs' history [...]. I truly believe that with these experiences, which fans will always remember, the values of these players are transferred to [club] and the league.”

(Senior Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 23.06.2023)

“[Athlete] lives for [club]. He is a best practice example of the super positive, very professional attitude over years. I think all of that also contributes [...] to the [clubs'] brand and the German Bundesliga itself.” (Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 27.06.2023)

Athletes contribute to shaping the narrative and image of the league they represent. By sharing sports-related content such as match day features, highlights, and goals, athletes not only showcase their own performances but also highlight the excitement and competitiveness of the league. This type of content not only reinforces the league's values, traditions, and unique aspects but also fosters a sense of belonging among fans, strengthening their connection to the league's brand:

“I believe that it really is the case that the players also transfer their values. The fact that [player], but also [player], were involved in, I would say, forward-looking situations. So not this season, but last season, where [player] crossed the ball and [player] shot the ball into the goal in the 94th minute and [club] stayed in the 1st division of the German Bundesliga. I think with stories like that, experiences like that - it stays as spill over in people's minds forever.” (Senior Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 23.06.2023)

The Bundesliga, the European league with the most appearances and goals scored by Asian players, greatly benefits from the strong fan identification with these athletes. The memorable moments and personal stories of local players resonate deeply with international audiences, creating lasting emotional connections and positive brand associations for the league. Stories of pivotal, high-pressure performances by players, as seen in this quote, reinforce the values

these athletes represent—resilience, determination, and commitment—which are transferred to the Bundesliga’s brand in the minds of fans. Athletes’ influence goes beyond club loyalty, shaping the overall narrative and identity of the Bundesliga.

Additionally, athletes’ personal stories and experiences can humanize the league brand, making it more relatable and resonant with younger audiences. This includes the usage of innovative technologies, such as virtual and artificial reality to provide a new and unique fan experience:

“The league must collaborate with athletes to create content that reflects both the league's overarching brand and the unique characteristics of individual athlete brands. This could include promotional videos, social media posts, interviews, and behind-the-scenes footage that showcase the partnership between the league and its athletes. In addition, new fan experiences must be developed to reach younger audiences.”

(Senior Marketing Manager, Association, HQ Germany, 19.07.2023)

However, as it comes with brand meaning co-creation, the Bundesliga is shifting control to the athletes, which are prone to personal and professional controversies which can also damage the leagues’s reputation. The rise of social media intensifies this risk, where a single misstep can be amplified and rapidly spread.

3.3.4.3 Prevailing conditions and effects of brand meaning co-creation in international league marketing

Fans’ identification with individual athlete brands goes beyond mere admiration for their athletic performance, rather it relies on a deep alignment with the values and identity that the athlete represents. Athletes are not just performers on the field, rather they are symbols of certain ideals, attitudes and principles that resonate with fans on a personal level. In the pursuit of enduring success, the league and its clubs are tasked with identifying athletes whose sporting achievements harmonize with the organization’s core values and unique identity. Therefore it is crucial, that these values and attributes of all actors involved match the characteristics in the respective target markets in order to foster the brand meaning co-creation process:

“Our priority is to empower specific athletes and to foster the grow internationally. Specifically tailored to the requirements of the local market, with the values and characteristics that are essential in the local market.”

(CCO, Media, Broadcasting Asia, 21.06.2023)

In the context of the German Bundesliga, the league's endeavor to facilitate brand meaning co-creation necessitates the identification of key athletes who epitomize the values and ethos intrinsic to the league. This selection process extends beyond mere athletic capabilities to encompass a nuanced understanding of the Bundesliga's unique characteristics, such as its emphasis on community engagement, youth development, and tradition. Athletes chosen to represent the league must align with these specificities, embodying qualities such as humility, dedication, and teamwork that are revered within the Bundesliga culture. For instance, the Bundesliga's renowned 50+1 ownership rule underscores a commitment to fan involvement and grassroots engagement, making it imperative for selected athletes to resonate with these principles, both on and off the field. The overlap between the values and identity embodied by key athletes and those emblematic of the Bundesliga fosters a synergistic environment empowering to the brand meaning co-creation process. As athletes align with the league's core values, they become not only ambassadors for their respective clubs but also catalysts for amplifying the Bundesliga brand. By emphasizing these shared values, such as teamwork, determination, passion or community engagement in marketing campaigns and messaging, the league and the athletes contribute to co-create the league's brand meaning:

"The character of the athlete has to fit the character of the league and the respective clubs [...] If a new player is to be transferred and you think he has the right character for the team and fits the Bundesliga, you obviously want to use these values and attributes to promote the club and the whole league on an international level. [...] And I think a prime example of this was [athlete], who I think just absolutely absorbed these German values and combined it with the characteristics of [club]." (CCO, Club, 1st Division, 21.06.2023)

As shown in the quote above, for the Bundesliga it is fundamental to balance the marketing activities via athlete brands with league-wide narratives. Otherwise, the league is risking that they will focus too heavily on individual athletes, neglecting other aspects of their brand identity, such as history, tradition, or community engagement.

3.3.4.4 Impact within the Bundesliga's brand ecosystem

By strategically collaborating with athlete brands, the Bundesliga can profit from the popularity and influence of athletes to leverage the Bundesliga's attractiveness and position itself as a premier destination for top-tier football. Athletes serve as powerful ambassadors for the league, attracting attention from various actors within the sports leagues' ecosystem, such as fans, media, other athlete brands and sponsors.

"You can really say that [athlete] was the door opener for the internationalization of the Bundesliga in Asia." [Athlete] created a massive hype - sponsors, media, agencies, and of course the fans – all were interested in the Bundesliga.

(Head of Asia & Pacific, Club, 1st Division, 21.06.2023)

The collaborative efforts of athletes, sponsors, media, and other actors within the brand ecosystem contribute to the ongoing co-creation of the Bundesliga's brand meaning, aiming for continued success and resonance in the continuously changing landscape of international football. The presence of athlete brands can catalyze collaborations and partnerships with sponsors seeking to associate themselves with high-profile athletes and the Bundesliga as a whole. Sponsors recognize the value of aligning their brand with successful and marketable athletes, thereby enhancing their own brand visibility and credibility. This symbiotic relationship between athletes, sponsors, and the Bundesliga creates a dynamic ecosystem where each actor reinforces and amplifies the brand meaning co-creation process. In addition, their interactions with fans and fellow athletes contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning within the Bundesliga ecosystem, shaping perceptions of the league as inclusive, innovative, and community-driven.

Despite being competing clubs within the same league, there is significant potential for different athlete brands to collaborate and enhance the international marketing efforts of the league. The collaborative efforts of athletes, sponsors, media, and other actors within the brand ecosystem contribute to the ongoing co-creation of the Bundesliga's brand meaning, aiming for continued success and resonance in the continuously changing landscape of international football. However, this collaboration is currently not happening due to competitive pressures and the individual interests of each club:

"The answer is no. There are currently no collaborations with other clubs."

(CCO, Club, 1st Division, 21.06.2023)

"No, not with other Bundesliga clubs at the moment. It is definitely an idea, but not something we are currently considering."

(Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 22.06.2023)

"Actually, we do not build official partnerships with other Bundesliga clubs."

(Marketing Manager, Club, 1st Division, 27.06.2023)

The lack of collaboration between clubs of the German Bundesliga in international marketing creates missed opportunities. Clubs often focus on their individual interests, and never establish a unified marketing strategy with other clubs and the league. From the league's

brand perspective, such cooperation could be highly beneficial, as sponsors recognize the value of aligning their brand with successful and marketable athletes, thereby enhancing their own brand visibility and credibility. This symbiotic relationship between athletes, sponsors, and the Bundesliga creates a dynamic ecosystem where each actor reinforces and amplifies the brand meaning co-creation process. A more collaborative approach between clubs, athletes, and the league would create stronger, more cohesive campaigns that benefit all stakeholders. In addition, their interactions with fans and fellow athletes contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning within the Bundesliga ecosystem, shaping perceptions of the league as inclusive, innovative, and community-driven.

3.3.5 Discussion

3.3.5.1 Theoretical contributions

Firstly, our study contributes to the understanding of athlete brands' role in the co-creation of sports league brands within the sport brand ecosystem (Brand et al., 2023). Athletes, transcend traditional boundaries of sports and actively participate in shaping the identity and meaning of the leagues they represent. Through strategic branding efforts and active engagement on digital platforms, athletes leverage their influence to connect with diverse actors, including fans, sponsors, media, and fellow athletes (Anderski et al., 2023). This dynamic interaction facilitates the co-creation of brand meaning, as athletes integrate their personal narratives, values, and characteristics with those of the league's brand. By aligning their brands with the ethos and values of the league, athletes contribute to the co-creation of a positive and authentic brand, fostering emotional connections and loyalty among fans. Moreover, athletes' international appeal and global reach amplify the league's brand visibility and resonance, attracting new markets, sponsors, and fans. Therefore, our study contributes to the increasing relevance of athlete brands (e.g., Bredikhina et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2014).

Secondly, this study revealed specific branding strategies focusing on individual athletes to promote international marketing of a sports leagues: By strategic storytelling, the Bundesliga can highlight the unique journeys and achievements of its athletes, creating compelling narratives that resonate with a global audience. Engagement initiatives, such as interactive fan experiences and social media campaigns, can deepen the connection between the league, its athletes, and its fans, fostering a loyal and engaged international fan base. Collaborations between athletes and the league, whether through joint marketing campaigns or co-created merchandise, foster enduring connections with fans on a global basis.

Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of recognizing individual athlete brands as key drivers of fan identification, especially among younger target groups and in international markets. Contrary to previous research that often overlooked the influence of athlete brands, this study underscores their significant impact on fans' emotional connections and identification, thus emphasizing their pivotal role in co-creating the meaning of sports league brands. Although fans can develop psychological connections to numerous sport objects, such as the sport itself, a coach, a specific competition or an athlete (e.g., Wu et al., 2012; Yoshida et al. 2015), research so far has neglected the club- or league-related consequences of athlete brand identification.

Lastly, our study emphasized the high relevance of fit between the league and the athlete brands that are involved in international league marketing or the necessity to proactively engage in creating a fit. The data emphasizes that an athlete's character and brand should resonate with the ethos and values of the clubs and the Bundesliga itself, highlighting the nested structure of the various brands (cf. Baker et al., 2022). When a player embodies these shared values, they become more than just a representative on the field; they become ambassadors for the league's identity, shaping its brand narrative through their actions. Individual athletes can therefore represent the entire league, regardless of the club they play for.

3.3.5.2 Managerial implications

First, it is crucial to understand the role of individual athlete brands in driving fan identification, especially among younger audiences. Brand managers should capitalize on this by creating personalized, data-driven marketing campaigns that connect athletes with specific audience segments, leveraging digital platforms such as Instagram, X, or TikTok, while using AI-powered tools (e.g., chatbots or virtual assistants) to deliver tailored content that resonates with these audiences. Our research reveals that fans, particularly those in international markets, often form strong emotional connections with specific athletes regardless of the club they play for. This presents an opportunity for brand managers to capitalize on the popularity of these athletes to attract and engage fans, media or sponsors on a global scale. An innovative approach could involve building digital ecosystems around star athletes by offering interactive experiences such as virtual reality (VR) events or exclusive content through NFTs (e.g., virtual meet-and-greets or NFT-based collectibles), transforming these connections into monetizable opportunities. By strategically aligning the league's brand and marketing efforts with the values and narratives embodied by these athletes, brand managers can foster deeper connections with fans, attract new sponsors and cooperate with local broadcasters to enhance the overall brand

experience. Moreover, brand managers must carefully select athletes who not only excel on the field but also resonate with the core values and ethos of the Bundesliga. By ensuring alignment between athlete brands and the league's brand identity, brand managers can strengthen brand authenticity and credibility, thereby enhancing fan loyalty. This can empower fans to subscribe to streaming services, attending matches or to purchase merchandise (e.g., collaborations between athletes and streaming platforms offering exclusive content or limited co-branded merchandise).

In addition to brand managers, clubs can leverage the popularity and influence of their athletes to enhance brand visibility and appeal. By strategically collaborating with athletes to create compelling content and engage with fans on digital platforms, clubs can amplify the league's brand presence and foster deeper connections with fans. This could include athlete-driven content such as behind-the-scenes footage shared on social media, personalized videos for fans, or exclusive interviews for club websites. Sponsors and media partners can benefit from aligning themselves with high-profile athletes and the Bundesliga as a whole. By associating their brands with successful athletes and the league's brand, sponsors can enhance brand visibility and credibility, while media partners can attract new audiences and increase viewership in new markets (e.g., partnerships with global media outlets or streaming services to showcase star athletes and exclusive content such as documentaries). It is crucial to consider digital engagement platforms (e.g., social media channels) as enablers and facilitators for the co-creation of brand meaning.

Lastly, integrating the use of several athletes from different clubs to follow the combined goal of marketing the league as a whole presents a strategic approach to address the challenges of cooperation among Bundesliga clubs. Despite the inherent competition between clubs, leveraging the collective influence of athletes can significantly enhance the visibility and appeal of the league. For example, clubs could organize cross-promotional campaigns featuring prominent athletes from different teams, highlighting the unity and diversity within the Bundesliga. These campaigns could include joint appearances (e.g., charity events, preseason tours or fan festivals), endorsements (launch of special merchandise), and social media collaborations (e.g., challenges, live streams, user-generated content), showcasing the shared values and excitement of Bundesliga football. Moreover, international tours featuring athletes from various clubs could be organized to engage with fans in key markets and promote the league's global appeal.

Theoretically and practically, the study also underscores the risks of emphasising athlete brands in international league marketing. A reliance on individual athletes is problematic given the possibility of transfer or controversy, and the inevitability of retirement. Theoretically, this highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how athlete-driven branding strategies can both enhance and destabilize sports leagues' brand ecosystems. A league marketing strategy ought to be able to withstand the ramifications of player movements. Clubs and leagues must also be cautious of fragmented efforts, as competition between clubs can dilute the overall impact of league branding, which requires more collaborative and cohesive approaches to maintain consistency and stability across markets. All these risks should encourage a league to pursue a diversified marketing strategy.

3.3.6 Limitations and future research

Our research adopted a single case study approach, focusing on the German Bundesliga. To avoid individual case exceptions and ensure external validity and generalizability, future research should incorporate multiple case studies involving other leagues across different countries, cultures, and sports. Future research should address women's sports as well as female athlete brands. Whilst our qualitative approach provided in-depth insights, it does not capture the full spectrum of perspectives within the leagues' ecosystem. We acknowledge that sample size and composition of participants may have influenced the scope and depth of the insights obtained. Including a more diverse range of actors in future research could provide a more nuanced understanding. Our study was cross-sectional and made no effort to explore changes or developments over time. Longitudinal research that tracks athlete branding strategies and their impact on sports league brands may provide insights into its dynamic nature. Furthermore, quantitative methods, such as surveys with fans or experiments with athlete brands, could serve to validate and complement the qualitative data obtained from interviews, enhancing the reliability and robustness of our findings.

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3.4 The Effect of Player Nationality and Club Level on Fan Behaviour: An Experimental Study

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At the time of publication of this dissertation, this research article has been under review in *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. Thus, I provide an extended abstract.

Extended Abstract

This study builds on and extends the findings of Anderski et al. (2024), which explored the role of athletes in the international marketing of professional sports leagues, with a focus on the German Bundesliga and in Asia. Building on these challenges and opportunities, this study examines how a player's nationality and club level influence fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) among international fans of the German Bundesliga, with a particular focus on Chinese fans. As international fan bases become increasingly vital for the global expansion of sports leagues, understanding these drivers in international markets is essential. Our study, therefore, addresses the research question: *What impact does a player's nationality and club level have on the fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) of Bundesliga fans in China?* To investigate these dynamics, we conducted a 2x2 quasi-experimental design using fictitious, AI-generated social media posts simulating player transfers (Chinese player vs. German player) to different Bundesliga clubs (1st tier vs. 2nd tier). This design allows us to analyze the effects of both player nationality and club level on fan behaviour, offering actionable insights for sports leagues aiming to strengthen their appeal in international markets.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically to marketing and sports management research by exploring the effects of player nationality and club level on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) in an international sports league context. Theoretically, it expands research on SIT by applying the concepts to athletes in global sports leagues, offering novel insights into how international fan engagement functions in a globalized sports industry. Practically, the findings provide strategic insights for sports leagues and clubs seeking to expand their international fan base. Additionally, this study demonstrates how leagues can adopt innovative marketing strategies that leverage athlete brands to foster fan behaviour and purchase intentions in international markets.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a framework for understanding how individuals categorize and define themselves based on their group affiliations (Tajfel et al., 1979). In the sports context, SIT has been widely used to investigate how fans' behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) are shaped by their identification with specific groups, including teams, players, or fan communities (Heere & James, 2007; Katz et al., 2020; Winand et al., 2021). Fans often exhibit strong identification and loyalty toward their favorite teams and players, which influences their behaviour and perceptions in both sports and broader social settings (Ströbel et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2023). SIT underscores how social environments, shared norms, and cultural backgrounds can significantly shape fan behaviour and purchasing

decisions. SIT's application is particularly relevant for league marketing because it explains how fan behaviour can extend beyond individual teams to the league itself, with fans identifying with the league brand as a broader entity that represents shared values, cultural connections, and social belonging (Lock & Heere, 2017). In our research context, SIT supports the use of individual players as cultural and national symbols that bridge the league to new fan bases.

The study utilised a participant pool of Bundesliga fans in China, specifically targeting individuals who currently have or previously held a subscription to broadcast services of the Bundesliga. The Bundesliga had access to the participants' contact details through their subscription records, allowing the league and its Asia-based partners to reach out directly via email, Weibo, and WeChat, China's two most prominent social media platforms. Initially developed in English, the survey was professionally translated into Chinese (Mandarin) to ensure clarity and avoid language barriers. The survey was distributed from May 26th to June 16th 2024. The survey period was strategically selected to occur after the Bundesliga season, minimizing potential biases related to ongoing matches or league standings.

Out of an initial total of 1,360 responses, 667 valid responses were retained for analysis after applying strict data quality measures, including manipulation checks, attention checks, and the exclusion of incomplete responses. We conducted an online scenario-based experiment to test our hypotheses. We implemented a factorial 2 (player nationality: German vs. Chinese) x 2 (club level: 1st tier club vs. 2nd tier club) between-subjects design to examine the effects of player nationality and club level on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) among Chinese fans of the German Bundesliga. Data was subsequently transferred to IBM SPSS Statistic 29, and data analysis was carried out according to the conventional procedures. The experimental stimulus for this study consisted of four different AI-generated social media posts designed to simulate an official transfer announcement by the German Bundesliga's Instagram account. AI-generated social media posts were used to ensure experimental control by standardizing content and isolating key variables. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2x2 between-subjects design, varying by country of origin of the player (German vs. Chinese) and club level of the German Bundesliga (FC Bayern Munich, a 1st tier club, vs. FC St. Pauli, a 2nd tier club). The selection of FC Bayern Munich and FC St. Pauli reflects a deliberate contrast in club level and positioning. FC Bayern Munich is Germany's most successful and internationally recognized top-tier club, while FC St. Pauli - although competing in the 2nd division - has spent the last decade as one of the most established clubs at that level.

A MANCOVA was conducted to examine the effects of player nationality and club level on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional), while controlling for key covariates, which yielded insightful results. As summarized in Table 1, significant main effects were observed for both experimental conditions. However, no significant interaction effect between player nationality and club level was found, indicating that their effects on fan behaviour operate independently. Specifically, the effect of player nationality on fan behaviour (non-transactional) was significant ($F(1, 504) = 6.54, p = .011, \eta^2 = .013$), indicating that the nationality of the player influences how Chinese fans engage with the German Bundesliga and its clubs. Similarly, for fan behaviour (transactional), the player nationality effect revealed significant results ($F(1, 504) = 9.05, p = .003, \eta^2 = .018$), reinforcing H1. These results demonstrate that Chinese fans are more likely to show specific types of non-transactional fan behaviour (following on social media, recommendations to family and friends) with the German Bundesliga and exhibit stronger transactional fan behaviour (such as subscribing to streaming services, attending matches, buying merchandise) when a player from their home country joins the German Bundesliga. In addition, the club level yielded significant effects on both dependent variables.

Similarly, the club level effect on non-transactional fan behaviour was significant ($F(1, 504) = 25.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .048$), indicating that Chinese fans are more likely to be interested in top-tier clubs (e.g., FC Bayern Munich) than lower-tier clubs (e.g., FC St. Pauli), thereby supporting H2. Likewise, the effect of club level on transactional fan behaviour was significant ($F(1, 504) = 16.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .031$), further supporting H2.

Furthermore, there was no significant interaction effect between player nationality and club level for both non-transactional fan behaviour ($F(1, 504) = .680, p = .410, \eta^2 = .001$) and transactional fan behaviour ($F(1, 504) = .752, p = .386, \eta^2 = .001$), leading to the rejection of H3. These findings indicate that while both the player's nationality and the club's tier independently influence fan behaviour, their combined effect does not generate any significant interaction. Thus, Chinese fans' interest to the nationality of the player remain consistent, regardless of whether the player joins a top-tier or lower-tier Bundesliga club. Similarly, the impact of club tier level on fan behaviour is not contingent on the nationality of the player.

To test H4a and H4b, we used Hayes' Process Model 3 to examine whether national pride and vicarious achievement motive moderate the relationships between player nationality, club level, and the dependent variables. Following Söderlund's (2023) and Sharma et al.'s (1981) recommendations for rigor in moderation analysis, we evaluated our moderators as potential

pure or quasi-moderators. Our correlation analysis indicated that vicarious achievement motive significantly correlated with non-transactional fan behaviour ($r = .232, p < .001$) and transactional fan behaviour ($r = .212, p < .001$), suggesting it functions as a quasi-moderator. Similarly, national pride showed weaker but significant correlations with non-transactional fan behaviour ($r = .167, p < .001$) and transactional fan behaviour ($r = .148, p < .001$), also indicating its role as a quasi-moderator. Furthermore, both experimental conditions do not exhibit significant correlations with the moderators. Club level and player nationality are not significantly correlated with both national pride ($r = .020, p = .650$; $r = -.025, p = .567$) and vicarious achievement motive ($r = .032, p = .466$; $r = -.047, p = .290$). In consequence, this means that the moderators operate independently of the experimental conditions, reinforcing their role as quasi-moderators.

H4a proposed that the impact of a player's nationality on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) would be stronger among Chinese fans with higher levels of national pride. However, the results did not support this hypothesis, as the interaction between player nationality and national pride was non-significant for both non-transactional fan behaviour ($t = 1.4193, p = 0.1564$) and transactional fan behaviour ($t = 0.4970, p = 0.6194$). Additionally, the three-way interaction between player nationality, club level, and national pride was also non-significant for both outcomes (transactional fan behaviour: $t = -0.1585, p = 0.8741$; non-transactional fan behaviour: $t = -0.5859, p = 0.5582$). These findings indicate that national pride does not significantly alter the relationship between player nationality and the dependent variables, leading to a rejection of H4a.

H4b proposed that the impact of a player's club level on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional) would be stronger among Chinese fans with a stronger vicarious achievement motive. Specifically, the interaction between club level and vicarious achievement motive was non-significant for both non-transactional fan behaviour ($t = -1.2845, p = 0.1996$) and transactional fan behaviour ($t = -0.8754, p = 0.3818$). The hypothesized three-way interaction between player nationality, club level, and vicarious achievement motive was non-significant ($t = -1.2845, p = 0.1996$), leading to the rejection of H4b.

Overall, this study expands research on SIT by applying the concepts to individual brands (athletes) in global sports leagues, offering novel insights into how international fan engagement functions in a globalized sports industry. First, the results from H1, which examined the impact of player nationality on transactional and non-transactional fan behaviour, support the well-established notion that player nationality plays a significant role in consumer

decision-making, as previously observed in various industries (e.g., Gerke et al., 2014; Pappu et al., 2006). However, this study expands on these findings by applying the concept of COO specifically to sports leagues and player nationality (Chiu & Won, 2022; Shi et al., 2023). The results suggest that international fans are more likely to interact with a sports league and its clubs when a player from their home country is involved. This is in line with prior research that highlights the importance of national identity in driving consumer engagement (Carvalho et al., 2019; Storm & Jakobsen, 2020) and supports the core tenets of SIT (Tajfel et al., 1979), which posit that individuals derive a sense of self-esteem and belonging from their identification with a social group, in this case, based on nationality and culture. The finding that player nationality significantly influences both transactional and non-transactional fan behaviour also aligns with Elling et al. (2014), who showed that fans often connect emotionally with athletes who represent their nationality. This study confirms that fans of a global sports league are more inclined to be interested when a player from their country of origin joins the league. Moreover, this finding adds to the growing body of literature on the globalization of sports leagues (Anderski et al., 2024; Behrens et al., 2022; Otto et al., 2024) highlighting the importance of considering players' nationalities in international marketing strategies.

H2, which tested the impact of club level on fan behaviour (transactional and non-transactional), also yielded significant results. Fans exhibited a stronger tendency to interact with top-tier clubs over lower-tier clubs, based on the concepts of BIRGing and CORFing (Cialdini et al., 1976), which claim that individuals rather seek affiliation with successful than unsuccessful teams to enhance their self-esteem and foster their social identity. While prior research has shown that club success, tradition, and prestige can drive fan behaviour, particularly for elite clubs with a global profile (Fan et al., 2020; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), our study extends this by examining these dynamics specifically among international fans. This is particularly relevant as European leagues, like the Bundesliga, aim to expand their fan bases in new markets. Testing this in the context of international fans provides valuable insights, as prior studies have primarily focused on domestic fans. Our findings suggest that international fans, similar to domestic fans, are more emotionally invested in successful clubs, which could inform targeted marketing strategies for expanding fan interest and merchandise sales in foreign markets (Ströbel et al., 2021; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

However, the lack of a significant interaction effect between player nationality and club level, as tested H3, is contrary to our hypothesis, as it challenges the assumption that the effects of player nationality would be amplified by the club's prestige. Yet, the results of this study indicate that while both player nationality and club level independently influence fan behaviour,

their combined effect does not generate additional interaction. This suggests that the nationality of the player exerts a strong and consistent influence on international fans, regardless of the club's tier.

To operationalize these insights, the Bundesliga and its clubs should prioritize market-based scouting, considering not only a player's on-field talent but also their off-field potential to attract fans from their home country. In addition, digital engagement platforms such as Weibo and WeChat offer additional avenues to engage international fans. Clubs should create targeted content, such as interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, and interactive sessions with international players, to strengthen fan relationships. Partnering with official Bundesliga platforms can increase reach and ensure authenticity, helping clubs maximize their presence in international markets while reinforcing the Bundesliga's global brand. The Bundesliga as a league can also play a crucial role in supporting clubs by providing market data and resources to help identify key regions for player transfers and fan engagement. Additionally, the league's central platforms can promote individual players and clubs in targeted international markets, offering clubs more exposure and helping them build a stronger international presence. The player and the club level emerge as the key points of interest for international fans, making strategic player transfers essential for Bundesliga clubs looking to expand their global reach. By prioritizing international talent, forming local partnerships, leveraging digital platforms, and creating fan-centered events, the Bundesliga can significantly enhance their league-wide fan engagement and commercial success.

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3.5 No Player is Bigger than the Club? Examining Athlete Brand and Team Brand Identification among Gen Z and Gen X

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Abstract

Purpose/Rationale

This study investigates generational differences in team brand and athlete brand identification, examining their impact on purchase intentions for team-branded and athlete-branded merchandise.

Design/Methodology/Approach

A systematic two-study quantitative design was employed. Study 1 (n=477) replicated and extended previous findings to explore generational differences in team brand and athlete brand identification among soccer fans. Study 2 (n=444) used a 2x2 quasi-experimental design to examine how these differences influence purchase intentions, specifically preferences for team-branded versus athlete-branded merchandise across generational cohorts (Gen Z vs. Gen X).

Findings

The results reveal novel significant differences between fan generations in terms of athlete brand identification. These generational differences are also reflected in the intention to buy team brand or athlete brand-licensed merchandising.

Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for brand managers to develop targeted marketing strategies and merchandise offerings that effectively address team branding and athlete branding to align with generational preferences

Research Contribution

This study contributes to fan identification research by integrating team brand and athlete brand dynamics, focusing on generational differences in purchase intentions.

Originality/Value

The study offers novel perspectives on the dynamics of fan behaviour among age cohorts, bridging theoretical and practical gaps in sports marketing and brand management research.

Keywords: team brand identification, athlete brand identification, generational differences, purchase intention, merchandising, fan behaviour.

3.5.1 Introduction

Professional athletes have greatly leveraged digital platforms to amplify their personal brands, with Cristiano Ronaldo exemplifying this shift. As the world's most-followed individual, Ronaldo's 1 billion social media followers far exceed the collective reach of all Premier League clubs combined (ESPN FC, 2022; Gerken, 2024). His unparalleled digital presence challenges the notion that "no player is bigger than the club" (Braumen, 2009). High-profile transfers, such as Ronaldo's and Lionel Messi's moves to leagues like the Saudi Pro League and MLS, demonstrate how fans increasingly align their loyalties with individual athletes over teams (Burton, 2023). This trend extends beyond soccer, as demonstrated by Shohei Ohtani's record-breaking influence on Japanese MLB fan behaviour and purchase intentions during the 2024 World Series, challenging the long-held assumption that team brands remain the primary point of attraction (Coskrey, 2024).

Although team brand identification has been widely studied, research comparing team brand and athlete brand identification within the same club, particularly across different age groups, remains scarce. With the growth of social media, athletes have gained direct channels to engage with fans, fostering deeper personal connections. This rise in athlete brand identification is particularly evident among younger fans, who prioritize digital interactions with athletes over traditional team-based affiliations (Abeza et al., 2017; Anderski et al., 2023). Platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow athletes to cultivate large followings, often surpassing those of their respective teams. For Generation Z (Gen Z) fans, social media is crucial to their fan experience. Around 80% of Gen Z follow athlete brands on digital platforms, influencing their consumption behaviour, from attending events to purchasing endorsed products (Giorgio et al., 2023). Based on these practical indicators, our research aim focuses on examining team brand identification and athlete brand identification across generational

cohorts. Specifically, we aim to examine whether generational differences exist in team brand and athlete brand identification and, if so, how these differences influence purchase intentions for team-branded versus athlete-branded merchandise. While previous research has examined athlete brand and team brand identification independently, limited attention has been given to how these identification constructs differ across generational cohorts (e.g., Wu et al., 2012; Yoshida et al., 2015). Existing studies often treat fan identification as a static or uniform construct, without considering how age-based socialization, media habits, and cultural contexts may shape brand attachment differently. In particular, the intersection between athlete brands and generational affiliation remains underexplored in the literature, despite the growing relevance of human brands in sport (Anderski et al., 2023). This gap is especially significant given the rising influence of Gen Z, whose consumption patterns, digital behaviour, and expectations of authenticity diverge considerably from those of older generations (e.g., Munsch, 2021; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Our study addresses this gap by systematically comparing Gen X and Gen Z in terms of their identification with athlete brands and team brands, as well as the resulting impact on merchandise-related fan behaviour.

Addressing this research gap, we conducted two consecutive online studies with fans of the German Bundesliga (1st and 2nd divisions). Study 1 played a crucial role in identifying generational differences in team brand and athlete brand identification, serving as the foundation for Study 2. In Study 1 ($n_1=477$), we replicated previous findings to assess generational differences in identification regarding team brands and athlete brands. Based on these results, Study 2 ($n_2=444$) used a 2x2 quasi-experimental design (Gen X vs. Gen Z) to test how these generational differences impact the purchase intentions of team-branded jerseys versus athlete-branded jerseys.

This research makes three key contributions to sports marketing and brand management literature: (1) It highlights the often-overlooked role of generational affiliation in shaping fan identification and behaviour; (2) It examines how generational differences influence purchase intentions for team-branded versus athlete-branded products; and (3) It provides actionable insights into how Gen Z and Gen X connect with sports brands, enabling practitioners to tailor engagement strategies, refine merchandise offerings, and create targeted branding campaigns.

3.5.2 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

3.5.2.1 Identity Theory

In the context of this study, we applied identity theory to understand the roles and personal connections fans have with a particular team brand or athlete brand (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Identity Theory (e.g., Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), provides a robust framework for understanding fans' identification. Identity theory posits that individuals define themselves through the roles they occupy in society, developing identities through social experiences and relationships (Shapiro et al., 2013). These roles form a pivotal part of their self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2000). In the context of sports fandom, the role of being a fan becomes a significant component of an individual's identity, influencing their behaviour, attitudes, and self-perception (H. H. Kwon et al., 2005). Drawing on identity theory, previous studies on identification have identified several points of attachment, which can be defined as a persistent and resilient construct leading to cognitive thoughts and directly influencing consumers' consumption decisions. Identity theory serves as a comprehensive framework for examining the complex dynamics of team brand and athlete brand identification across generational cohorts in sports management research. By focusing on the roles that fans can occupy—whether as team brand or athlete brand supporters—identity theory serves as the conceptual framework for this study. Identity theory allows to understand how these identities vary across generational cohorts, specifically Gen Z and Gen X and how generational differences influence fan behaviour and purchase intentions, especially for team-branded versus athlete-branded merchandise.

3.5.2.2 Team brand identification

The concept of team brand identification has been used as a theoretical framework by many scholars to explain various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions of fans in different types of sports (H. H. Kwon et al., 2014; Lock & Heere, 2017; Stieler & Germelmann, 2016). Team brand identification indicates the level of individual connection between fans and their favorite team (Wann D. L. & Branscombe, 1993). In previous research on team brand identification, the specific role of athlete brands has either been neglected or considered as an additional element, even though sport fans can develop psychological connections to numerous sport objects, such as the sport itself, a coach, a specific competition or an athlete (Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wu et al., 2012; Yoshida et al., 2015).

The ethology and antecedents of team brand identification are as varied as the number of sport objects with which an individual can identify. Therefore, a broad spectrum of sports fan motives for identification have been examined and further developed in recent years in order to establish a standardized method for measuring team brand identification (Fink et al., 2002; Sloan, 1989; Wann D. L. & Branscombe, 1993; Wann D. L. & James, 2018). Based on the theoretical foundations as well as the conceptual model and validated construct of Wu et al. (2012), trust and vicarious achievement were identified as two pivotal motives among others

that influence team brand identification. Trust and vicarious achievement are essential for understanding team brand identification as they represent key drivers of fans' psychological and emotional connections. Trust reflects the perceived reliability and credibility, which can differ across generations based on their values and expectations. (Aiken & Koch, 2009; M. Kim & Walker, 2013). Vicarious achievement captures the sense of pride and emotional fulfillment fans derive from a team's or athlete's success, which influences their loyalty and engagement. Both are widely studied motives in sport management research, recognized for their role in driving fan identification and behaviour (Trail et al., 2003; Wu et al., 2012). It refers to fans deriving a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from the success of their favourite teams or athletes, enhancing their self-esteem and well-being. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_{1a}: Soccer fans' vicarious achievement motive toward a team brand positively influences their team brand identification.

H_{1b}: Soccer fans' trust in a team brand positively influences their team brand identification.

Kunkel and Biscaia (2020) found that teams and single athletes play a key role within the sports brand ecosystem, where multiple actors such as fans, sponsors, leagues or media are connected. Based on these connections, all actors can benefit from direct and indirect brand relationships (Su et al., 2020). In the context of sport, several studies have looked at the value of athlete brands and its impact on stadium attendance (Jane, 2016), the clubs winning percentage (Berri et al., 2004) or financial benefits (DeSchrive, 2007). In addition, Shapiro et al. (2017) confirmed these findings in their single case study examination of David Beckham's impact on the MLS. While Kucharska et al. (2020) showed that brand identification with authentic athlete brands in soccer is a focal factor enabling the creation of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, it is still unclear what potential impact the identification with individual athlete brands can have on other actors in the sports brand ecosystem. For example, the impact on a club's transfer decisions or corporate sponsorships, as in the case of David Beckham or Lionel Messi's move to the MLS. These findings emphasize the critical role of athlete brands in shaping fan behaviour and purchase intentions, as well as their broader influence on the sports brand ecosystem. However, the interplay between athlete brand identification and team brand identification, particularly across different generational cohorts, remains underexplored.

3.5.2.3 Athlete Brand Identification

Building on current research in human and athlete branding literature, digital engagement platforms, especially social media, have become essential branding tools for professional athletes (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Na et al., 2020). Osorio et al. (2020) conceptualize the transformation from a personal brand to a commercialized human brand within their branding continuum, emphasizing how human brands evolve through strategic brand-building processes. Athlete brands, in particular, transcend traditional sports boundaries, enabling fans to identify emotionally with athletes, teams, sponsors, and leagues (Arai et al., 2013). Social media has further amplified athlete branding by enabling direct, unfiltered interactions with fans, sponsors, and other stakeholders, significantly boosting athlete brand visibility (Cocco et al., 2023; Panthen, M., Anderski, M., Ströbel, T., 2024). Athletes create their own symbolic meanings through unique elements such as icons, symbols, and marketable lifestyles (Arai et al., 2014), while leveraging platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to engage with diverse audiences (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Athlete brands have become the most successful human brands on social media, with top athletes gaining millions of followers. For example, Lionel Messi's transfer to Inter Miami led to the club gaining over 11 million new followers on social media, illustrating the global impact of individual athlete brands (Chhajta, 2023). This trend underscores the growing importance of athlete brand identification.

Athlete brand identification, compared to team brand identification, has often been overlooked in branding literature (Mahony et al., 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005). Scholars have found that fans can form strong psychological connections with individual brands (Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wu et al., 2012). Athlete brand identification refers to fans' emotional attachment to an individual athlete, which can sometimes surpass their attachment to the team. For instance, fans of the Cleveland Cavaliers followed LeBron James to different teams due to their strong identification with him, rather than the team brand (Kahle & Close, 2011). Athlete brands not only drive fan loyalty to clubs but also enhance engagement through vicarious achievement and trust. Athletes' personal accomplishments and loyalty to their clubs help establish credibility and trustworthiness, fostering deeper connections with fans (Robinson et al., 2004). As such, the identification with an athlete can be driven by their on-field success, public persona, and personal narratives. Thus, we hypothesize:

H_{2a}: Soccer fans' vicarious achievement motive toward an athlete brand positively influences their athlete brand identification.

H_{2b}: Soccer fans' trust in an athlete brand positively influences their athlete brand identification.

Understanding these dynamics provides an important foundation for examining the effects of team brand and athlete brand identification on fans' purchase intention. By analyzing fans' identification with teams or athlete brands through the motive of vicarious achievement and trust, we gain deeper insights into the underlying factors that determine soccer fans' consumer behaviour.

3.5.2.4 Effects on Fans' Purchase Intention

Identification plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of purchase intentions. When individuals strongly identify with a particular team or athlete, it fosters a sense of emotional connection and loyalty towards associated products or brands. One of the crucial elements of identification in sports is the affiliation with a group of fans and the conscious differentiation from other groups and individuals (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Hogg et al., 1995; Maier et al., 2016). In this context, the purchase and wearing of merchandising serves as an important element to demonstrate affiliation with the favorite team as part of their identification and fan loyalty (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Fink et al., 2009; Riedmüller, 2018). Moreover, identification serves as a powerful construct for self-expression and social affiliation, as consumers seek to align themselves with symbols and entities that reflect their values and aspirations towards their favorite team brand or athlete brand (Stride et al., 2020; Ströbel et al., 2021).

In sport management research, the construct of identification has usually been examined as determinant of fan behaviour. While several scholars examined the effects of team brand identification on purchase intention and vice versa (e.g., Y. K. Kim et al., 2011; H. H. Kwon et al., 2007; Ströbel et al., 2021), the relationship between athlete brand identification and purchase intention as well as differences between both effects remain largely unexamined. While Wu et al. (2012) examined the effect of identification on fan's re-patronage intention, operationalized as the positive future fan behaviour including stadium attendance, viewing games on TV, and the purchase of merchandise, we focus on purchase intention as the dependent variable. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H₃: Soccer fans' team brand identification positively influences their purchase intention.

H₄: Soccer fans' athlete brand identification positively influences their purchase intention.

Given the established significance of team brand identification in shaping fan behaviour and purchase intention, as evidenced by previous research, our study extends this inquiry to explore the relatively underexplored realm of athlete brand identification. By focusing exclusively on purchase intention as the dependent variable, we aim to provide a clear understanding of how both team brand and athlete brand identification uniquely influence soccer fans' purchasing decisions, thereby uncovering valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of fan behaviour within the context of soccer fandom, especially focusing on different age cohorts.

3.5.2.5 The Next Generation of Sport Fans

While the sports industry is constantly evolving and sports fans nowadays are confronted with an unprecedented abundance of consumer offerings (Rein et al., 2007), sports fans are undergoing changes in their own specific characteristics, behaviour, and individual needs (Schmidt et al., 2019). The next generation of sports fans, which already represents the largest age cohort in the United States and will overtake all other generations in terms of purchasing power sooner or later (Munsch, 2021), is the so-called Gen Z. Gen Z is the generation that follows the Millennial generation (Gen Y), which in turn is preceded by Generation X (Gen X) (Fromm & Read, 2018). When exactly Gen Y ends and when Gen Z starts is often disputed in current literature and cannot be defined precisely. According to Dimock, 2019) and Fromm and Read (2018), people born between 1996 and 2010 are classified as Gen Z.

With regard to their sports consumer behaviour, technological alignment and affinity can be considered as key aspects, especially among younger target groups (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009; Yim et al., 2021). Members of Gen Z differ significantly from older generations in numerous aspects. Gen Z value diversity and equality, are risk averse, seek early financial security, and believe that personal success must be earned (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Schroth, 2019). In addition, they are often considered true digital natives, as they are barely familiar with a world without smartphones and always-on access to the Internet and social networks (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Since they are used to being frequently exposed to numerous different technical devices and digital content, they typically have an extremely short attention span and process information faster than any other generation (Turner, 2015). This development makes it more difficult for marketers to attract their attention and convince them of their products and services with targeted marketing measures (Munsch, 2021).

For Gen Z sports fans, social media appears to be an ideal gateway to connect and build a personal relationship with their favorite athlete brands. In addition, the influence and

importance of individual athletes' presence and expression on digital engagement platforms has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as by megatrends such as eSports, fantasy sports or NFTs (Beaupré et al., 2020; Yim et al., 2021). Furthermore, individual athletes are perceived as particularly trustworthy among Gen Z and have a positive influence on the consumption behaviour among this target group (Voráček & Bernardová, 2021). This is also reflected in the global demand for documentaries about individual athletes, which significantly exceeds the current supply, outstripping the demand for documentaries about professional teams or leagues (PwC, 2021). These series also include retired athletes, as seen in documentaries about Michael Jordan or David Beckham (Wood, 2023). In summary, these indicators suggest a stronger focus of Gen Z sports fans on athlete brands as sports-related points of attachment compared to other generations:

H₅: Members of Gen Z identify stronger with athlete brands than members of Gen X.

Based on this hypothesis, it can be assumed that there are generational differences related to licensed sports merchandising consumption behaviour of both generations. Team-branded merchandising, such as replica soccer jerseys, are a popular medium for fans to express their identification, satisfaction, and loyalty to their favorite club (Ströbel et al., 2021). At the same time, they give fans the opportunity to demonstrate their attachment to a certain athlete by customizing their replica jersey (Stride et al., 2020). Thus, licensed replicas, customized with the printing of an athletes' name and his or her number, expresses the identification with the athlete. Based on previous research on team brand identification, sports-related points of attachment, perceived value in the relationship between team brand identification and purchase intention, and the specific characteristics related to identification and consumption behaviour (Y. Kwon & Kwak, 2014; Sheth et al., 1991; Zeithaml, 1988), we hypothesize for Gen Z compared to Gen X:

H_{6a}: Members of Gen Z assign a higher value to individualized athlete brand-licensed replicas than members of Gen X.

H_{6b}: Members of Gen Z assign a higher value to individualized athlete brand-licensed replicas compared to standardized team brand-licensed replicas.

H₇: A high degree of athlete brand identification positively affects the perceived value of athlete brand-licensed replicas across Gen X and Gen Z.

3.5.3 Methodology and Results

We employed a systematic two-fold research design, building on and adapting Wu et al.'s (2012) validated framework to suit our research context. In the first stage, we conducted an online survey to replicate their findings and assess their applicability within professional soccer, with a specific focus on different generational cohorts—a dimension not addressed in the original stud. Age was included as an additional variable in order to provide evidence of a possible influence on hypotheses 1-4. After this novel influence could be fundamentally proven, a second follow-up study was conducted. Utilizing a panel, soccer fans from Generations X and Z were recruited according to a quota system to test hypotheses 5-7, using a 2x2 quasi-experimental design. Both studies are based on a covariance-based approach to analyze the developed conceptual model in order to adequately validate our implemented constructs. Study 1 was necessary to establish foundational generational differences in team brand and athlete brand identification, providing critical insights that informed the design of Study 2. Building on these findings, Study 2 serves as the main focus of our research by investigating how these generational differences influence purchase intentions for team-branded versus athlete-branded merchandise.

Omitted information on single questions have been coded as missing values. We used IBM SPSS Amos version 29 to test our suggested hypotheses, which has proven its eligibility as a suitable statistical software tool for the data analysis of quantitative studies (Arbuckle, 2019; Collier, 2020). Study 1 was conducted online in February 2022, followed by study 2 in April of the same year. Subsequently, the replication study is denoted as study 1, while the subsequent study is labelled as study 2. The following sections will first detail the methodological approach and present the results of study 1, followed by an explanation of the methods and results of study 2. The discussion will focus on the contributions of both studies.

3.5.3.1 Research Design and Measurement Study 1

To ensure a broad representation of soccer fans across different demographics, we distributed the survey for study 1 extensively online, including fan forums, social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter, targeting soccer fan communities. Through this outreach, we recruited $n_1=477$ participants. The entire data collection and data analysis were carried out in German, and the relevant parts were translated into English.

We adapted all measures from existing sport management literature on fan identification and consumption behaviour (H. H. Kwon et al., 2014; Robinson & Trail, 2005). We used our

conceptual model for the first study to determine differences regarding team brand and athlete brand identification among age groups as well as their effects on purchase intention (Wu et al., 2012). To measure these constructs, subscales and items were adopted from the Point of Attachment Index (PAI) (H. H. Kwon et al., 2005; Trail et al., 2003). The applied PAI consists of seven subscales with three items each to measure the attachment to several different sport objects (cf. Table 1). The index has been used in numerous previous studies investigating fans' identification in various sports and ensures good internal consistency (Robinson & Trail, 2005; Robinson et al., 2004).

We examined the four different constructs of *vicarious achievement motive*, *trust*, *identification*, and *purchase intention*, respectively for a team or an athlete brand. Each participant could select his or her favorite team brand from the German Bundesliga in the season 2021/22 (1st and 2nd division) and add his or her favorite athlete. Overall, 138 different players were registered within this sample. Thomas Müller was the most frequently mentioned player (12.6%), followed by his teammates Robert Lewandowski (4.8%), and Leon Goretzka (4.4%). Christian Günter from SC Freiburg was selected by 4.6%, while Borussia Dortmund striker Erling Haaland received 4.2% of all answers. As both question could be answers separately, 82% of the mentioned players had a connection to the participants' favorite club (either current or former player), the remaining 18% had no connection to the selected team.

Sample items of *vicarious achievement motive* consisted of "I feel a personal sense of success, when [...] plays well" or "I feel like I have won when [...] wins". Items used in study 1 to examine the construct of *trust* are "[...] keeps promises it makes to the fans" or "I completely trust in [...]". *Identification* has been examined with sample items: "I consider myself to be a real fan of [...]" or "Being a fan of [...] is very important to me". *Purchase intention* consists of items such as "I will attend games of [...] live in the stadium" or "I will purchase a lot of [...] merchandise" (cf. Table 1).

Study 1: Illustrative questionnaire					
Variables	Illustrative Items	α_T	α_{AB}	Source	
Team	Please select favorite Bundesliga team.				
Athlete Brand	What is your favorite athlete?				
Vic. Ach. Motive (VAM _{TB} ; VAM _{AB})	I feel a personal sense of success, when [...] plays well. I feel like I have won when [...] wins. I feel proud, when [...] plays well.	.82	.90	Trail et al. (2003)	
Trust (TR _{TB} ; TR _{AB})	[...] keeps promises it makes to the fans. I completely trust in [...]. [...] is trustworthy.	.89	.92	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001); Tsotsou (2013)	
Identification (ID _{TB} ; ID _{AB})	I consider myself to be a real fan of the [...]. Being a fan of [...] is very important to me. It would be difficult to change my opinion about [...].	.91	.91	Trail et al. (2003) Wann & Branscombe (1993)	
Purchase Intention (PI _{TB} ; PI _{AB})	I will attend games of [...] live in the stadium. I will purchase a lot of [...] merchandise. I will subscribe to streaming services of [...].	.80	.69	Wu et al. (2003)	
Study 2: Illustrative questionnaire					
Variables	Illustrative Items	α		Source	
Identification Team (ID _{TBGenX}) (ID _{TBGenZ})	I consider myself to be a “real” fan of my favorite team. I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my favorite team. Being a fan of my favorite team is very important to me.	.83		Trail et al. (2003) Robinson & Trail (2005)	
Identification Athlete Brand (ID _{ABGenX}) (ID _{ABGenZ})	I identify more with the individual players on a team than the team itself. I am a big fan of specific players, more than I am a fan of a specific team. I consider myself a fan of certain players rather than a fan of a certain team.	.89		Trail et al. (2003) Robinson & Trail (2005)	
Team-licensed Replicas (M _{TBMerchX}) (M _{TBMerchZ}) Manchester United & Paris Saint-Germain	What I get from the jersey for the price of 90€ (or 108€ respectively) is worth the cost. All things considered (price, time, and effort) the jersey is a good buy. Compared to other jerseys, this item is a good value for the money.	.95		H. H. Kwon et al. (2014)	
Athlete Brand-licensed Replicas (M _{ABMerchX}) (M _{ABMerchZ}) Manchester United & Paris Saint-Germain	What I get from the jersey for the price of 90€ (or 108€ respectively) is worth the cost. All things considered (price, time, and effort) the jersey is a good buy. Compared to other jerseys, this item is a good value for the money.	.96		H. H. Kwon et al. (2014)	
Age	What is your age?	Both studies.			
Gender	What is your gender? (female/male/diverse)				
Income	Monthly spending on football items?				

Table 3.5-1: Illustrative questionnaire items of study 1 and study 2

To test hypotheses 1-4, a path analysis was conducted (cf. Figure 1) according to the adapted and modified conceptual framework and validated construct of Wu et al.’s (2012)

original study. To control the model fit, we combined several model fit indices to ensure fit to our data (cf. Table 2). We included the commonly used ratio χ^2 to the degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The ration $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2,82$, CFI=.986, RMSEA=.064, and the NFI=.978 indicate a good fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hornburg & Giering, 1996; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996; Weiber & Sarstedt, 2021).

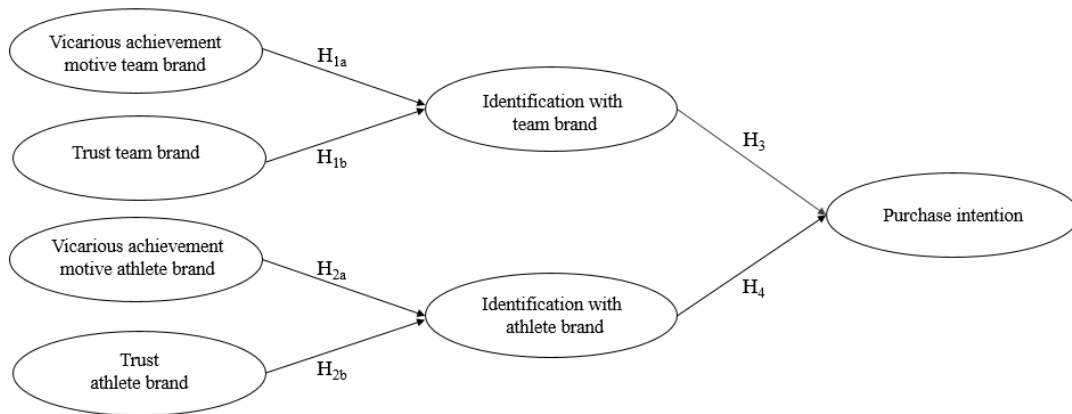


Figure 3.5-1: Conceptual model and hypotheses study 1

Fit index	Conceptual model	Recommended value
χ^2	22.55	
df	8	
χ^2/df	2.82	≤ 3.00 (Hornburg & Giering, 1996)
CFI	.986	$\geq .92$ (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996)
RMSEA	.064	$\leq .06$ (Weiber & Sarstedt, 2021)
NFI	.978	$\geq .90$ (Bentler & Bonett, 1980)

Table 3.5-2: Model fit indices

3.5.3.2 Results Study 1

We replicated the original study of Wu et al. (2012) in order to determine differences regarding team brand and athlete brand identification among age groups as well as their effects on purchase intention in the context of professional soccer. The online survey ($n_1=477$) referred to fans of the German Bundesliga (1st and 2nd division). The sample is not balanced with respect to the gender of the respondents. While 355 (74.4%) participants were male, only 121 female participants (25.4%) participated in the questionnaire. One participant responded as non-binary

(0.2%). After analysis of incomplete questionnaires, the data set reduced to $n=447$. Results of the path analysis indicated that all paths are significant ($p < .01$). Figure 2 summarizes the analysis including the path coefficients of our model for study 1.

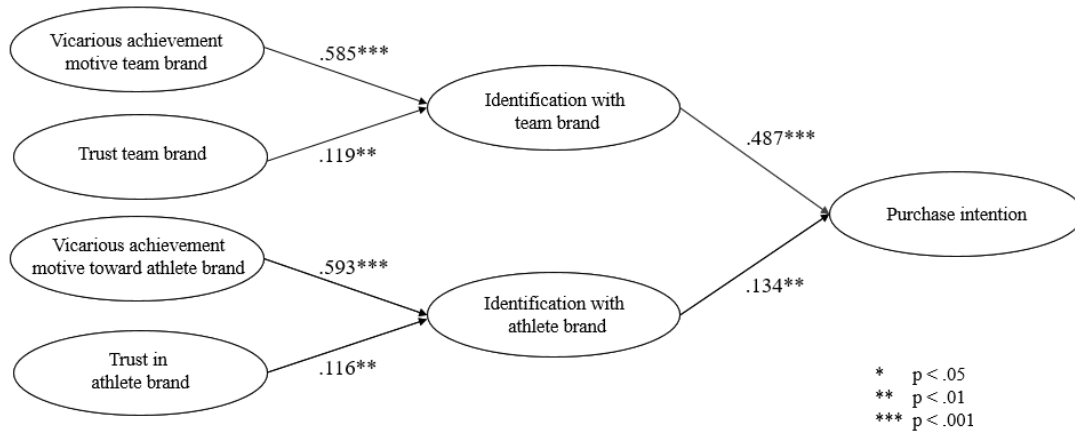


Figure 3.5-2: Path coefficients study 1

In terms of the relationship of vicarious achievement on identification, represented in H_{1a} and H_{2a} , the analysis revealed strong and significant effects supporting both hypotheses. In particular, vicarious achievement in the team brand context positively affects team brand identification (.585) as well as vicarious achievement in the athlete brand context has a strong impact on athlete brand identification (.593). The model demonstrates lower, but also positive and significant effects of trust in a team brand on team brand identification (.119) as well as trust in an athlete brand on athlete brand identification (.116). Although both path coefficients are comparably lower, H_{1b} and H_{2b} are supported. Consistent with the theoretical background of our study, the results of our model support H_3 concerning the influence of team brand identification on purchase intention. We found team brand identification has a strong and significant effect on purchase intention (.487). While the influence of athlete brand identification on purchase intention is not as strong, the relationship shows a positive and significant effect (.134), which supports H_4 as well. The strong identification of fans with their favorite team brand as well as the identification with individual athlete brands consequently leads to increased purchase intentions. Due to the fact that this study is based on the conceptual model and validated construct of Wu et al. (2012), a rival model is not developed and analysed. The findings are consistent with previous studies in the sports management literature and emphasize that the team brand is still the point of attachment compared with the athlete brand among sports fans across all generations (Dittmore et al., 2008; Karg & McDonald, 2011; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wu et al., 2012). However, in contrast to Wu et al.'s (2012) results the

support of H₄ shows that athlete brand identification must not be neglected. In their work as well as in recent relevant literature (e.g., Merten et al., 2023), the impact of the generational demographic factor has been largely overlooked. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at the respective age groups (cf. Table 3).

Variable	≤ 18 M (SD)	19-29 M (SD)	30-39 M (SD)	40-49 M (SD)	50-59 M (SD)	≥ 60 M (SD)	F	p
ID _{TB}	4,95 (1,72)	5,49 (1,69)	5,91 (1,35)	6,02 (1,47)	5,98 (1,41)	6,11 (1,01)	3,64	.003**
ID _{AB}	5,82 (1,44)	3,94 (1,72)	4,12 (1,47)	4,45 (1,47)	4,82 (1,61)	5,10 (1,74)	8,82	< .001**

Table 3.5-3: Identification among age groups

The ANOVA reveals novel and significant differences among the age groups regarding team brand identification ($p < .001$) and athlete brand identification ($p = .003$). Data analysis has shown that highest identification with the team brand are in the age groups of 30 and above, while fans under 18 identify the strongest with athlete brands. However, since the sample size in the respective age groups is too small ($n_{\leq 18} = 20$; $n_{19-29} = 202$; $n_{30-39} = 92$; $n_{40-49} = 65$; $n_{50-59} = 67$; $n_{\geq 60} = 31$), no valid results can be obtained regarding the proposed research questions. The replication study of Wu et al.'s (2012) original framework has revealed novel and previously unnoticed variations among different age groups concerning their identification with either a team brand or an athlete brand. Considering these new findings, there is an urgent need for a follow-up study that focuses specifically on age generations. Therefore, study 2 aims to examine the complex differences between Gen Z and X in terms of identification with a team brand or athlete brand and the resulting purchase intentions.

3.5.3.3 Research Design and Measurement Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to measure the participant's (Gen X and Gen Z) degree of *perceived value* related to licensed replica soccer jerseys of a team brand or an athlete brand and, therefore addresses hypotheses 5-7 (cf. Figure 3). In order to eliminate the influence of local fan peculiarities between different clubs, we worked with two international clubs and their superstars as stimuli: Lionel Messi for Paris Saint Germain and Cristiano Ronaldo for

Manchester United. These athletes were deliberately chosen as they are among the most popular soccer athletes worldwide, are the two most followed athletes on social media and both switched their clubs prior to the 2021/2022 season. A recent study also identified these two athletes as the most popular soccer players all over the world (Merten et al., 2023). Beyond their global popularity, these athletes exemplify the concept of a strong, independent athlete brand that transcends club affiliation. Over the past decade, both have dominated global soccer, accumulating the highest number of individual awards (e.g., Ballon d'Or, Golden Boot) and contributing to numerous club-level successes across Europe's top competitions. Moreover, their influence extends beyond sports, as both athlete brands have emerged as global icons in fashion, lifestyle, philanthropy, and digital culture (Anderson et al., 2020). Their recent transfers to new clubs reduce the likelihood of existing team loyalties influencing participant responses, thereby enabling a clearer conceptual distinction of the constructs.

As previously mentioned, the presence of a star player in the team is crucial as it potentially affects the degree of identification and the associated conative loyalty of the respondents (H. H. Kwon et al., 2005). To measure the identification and the attachment of the participants to the soccer-related objects of a team and individual athlete, the suitable subscales and items were again extracted from the PAI (cf. Table 1). All participants in the study were soccer fans, but had no active fan relationship with the two selected players or clubs. Therefore, the perceived value of different jersey variants was chosen as the dependent variable instead of the specific purchase intentions from study 1. Perceived value of merchandise products has been confirmed in empirical studies as a decisive variable for a later merchandise purchase (H. H. Kwon et al., 2014; Zeithaml, 1988).

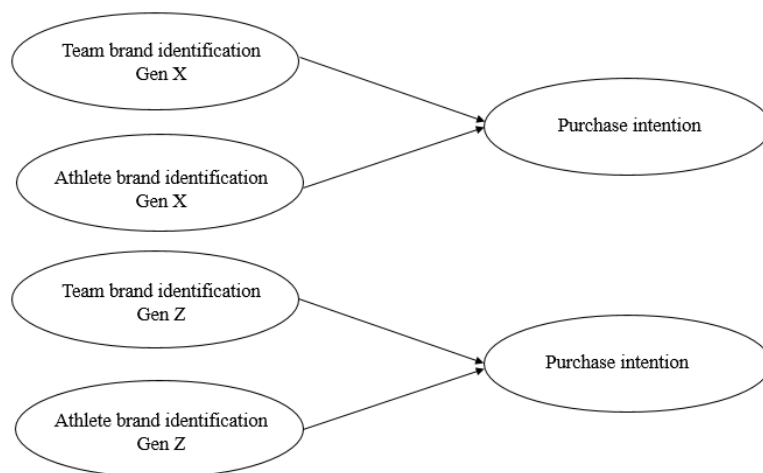


Figure 3.5-3: Conceptual model study 2

Utilizing a panel, soccer fans from Generations X and Z were recruited according to a quota system to test hypotheses 5-7, using a 2x2 quasi-experimental design. Based on the results of study 1 (cf. Table 3), we focused specifically on the both age groups of Gen X and Gen Z in our follow-up measurement of study 2. Generation Z, as digital natives, might engage differently with sports content and athlete brands compared to Generation X, who have experienced traditional sports marketing strategies. By narrowing our focus to Generations Z and X, we aimed to explore potentially significant contrasts in their behaviour and attitudes towards fan affiliation with athletes and teams. By incorporating a quota, the Toluna consumer panel company filtered its participants prior to the data collection so that only participants in the Gen X and Gen Z age groups took part in our experimental study. The survey started with a screening question, which asked the participants whether they consider themselves as "soccer fans". The screening question was adapted from the revised sport spectator identification scale (SSIS-R) (James et al., 2019) to ensure that there is any level of psychological connection and affiliation with a soccer related sport object among the participants. The final participant number were $n_2=444$ soccer fans, half of them belonging either to Gen X (1965-1980) or Gen Z (1996-2010).

As in Study 1, we adopted the subscales and items of the PAI (H. H. Kwon et al., 2005; Trail et al., 2003) to measure participants' affiliation and attachment to team brand and athlete brands. In the 2x2 quasi-experimental design of the second study, the participants were shown four different stimuli: (1) team-licensed Paris Saint-Germain and (2) Manchester United Home Jerseys; each jersey athlete-branded with either (3) Lionel Messi or (4) Cristiano Ronaldo. In the course of the study, participants answered three questions each about the stimuli which consisted of the following four combinations: A Paris Saint-Germain replica without an athlete name and number; a Manchester United replica without an athlete name and number; a Paris Saint-Germain replica with the printing "Messi 30"; and a Manchester United replica with the printing "Ronaldo 7" (cf. Figure 4).



Figure 3.5-4: Stimuli study 2

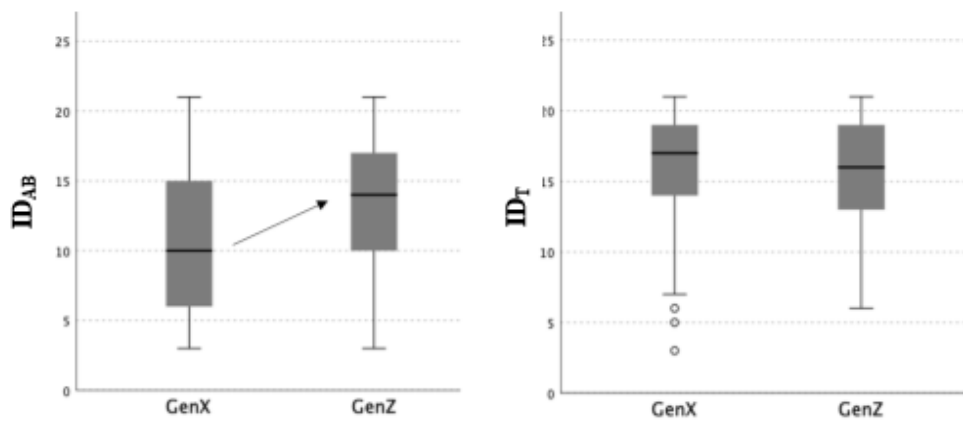
Participants used again the 7-point Likert-scales to assess their level of agreement to the three statements mentioned for each stimuli: “What I get from the jersey for the price of 90€ (or 108€ respectively) is worth the cost”; “All things considered (price, time and effort), the jersey is a good buy”; and “Compared to other jerseys, this item is a good value for the money” (cf. Table 1).

Before the evaluation of the study results with the mentioned scales and the investigation of the conceptualized hypotheses, a reliability study was carried out. To examine the reliability of the scales, the coefficient Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure internal consistency and scale reliability (Peterson, 1994, p. 381). Cronbach’s alpha values for ID_{TB} (.826), ID_{AB} (.885), perceived value of team-licensed replica (.954), and perceived value of player-licensed replica (.961) - all met the defined standards above 0.7 (Nunnally, 1979).

3.5.3.4 Results Study 2

The sample structure of our second study contains 47.1% female, 52.7% male, and 0.2% non-binary respondents. The sample represents 48.6% fans of Gen X, while 51.4% belonged to Gen Z. Gen X participants had a mean age of 49.28 years, Gen Z participants a mean age of 21.43 years. Both subgroups were analyzed with regard to their identifications and purchase intentions towards generic team brand versus athlete brand-licensed soccer jerseys. We analyzed the identification of Gen X and Gen Z with athlete brands by applying several statistical methods. After conducting the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test as well as the Kruskal-Wallis test, we measured the identification of both constructs on the PAI according to Trail et al. (2003) to test our proposed hypotheses. Contrary to the original assumption, team brand identification did not show significant differences between both age groups of Gen X and Gen Z (ID_{TB}: M_{GenX} = 16.43; M_{GenZ} = 15.96; H = 2.659; p < .103). Members of both generations indicate an almost similar level of identification with the favorite team in the context of professional soccer. However, data analysis revealed, that the athlete brand identification is

significantly higher among Gen Z compared to Gen X (ID_{AB} : $M_{GenX} = 10.81$; $M_{GenZ} = 13.37$, $H = 27.682$; $p < .001$), which supports H_5 . In summary, data analysis proved a crucial generational difference in the degree of identification with individual athlete brands, but revealed no effect of generational affiliation on team brand identification. Figure 5 summarizes the different effects of generational affiliation on the both constructs of team brand identification and athlete brand identification using a boxplot diagram for visual representation.



ID_{AB} : $M_{GenX} = 10.81$; $M_{GenZ} = 13.37$; $H = 27.682$; $p < .001$

ID_{TB} : $M_{GenX} = 16.43$; $M_{GenZ} = 15.96$; $H = 2.659$; $p < .001$

Figure 3.5-5: Effects of generational affiliation on ID_{AB} and ID_{TB}

The construct of purchase intention was measured based on the perceived value standard according to Zeithaml (1988). To test significant mean differences between the both generations, a Kruskal-Wallis-Test was performed as a one-way ANOVA. Data analysis revealed that Gen Z assign a significantly higher value to individualized athlete brand-licensed replicas compared to members of Gen X ($M_{GenX} = 18.39$; $M_{GenZ} = 22.59$, $H = 20.495$, $p < .001$) and supports H_{6a} . In addition, members of Gen Z were considered separately to examine whether they assign a higher value to athlete brand-licensed replicas compared to standardized team-licensed replicas (H_{6b}). Furthermore, the same analysis was done for Gen X to make a generational comparison on this relationship. Data analysis showed that Gen Z participants assigned a higher value to team-licensed replicas than athlete brand-licensed replicas. Compared to the results, members of Gen X rated both replica concepts significantly lower than members of Gen Z. Moreover, relative to the team-licensed replicas, Gen X evaluated the perceived value of the athlete brand-licensed replicas distinctively lower. Consequently, the gap between the mean values referring to the perceived value of team brand and athlete brand-licensed replicas was fundamentally smaller among Gen Z ($\Delta_{GenZ} = 1.64$, $\Delta_{GenX} = 3.30$).

The results confirmed no significant difference in the perceived value evaluation between team brand and athlete brand-licensed replicas among Gen Z participants ($M_{\text{TBMerchZ}} = 24.23$; $M_{\text{ABMerchZ}} = 22.59$, $H = 3.106$, $p = .078$). However, a significant difference in the perceived value evaluation between team brand and athlete brand-licensed replicas among members of Gen X was revealed ($M_{\text{TBMerchX}} = 21.69$; $M_{\text{ABMerchX}} = 18.39$, $H = 11.926$, $p < .001$). Consequently, team-licensed replicas were rated significantly better compared to athlete brand-licensed replicas among Gen X, while data analysis proved no significant difference in the value assignment among Gen Z participants. In summary, H_{6b} must be rejected.

The additional variable "ID_{AB} Below/Above Median" was added to the data analysis to test H_7 . We conducted a multidimensional ANOVA to measure the influence of two independent variables ("ID_{AB} Below/Above Median" and "Generational Affiliation") on the dependent variable ("Perceived Value: Athlete Brand-licensed Replicas"). The results of our data analysis revealed a significant influence of ID_{AB} on the perceived value of athlete brand-licensed replicas ($F = 110.471$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, no significant effect of the generational affiliation on the perceived value of athlete brand-licensed replica soccer jerseys was found ($F = 3.548$, $p < .060$). Moreover, no interaction effect between the two independent variables was revealed ($F = .877$, $p < .350$). The effect of high or low ID_{AB} on the perceived value of athlete brand-licensed replicas thus applies to both, Gen X and Gen Z participants. This result supports H_7 . Figure 6 and Table 4 summarize our results according to H_7 .

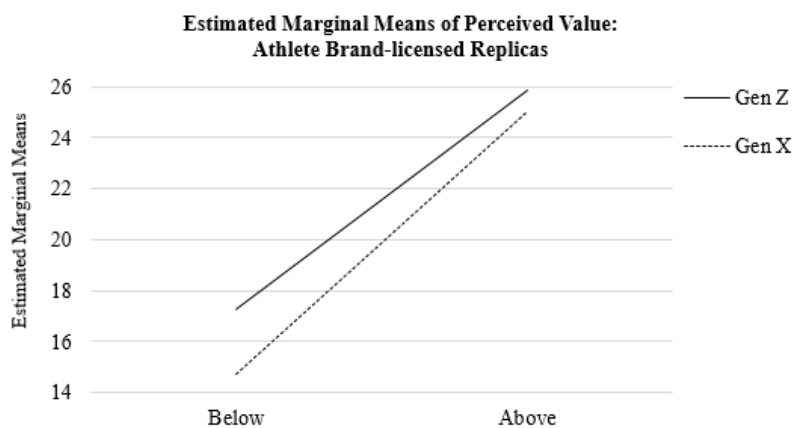


Figure 3.5-6: Perceived Value: Athlete Brand-licensed Replicas

ID_{AB}				
Below/Above Median	Generation	M	SD	N
Below	Gen X	14,71	8,062	139
	Gen Z	17,25	8,849	87
	Total	15,69	8,445	226
Above	Gen X	25,03	10,750	77
	Gen Z	25,88	9,400	141
	Total	25,58	9,882	218
Total	Gen X	18,39	10,348	216
	Gen Z	22,59	10,090	228
	Total	20,55	10,419	444

Table 3.5-4: Multidimensional ANOVA

3.5.4 Discussion

3.5.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three important contributions to the area of sport marketing and brand management. First, it offers a novel contribution to research on athlete brand and team brand identification by quantitatively examining both constructs within a unified framework. While prior studies primarily applied the PAI to intercollegiate sports and American football (e.g., Karg & McDonald, 2011; Spinda et al., 2016; Woo et al., 2009), this study extends its application to European soccer. Unlike earlier work (e.g., Robinson & Trail, 2005; Wu et al., 2012), we treat team and athlete brand identification as independent constructs. Through two sequential studies, we provide in-depth insights into fan identification patterns, showing that athlete brand identification is not merely a subset of team identification, but a distinct construct. These findings encourage a reevaluation of identification models in light of evolving media landscapes and fan engagement platforms.

Second, we highlight the overlooked role of generational affiliation in team brand and athlete brand identification. While previous studies consistently identified the team as the primary point of attachment (e.g., Dittmore et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2012), few considered generational effects. Our findings partially challenge prior claims that age has minimal influence (Robinson et al., 2004), showing that Gen Z fans report significantly higher athlete brand identification. This introduces a meaningful starting point for further exploration of generational dynamics (e.g., Baby Boomers or Generation Alpha) in identification, loyalty and purchase intention.

Third, this study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the direct effect of generational affiliation on the perceived value of licensed merchandise. Using two European

soccer clubs from different leagues, our results show that Gen Z assigns greater value to athlete-branded merchandise and is more willing to pay extra for customization (e.g., name and number) than Gen X fans. This aligns with prior research on Gen Z's consumption behaviour (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; PwC, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2019) and suggests that licensed products play a significant role in self-expression for this cohort.

3.5.4.2 Managerial Implications

This study enhances sport managers' knowledge on the dynamics of team brand identification and fan behaviour. Our findings do not yet suggest a shift from team brand identification towards athlete brand identification. However, the main results indicate a change regarding the identification and consumption behaviour of young target groups, leading to a call for action for clubs and sponsors as well as leagues and associations. Sports clubs could benefit from these insights by providing their younger target groups with additional options to individualize their team's merchandising items with athlete-specific trademarks. In this context, sports clubs should offer the opportunity to individualize other licensed merchandise items, such as shirts, flags or scarves with athlete-brand related attributes. This approach addresses the predominant aspect of team brand identification, while simultaneously capitalizing on the commercial opportunities arising from younger fans' willingness to pay and the stronger athlete brand identification.

Investing in or holding on to popular star athletes to build a long-lasting partnership may be beneficial for clubs as other consumption decisions, such as stadium attendance, purchase intention or media consumption, are related to Gen Z sports fans' attachment to athlete brands. Current developments in professional soccer show that athlete brands in particular are responsible for identification with a club. Young target groups on social media follow their idols when they move to a new club in a different league and thus also unfollow the previous ones. This follower shift could be observed very well with Lionel Messi's move to Inter Miami or Ronaldo's move to Saudi Arabia; in both cases, the transferring clubs lost millions of followers to the receiving clubs (Chakraborty, 2023; Leeks, 2023). In addition, athlete brand collaborations offer untapped potential for sponsors, especially in targeting younger audiences. Strategic partnerships with athlete brands may offer more sustained market access, allowing sponsors to enter new regions and reach emerging fan bases.

Furthermore, sports clubs should provide additional online services for younger target groups. This not only affects sports clubs, it furthermore applies to the international marketing efforts of leagues and associations such as the Premier League or the German Bundesliga.

Leagues and associations should provide different social media channels in foreign languages to attract distant fans overseas, to build and maintain a long-lasting identification. A prime example is the “Heung-min Son effect” in Asian soccer. Around 12 million people - almost a quarter of the total population of South Korea - currently consider themselves Tottenham Hotspur fans and thus English Premier League fans, as the athlete has been playing for Tottenham for several years and becoming a legend for his club and country (Conroy, 2022).

3.5.5 Limitations and Future Research

As with any empirical study, this study has several limitations that need to be considered. Primarily this quantitative research marks only a snapshot. Future research on athlete branding and athlete brand identification should be conducted to better understand the needs and purchase intentions of different generations. Therefore, it is essential to extend and replicate the survey as well as to examine additional subjects to avoid individual case exceptions and ensure external validity and generalizability. The results should be validated by applying our conceptual model to other types of team sports. Further limitations, which is referring to the validity and generalizability of the study results, are that the study participants were exclusively German soccer fans and both studies were distributed online. In Study 1, participants were recruited through digital fan forums, which may slightly limit the representativeness of the results for all soccer fans in Germany. Cultural factors, including local fan traditions and media habits, may influence identification patterns and limit the generalizability of our findings. Future cross-cultural studies are recommended to examine whether the generational differences observed here persist across diverse cultural and sporting contexts. Such analyses would also be valuable for identifying potential variations across different types of sports, cultures, gender, and nationalities.

In addition, it would be valuable to conduct on-site replications of the study in soccer stadiums to gain new insights into the motives and preferences regarding team brand identification of stadium attendees, as well as age and gender distribution. It would be of particular relevance to target members of Gen Y as this generation already represents the largest age cohort in the U.S. labor force and therefore will have considerable purchasing power in the coming years (Fry, 2018). Moreover, previous literature as well as our study focused on men’s sports. Future research should address women’s sports as well as female athlete brands to enrich the database and compare previous results.

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Chapter 4: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore how athletes build and manage their brands within the framework of integrative branding. In doing so, there was an emphasis on two interrelated sub-processes: (1) building brand identity and (2) co-creation of brand meaning. Integrative branding provides a dynamic and multi-actor perspective, contrasting traditional management-oriented approaches that treat brands as static entities controlled solely by the brand owner. Instead, this framework highlights the collaborative interactions and resource integrations among multiple actors on various engagement platforms. Building on this framework, the thesis introduces the concept of *integrative human branding*, applying the principles of integrative branding to the unique context of human brands, such as athletes. Human brands differ from traditional brands by combining personal and professional dimensions to create symbolic and emotional connections with audiences. This concept addresses the underexplored processes of brand meaning co-creation, which is particularly crucial for athlete brands due to their dynamic interactions with diverse actors, including fans, sponsors, media, clubs, associations, and corporates. However, existing research on athlete branding has primarily focused on the first sub-process of building brand identity. Consequently, it remains unclear how athletes build and manage their brands within the framework of integrative branding.

To address this research question, eight empirical studies employing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches were conducted. To ensure a systematic and coherent structure, the eight empirical studies presented in this thesis were organized within a research framework that incorporates two key dimensions: methodological approach (two dimensions) and level of aggregation (two dimensions). The methodological approach distinguishes between qualitative and quantitative methods, while the level of aggregation categorizes the studies into the micro and meso level, enabling a systematic exploration of branding processes across diverse contexts.

At the micro level (Chapter 2), Papers 1 to 3 focus on brand building and brand management of athlete brands, examining how athletes build their brands and how brand meaning is co-created on various engagement platforms. Building on this foundation, Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the meso level, exploring the role of athlete brands within the broader sports brand ecosystem. Based on the multi-actor perspective, Papers 4 to 8 investigate various contexts, including an athlete's sustainability behavior, athlete activism, the international marketing of professional sports leagues, fan behaviour of international sports fans, and generational differences in fan identification regarding team brands and athlete brands.

This thesis contributes to advancing the understanding of the emerging field of human branding by applying the concept of integrative branding to both academia and practice. Structured across two levels of aggregation, the thesis offers novel insights into the processes of brand building and brand meaning co-creation, with a focus on athletes as a unique type of human brand. At the micro level (Chapter 2), the thesis develops the first typology of athlete brands, establishing a foundation for identifying relevant platforms, key actors, and specific brand meaning co-creation performances. Grounded in the framework of integrative human branding, these insights are extended to other contexts, such as club brands, highlighting commonalities and contrasts in branding dynamics.

At the meso level (Chapter 3), the analysis shifts to the broader sports brand ecosystem, incorporating diverse actor groups. The thesis developed the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI), the first measurement framework focusing on athletes' sustainability across ecological, social, and economic dimensions from the perspective of various actors evaluating the individual athlete. Furthermore, it introduces four distinct levels of brand meaning co-creation by athlete activists, categorized by the extent of actor involvement. Additionally, it examines the strategic role of athlete brands in the international marketing of professional sports leagues and their influence on fan behaviour and purchase intentions, particularly in global markets and among different generations.

These studies not only present novel findings but also challenge established perspectives in marketing and sport management literature. By connecting these levels, the thesis combines theoretical contributions with actionable insights for brand managers, offering a comprehensive perspective on human branding based on a multi-actor perspective. From this synthesis of the eight studies, five overarching insights emerge:

1. Athlete brands are multidimensional and heterogeneous

Paper 1 introduced the first typology of athlete brand building, demonstrating that athletes adopt distinct brand building strategies depending on their self-identity, available resources, and interactions within their surrounding ecosystem. The findings indicate three specific types of human brands: brand antagonist, brand supporter, and brand manager. These three types can be differentiated by the athlete core, the brand concept, the role of social media, the sports ecosystem, and their sponsorship relationships. This typology reveals that athlete brands are far from homogeneous; instead, they reflect diverse approaches to self-presentation, engagement with stakeholders, and strategic brand development. For example, some athletes resist being framed as brands (brand antagonists), others accept branding

passively through external actors (brand supporters), while a third group actively manages and orchestrates their brand identities (brand managers). By highlighting these orientations, the study challenges earlier one-dimensional conceptualizations of athlete brands as uniformly strategic and controlled, showing instead that brand building is a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by both individual agency and network influences.

2. Brand meaning is actively co-created by multiple actors on various brand platforms

Papers 2 and 3 illustrated that athlete and club brands emerge not only through identity work by the brand owner, but moreover through Brand Co-Creation Performances (BCCPs) enacted by multiple actors such as fans, sponsors, media, and organizations. We introduced integrative human branding as the overarching framework and identified three new performance categories that reflect different levels of actor involvement. We differentiated between (1) network-related performances (i.e., cooperating) that emphasize the collaboration of actors regarding the co-creation of brand meaning; (2) human brand-related performances (i.e., reinforcing, communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating) that describe activities that are considered to directly affect the athlete brand; and (3) person-related performances (i.e., individual loving, and individual hating) that mainly target the individual person behind the human brand. These performances demonstrate that branding is not a static outcome but a performative and iterative process shaped by continuous interactions across engagement platforms. The studies further reveal that new actors are pivotal in shaping athlete brands, particularly the inner circle of family and friends, who play an often-overlooked yet influential role in co-creating and sustaining brand meaning. Taken together, these insights advance the understanding of branding as a dynamic, multi-actor process, underscoring the need for managers to recognize and orchestrate the diverse contributions of various actors and several brand platforms rather than assuming sole control over the branding process.

3. The impact of athlete brands reaches far beyond the boundaries of sport

Papers 4 and 5 broadened the perspective by focusing on sustainability and activism, two areas where athlete brands exert influence well outside traditional sporting contexts. Paper 4 developed the Athlete Sustainability Index (ASI), the first systematic framework to evaluate ecological, social, and economic sustainability at the level of individual athletes. This framework demonstrates that athletes are not only performers on the field but also potential role models and change agents in advancing global sustainability agendas. In

doing so, the ASI is structured around four main behavioral categories: (1) Social media presence, (2) sponsoring, (3) initiatives, and (4) carbon conservation. Paper 5 examined athlete activism, showing that although relatively uncommon during major sporting events, it is deeply shaped by interactions across up to ten actor groups, with varying intensities of involvement - ranging from autonomous to collaborative, sports-network, and beyond-network activism. Autonomous activism is defined by the athlete's deliberate choice to act alone, without engaging other actors, meaning that co-creation of brand meaning occurs only indirectly at a later stage. In contrast, beyond-network activism represents a new level that extends athlete activism beyond the immediate sports network to include non-sport actors and cross-platform interactions. This form of activism is particularly powerful, as it brings in actors capable of exerting broad societal influence. Previous work tended to view activism only within the sports network and mainly in terms of positive effects. Moreover, we found a new group of actors, which we termed beyond-network actors, which involves actors from organizations, industry or the government linked to the specific cause or topic of activism. These actors are pivotal to the co-creation of an athlete's brand meaning when they engage in activism. Together, these studies illustrate that athletes' off-field actions, whether in sustainability or activism, are critical drivers of their brand meaning and legitimacy. More importantly, they reveal how athletes can serve as societal influencers and cultural intermediaries, shaping discourse on pressing issues and extending the relevance of sport brands into political, social, and environmental domains.

4. Athletes serve as crucial levers for international marketing

Papers 6 and 7 demonstrated that professional sport leagues such as the German Bundesliga strategically rely on athlete brands to internationalize and connect with global audiences. Athletes operate as cultural brokers, translating sporting performance into culturally resonant narratives that help leagues bridge linguistic, cultural, and market barriers. By embodying both local and global identities, they make leagues more relatable in emerging and established markets alike. Athletes thus function as critical vehicles for storytelling and market entry, enhancing visibility, fan identification, and engagement, particularly in overseas contexts where institutional league brands may lack recognition. However, this strategic reliance also entails vulnerabilities. An over-dependence on individual star players risks shifting symbolic capital away from the league itself, potentially weakening institutional brand equity, undermining long-term stability, and exposing leagues to reputational crises tied to player performance, transfer movements, or off-field

controversies. Together, these studies highlight both the opportunities and risks of leveraging athlete brands in global sport ecosystems. They underscore the need for leagues to adopt a dual approach: strategically integrating athlete brands to enhance global resonance while simultaneously developing league-wide narratives and institutional branding to safeguard against volatility. In doing so, leagues can balance the immediate benefits of athlete-centered marketing with the pursuit of more sustainable, long-term brand strategies.

5. Generational differences are key to understanding identification

Paper 8 revealed that Gen Z fans identify differently with athletes and teams compared to Gen X. For younger fans, athlete brands resonate more strongly, serving as aspirational figures and shaping both emotional connections and purchase intentions. This reflects broader generational shifts in media consumption and engagement practices, with Gen Z gravitating toward individualized, digital-first relationships fostered through social media platforms. In contrast, Gen X fans remain more strongly oriented toward club brands, reflecting traditional forms of fandom anchored in collective identity, heritage, and institutional loyalty. This generational divide carries important implications for long-term marketing and engagement strategies: while athlete brands can be powerful entry points for younger audiences, an overemphasis on individuals risks undermining the institutional stability of team and league brands. Hence, organizations must carefully balance strategies that leverage athlete charisma with those that preserve and strengthen club-based identities across generations.

However, several areas remain open for future exploration to expand and deepen these insights. First, the concept of integrative human branding could be extended beyond athletes to other types of human brands, such as influencers, artists, and entertainers. Investigating how these brands engage with diverse actor groups and platforms across different industries could enhance the framework's generalizability and reveal new dynamics. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the evolution of brand identity and co-creation processes, shedding light on how human brands adapt to career changes, technological advancements, or societal trends.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of human branding, future research could integrate perspectives from psychology, sociology, and marketing to explore how personal traits (e.g., authenticity, likability) and societal factors (e.g., cultural norms) influence branding processes. Further investigation into multi-actor engagement is also essential, particularly the interactions

between fans, sponsors, and media across cultural and geographic contexts. Emerging factors, such as artificial intelligence, offer a novel dimension to actor-driven branding dynamics that warrants closer examination. Comparative studies across industries, such as entertainment or politics, could provide broader insights into how integrative branding operates in varied ecosystems.

Cultural and generational perspectives also merit further investigation. As demonstrated in this thesis, these factors significantly influence fan behaviour and brand identification. Research could explore how generational shifts and global trends, such as sustainability, artificial intelligence, or inclusivity, impact brand perceptions and consumer preferences. Lastly, practical challenges in applying integrative branding principles offer fertile ground for research. Examining how managers balance strategic brand identity development with dynamic, actor-driven co-creation processes can provide actionable insights for practitioners navigating complex brand ecosystems. By addressing these areas, future research can build on this thesis's contributions, advancing theoretical frameworks and offering practical strategies for managing human brands in dynamic, interconnected environments.

Appendix A: International Conference Contributions – Full papers

Paper 9: Navigating Fan Reactions: The Role of Innovation Resistance and Acceptance in Smart Stadium Technology Use

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Abstract

The adoption of Smart Stadium Technologies (SST) has become essential to meet increasing demands for real-time data, interactive experiences, and personalized content among sports fans. This study aims to understand drivers and barriers influencing the intention to use SST by integrating the Technology Acceptance Model and Innovation Resistance Theory, alongside fan identification concepts. We conducted a survey of 504 sports event attendees and analyzed the data using structural equation modeling. Our findings indicate that usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic value significantly enhance the intention to use SST, while distraction and social risks serve as resistance factors. Security concerns did not show an impact. Fan identification moderates these effects, with higher identification weakening the positive impact of hedonic value and amplifying the impact of social risks. This research contributes to the understanding of technologies in sports and offers practical recommendations for fan engagement through SST, tailored to different fan types.

Keywords: Smart stadium technology, Digital fan experience, Technology acceptance model, Innovation resistance theory, Fan identification

Introduction

In today's digital era, fans of live sporting events expect far more than just the actual game. The convenience of streaming sports from home has significantly challenged live attendance, as broadcasters enhance their offerings with second-screen infotainment, including live statistics, polls, probabilities, and additional content. Sports venues, stadiums and arenas, are countering this by integrating additional digital services into the stadium experience. A prime example is the newly built SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, which fosters value co-creation with real-time content and participation in various activities on digital platforms, such as live polls and contests (Anderski et al., 2023; Stegmann et al., 2023). Other event hosts and providers are under increasing pressure to integrate innovative digital solutions to maximize spectator excitement and engagement. From Augmented Reality (AR) to comprehensive statistics, social media, and mobile device interactions, the possibilities have become diverse and indispensable (Horbel et al., 2021). Thus, Smart Stadium Technologies (SST) represent a new tool to compete for fans' favor and deliver a modern stadium experience.

As live events become increasingly important in the e-sports industry, the relevance of SST in the e-sports context is particularly compelling due to the inherently digital nature of e-sports and its tech-savvy audience (Jenny et al., 2018). Big e-sports events are regularly held in arenas equipped with advanced digital infrastructures, making them ideal candidates for SST integration. These technologies can enhance the e-sports viewing experience by offering real-time data analytics, interactive elements, and AR overlays (Sjöblom et al., 2020). While our study primarily focuses on traditional sports, the insights gained can enrich e-sports research by highlighting how SST impact the fan experience since live spectatorship motives overlap between traditional and e-sports (Pizzo et al., 2018).

When it comes to traditional sporting events, implementing new technologies may face unique challenges that are not as prevalent in other mass events like concerts or fairs, where trends like AR entertainment are often welcomed (Park et al., 2024). Among sports fans, there may be resistance to integrating SST into the live experience, as some fans prefer the traditional, unaltered atmosphere and worry that digital enhancements could dilute the essence of the sport (Uhrich, 2022). Therefore, balancing innovative advancements with the preservation of the sport's core essence remains a challenge for event organizers.

The research field of SST is still in its nascent stage and therefore rather limited. Understanding the role of innovation and technology on the fan experience and the potential issues involved has been the main driver for most studies to date (cf., Levallet et al., 2019;

Melander, 2016; O'Brolcháin et al., 2019; van Heck et al., 2021). To this date, however, literature is lacking a quantitative validation of these conceptual works and case studies. Additionally, to the authors' knowledge, hardly any research deals with the role of innovation resistance and acceptance factors in the use of SST and explicitly examines these in the context of sport. We thereby contribute to theory by integrating theory from fan identification into the knowledge on technology acceptance and resistance.

Considering (1) the increasing competition from streaming services, (2) a potentially existing resistance among sport fans, and (3) the current state of research, we postulate the following research question: *Which drivers and barriers influence the intention to use Smart Stadium Technologies of fans?*

For an in-depth understanding of the factors that promote SST acceptance and encourage its adoption, we developed a research model based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Innovation Resistance Theory (IRT). Additionally, we incorporated important contextual factors from research on sport fan identification. To validate the research model, we surveyed 504 participants, which we reached via a newsletter of a professional ice hockey and basketball team in Germany, shortly before the opening of their new arena with advanced smart technologies.

We analyzed the factors influencing the intention to use SST using structural equation modeling based on the partial least squares approach (PLS-SEM). The results confirmed that the main drivers of the intention to use SST are hedonic value (fun), usefulness, and ease of use, while social interaction was rejected as a driver. On the other hand, we identified distraction from the actual event and social risks as the main barriers, negatively correlating with the intention to use SST. Security concerns could not be confirmed as a resistance factor. Furthermore, we found a moderating effect of the level of fan identification on social-related drivers and barriers; the stronger the commitment to the team, the weaker the positive influence of social identification on the intention to use SST, while social risks are more strongly correlated with resistance against SST for high levels of fan identification.

With these results, our research is the first to examine SST, successfully combining TAM, IRT, and research on fan identification. Thus, we make a valuable contribution to the research interface of technology acceptance, consumer behavior, and sports fandom. From a practical standpoint, we provide recommendations to enhance the positive drivers of SST and mitigate barriers, especially considering different levels of fan identification.

Literature review

As mentioned, research within the intersection of live sport attendance and digital measures is still an emerging field, with limited but growing research. The findings presented in this chapter are the result of an extensive research within common databases for academic publications (Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar), using relevant keywords including “smart stadium”, “digital sport event”, “sport fan technology” or “digital fan experience”, and their combinations. Thus, this chapter offers valuable insights into the development and impact of SST and further strengthen the need for our study.

Smart Stadiums are emerging as cutting-edge venues that harness advanced digital technologies to significantly enhance the fan experience, bolster safety, improve operational efficiency, and promote sustainability, all while optimizing economic outcomes (Kainz et al., 2020). These stadiums function on the principles of Internet of Things (IoT), which facilitates sophisticated information exchange between the software and hardware components of the stadium infrastructure (O'Brolcháin et al., 2019). This interconnectedness allows for real-time data processing and responsive actions, creating a more integrated and seamless experience for all stakeholders.

From a marketing perspective, enhanced stadium security contributes to increased visitor well-being and longer stay durations, which in turn can boost revenue through higher likelihoods of additional purchases and repeat visits (Harwardt et al., 2020). However, the implementation of these technologies is not without challenges. Ethical concerns, including issues related to privacy, the potential for misuse of sensitive data, and a lack of transparency in how data is processed, have been raised as barriers to widespread adoption (O'Brolcháin et al., 2019). SST can optimize administrative processes during stadium visits, including solutions like contactless payments, electronic tickets, digital parking tickets, and reservations, all aimed at reducing waiting times and improving visitor flow (Panchanathan et al., 2017). The fan experience in Smart Stadiums is augmented by personalized digital offerings, such as interactive entertainment functions, and AR features tailored to user interests. Smart seats equipped with touchscreens or USB ports allow fans to watch replays, access information, or place orders (Panchanathan et al., 2016). Additionally, second-screen applications and in-stadium competitions, particularly during game breaks, are typical technologies enhancing the fan experience (Beatriz & Santos, 2021).

While experts positively assess the use of digital technologies for safety and sustainability, there is no consensus on their impact on the fan experience (Kainz et al., 2020). Technologies

addressing basic consumer needs (e.g., quality of food, stadium navigation) tend to yield lower satisfaction levels. Meeting these needs is essential but does not significantly enhance the stadium experience to attract fans. Personalized communication and extended services through digital applications hold potential for a better stadium experience, depending on the target audience and content offered (Beatriz & Santos, 2021). However, critics argue that digital applications should not overshadow the core event and should not detract from the experience of fans seeking a break from digital media or preferring traditional stadium visits (Kainz et al., 2020). If implemented thoughtfully, SSTs have the potential to not only meet basic operational needs but also to draw fans back to the stadium by offering a more enriched and personalized experience (Bal & Fleck, 2016). This underscores the importance of understanding the factors that drive or hinder the adoption of these technologies.

The literature presented in this chapter has primarily consisted of conceptual reviews, or qualitative studies. Building on this, our research takes the next step in advancing the understanding of digital fan experience by proposing a parsimonious research model with key drivers and barriers of SST acceptance. Our paper addresses a gap by integrating the earlier insights into a quantitative analysis, thereby providing empirical evidence that validates and extends existing literature.

In the next chapter, we delve into the theoretical models chosen to guide our research. We will explore the TAM, which helps explain the factors driving fans' willingness to adopt SST, and the IRT, which sheds light on the barriers that may hinder this adoption. Additionally, we will consider the concept of fan identification, which plays a crucial role for changes of their experience. We will present each model, justify its suitability for our context, and derive hypotheses accordingly to develop a comprehensive research model that captures the complexities of SST acceptance.

Theoretical foundations and hypotheses

Technology acceptance model

The TAM is a theoretical model that explains and predicts the acceptance and use of technologies by individuals. Originally developed by Davis (1989), the TAM postulates that two main factors, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, determine intention to use and ultimately actual use. The TAM was initially designed to investigate utilitarian technologies in an organizational context but was then successfully transferred to hedonic technologies. Specifically, in sport consumption, the TAM has been applied to various applications such as team apps (Kim et al., 2017), smartphones (Ha et al., 2015), sports websites (Hur et al., 2011),

fantasy sports (Kwak & McDaniel, 2011), and social media (Mahan, 2011). These applications have shown that the TAM is also a valid model for evaluating leisure technologies. Since the TAM appears to be well-suited for examining SST acceptance drivers, we will delve deeper into the key factors – perceived usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic value – to explore their specific roles in shaping the intention to use SST.

Regarding SST, usefulness refers to the fact that fans have easy access to information and the technology facilitates fans' actions (Goebert & Greenhalgh, 2020). In the sports sector, there are numerous hurdles that can make attending sporting events a burden, such as getting to the event, finding a parking space, waiting times for food and drinks, and leaving the stadium. These hurdles can be overcome by SST services, such as mobile pre-order and parking space assignment via app. We therefore postulate *H1: The perceived usefulness positively correlates with the intention to use SST.*

Ease of use is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a technology would be easy (Davis, 1989). Regarding sports consumption, ease of use refers to the convenience of obtaining and using sports-related data in a straightforward and quick manner (Hur et al., 2007). Fans should be able to obtain information effortlessly and use SST easily, with instructions being clear and understandable (Kim et al., 2017). Therefore, we postulate *H2: The perceived ease of use positively correlates with the intention to use SST.*

Literature suggests adding a dimension to reflect pleasure to the TAM in order to understand the acceptance and usage intentions of technologies that are primarily focused on entertainment (Van der Heijden, 2004). Hedonic value, understood as the fun or pleasure that results from using a technology (Venkatesh et al., 2012), is particularly relevant to SST. Therefore, we postulate *H3: The hedonic value from SST positively correlates with the intention to use SST.*

Innovation resistance theory

While TAM focuses on the drivers of technology adoption, Ram and Sheth's (1989) IRT emphasizes the factors that hinder acceptance, offering a more holistic analysis of user behavior. This dual approach addresses the need highlighted by Kang et al. (2015) to integrate multiple theories for a comprehensive understanding of technology acceptance. The IRT provides a critical framework for understanding the barriers to adopting technologies, making it an ideal complement to the TAM. In the SST context, where both enthusiastic adoption and significant resistance can be assumed among fans, IRT helps elucidate why some fans may resist innovations despite their perceived benefits.

Resistance to innovation is a significant factor that can slow down or even block the adoption of new products (Laukkanen et al., 2008). Defined as behaviors that maintain the status quo under the influence of change efforts (Ram, 1987), resistance is often rooted in the perception of change as a threat (Ram, 1987). Various motivations drive consumers to reject innovations, including concerns about tradition, security, and social acceptance (Ram & Sheth, 1989). Therefore, we hypothesize *H4: Resistance towards SST negatively correlates with the intention to use SST.*

For a deeper understanding our research strives to delve deeper in the composition of a potential resistance. Therefore, we derive specific barriers from related studies and the SST context for better understanding the reluctance to adopt SST. Reflecting Uhrich's (2022) findings on app usage behavior in stadiums, a key influence factor is the potential distraction from the main event. Fans worry about being distracted from the game, which is the central aspect of their stadium visit. For instance, AR applications can divert spectators' attention from the game to the technology. Most spectators view focusing on the live event on the field as the core activity of their visit, creating a conflict between using AR applications and enjoying the live event (Uhrich, 2022). This aligns with the tradition barrier in Ram & Sheth's (1989) IRT. Evidence suggests that new technologies in stadiums can diminish the fan experience (Levallet et al., 2019). Fans fear that increased use of technology in stadiums will lead to more spectators being preoccupied with their smartphones, negatively impacting the atmosphere (Uhlendorf & Uhrich, 2022). Consequently, we propose *H5: Potential distraction from the live event positively correlates with resistance towards SST.*

For many individuals, digital innovations present experience coming along with the opacity of data processing. Security concerns are understood as fans' fears of losing control over private information (Mani & Chouk, 2018) and are a major concern for fans to use technologies (Capgemini Research Institute, 2020). Skepticism about data protection demonstrably reduces the willingness to adopt digital technologies in sports (Aksoy et al., 2020; Naraine & Karg, 2020). In the IoT context, current research indicates that security concerns are a significant barrier to adopting devices and services (Park & Shin, 2017). Perceived security concerns is directly positively associated with consumer resistance to smart services (Mani & Chouk, 2018). We transfer this to the SST context, proposing *H6: Perceived security concerns positively correlate with resistance towards SST.*

Attending sports events occurs in a group environment with deeply rooted traditions and norms. Spectators are typically surrounded by other fans, making it likely they will experience

social disapproval if their behavior is seen as violating these norms (Uhrich, 2022). Social risk involves the concern that fans might be negatively perceived by their peers if they use SST, particularly if this behavior disrupts self-image congruence (Mani & Chouk, 2018). Furthermore, social risk is identified as a psychological barrier in IRT (Mani & Chouk, 2018). We postulate *H7: Social risks positively correlate with resistance towards SST.*

Fan identification

The concept of fan identification has been used as a theoretical framework by many scholars to explain various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions of fans in different contexts (e.g., Kwon et al., 2014; Lock & Heere, 2017; Siuda, 2010). Fan identification, grounded in identity theory (Biscaia et al., 2018) and defined as the psychological connection an individual feels with a sports team (Wann & Branscombe, 1990), plays a crucial role in shaping fans' responses to innovations like SST. European sports fans, known for their deep-rooted traditions, often view commercialization and digitalization critically (Schubert et al., 2016). The strong social component of live sports consumption is seen as potentially threatened by digital advancements. The degree of fan identification varies significantly, with less identified fans engaging more passively, deriving enjoyment primarily from the entertainment value of the event (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Hedlund, 2017). Conversely, highly identified fans, who have a stronger emotional bond with their team (Merkel, 2012), tend to resist changes that disrupt their traditional experiences. This resistance can extend to SST, which they may perceive as intrusive. Understanding these dynamics is vital for tailoring marketing strategies effectively (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), as fans exhibit different affective and cognitive reactions based on their identification levels (Dietz-Uhler & Lanter, 2008).

Research to date has rarely focused on fan identification in the context of technologies. However, we assume that fan identification might alter the effects of hedonic value and social risks, as highly identified fans might try to focus on the sporting or support during their stadium attendance. For these fans, the fun factor might be lower compared to fans with lower identification, who also might derive pleasure from side-entertainment such as SST. On the other hand, tradition-oriented fans might value the social risks higher, e.g. what other fans think of them for letting the team support slide in favor of using SST in the stands. Based on previous studies examining the moderating role of fan identification in the context of sports fandom (e.g., Ahn et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2009) we therefore hypothesize: *H8a: The positive effect of hedonic value on the intention to use SST is weaker for high levels of fan identification*

(moderation). *H8b: The positive effect of social risks on the resistance towards SST is stronger for high levels of fan identification (moderation).* Figure 1 summarizes the research model.

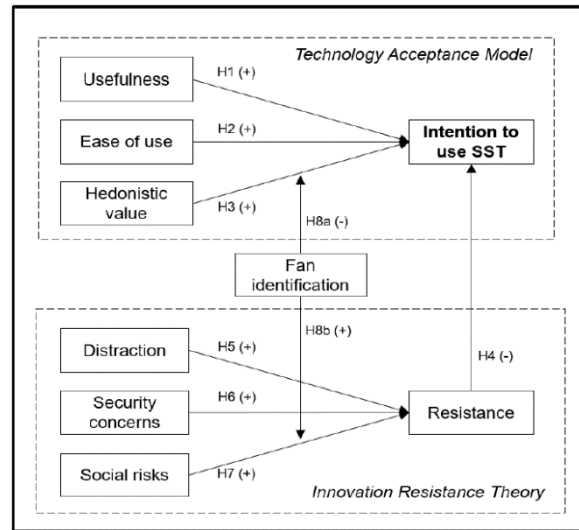


Figure 1: Research model

Methodology

Data collection and sample description

Data for this study was collected from newsletter subscribers of a professional ice hockey and basketball team in Germany. While this may limit the generalizability of our results (see limitations), it ensures that our sample consists of individuals who will soon encounter SST, thereby strengthening the validity of our findings. Additionally, the survey was conducted just before the opening of a new multi-sports arena equipped with advanced smart IoT technologies for both teams, which further enhances data validity due to the high relevance and immediacy of the topic for the participants. These multi-sports arenas are designed for versatility, featuring adaptive digital systems like modular LED displays and flexible audio-visual setups, suitable for a wide range of events, including traditional sports, concerts, large meetings, and e-sport championships. In contrast, large football stadiums are primarily optimized for football, incorporating high-resolution scoreboards and advanced player tracking. While football stadiums may occasionally host other events, their infrastructure is predominantly focused on football, whereas multi-sports arenas can quickly adapt to various types of events.

For a better understanding, the survey introduced four examples for SST at the beginning: two entertainment technologies, one infotainment technology, and one service technology. Several attention checks were included to ensure data quality. This procedure generated 504 valid responses.

The average age of the participants was 40.0 years, with a standard deviation of 15.1 years. The youngest participant was 14 years old, while the oldest was 82. This age range includes perspectives from both Digital Natives and older generations. Of the participants, 348 were male, 152 were female, and four did not specify their gender. All participants indicated an interest in at least one of the four most popular team sports in Germany: basketball (416), ice hockey (265), football (347), and handball (137), with multiple selections possible. Regarding stadium visits, 472 respondents (94%) stated that they had attended at least one match of their favorite team in the past season, while 149 (30%) even visited more than half of the home games.

Operationalization of constructs

The constructs in this study were measured using established scales from previous research, adapted to the SST context (Note: The questionnaire can be requested from the corresponding author). The utilitarian and hedonic value were each measured using three items from the work of Voss et al. (2003). Perceived ease of use was assessed with three items from Kim et al. (2017). Perceived distraction and social risk were each measured by three items from Uhlenndorf and Uhrich (2022). Security concerns were assessed with three items from Mani and Chouk (2018). Usage intention was measured using three items from Venkatesh et al. (2012). Fan identification was measured with two items from Wann and Branscombe (1990). The construct of resistance against SST was measured by a combination of items from Mani & Chouk 2018 and Kleijnen et al. 2009. All item formulations were adapted to the specific context of SST without compromising their meaning or clarity. Item evaluation was conducted using a seven-point Likert scale, chosen for its ability to enhance reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

Results

Measurement model

To validate our proposed research model, we utilized structural equation modeling with the partial least squares approach (PLS-SEM). This method is particularly effective for evaluating complex path models involving latent variables (Benitez et al., 2020). Using SmartPLS 4, we configured the algorithm for path weighting with a maximum of 5,000 iterations and a stop criterion of 10^{-7} . To assess the measurement model's validity and reliability, we examined several recommended indices, including Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), convergent validity, and discriminant validity. For convergent validity, we ensured that outer factor loadings exceeded .708 (Hair et al., 2019), composite reliabilities (CR) were above .8 (Nunnally, 1978), and the average variance extracted (AVE) was at least .5

(Barclay et al., 1995). As shown in Table 1, all criteria for reliability and convergent validity were satisfactorily met.

Discriminant validity was tested to ensure that construct indicators are distinct from each other. Using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, we compared the square roots of the AVEs with the corresponding off-diagonal inter-construct correlations (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 2, the square roots of AVEs exceeded the inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity for all constructs.

	. α	CR	AVE
DST	.909	.942	.844
EOU	.917	.948	.858
FID	.874	.940	.887
HED	.948	.966	.905
INT	.963	.976	.931
RES	.789	.904	.826
SCR	.812	.889	.729
SEC	.903	.939	.837
UTI	.899	.937	.833

Table 1: Reliability, and convergent validity of the measurements

(I)	DST	EOU	FID	HED	INT
DST	.919				
EOU	-.391	.926			
FID	.014	.023	.942		
HED	-.455	.460	-.023	.951	
INT	.472	.513	.011	.721	.965
RES	.433	-.436	.094	-.592	-.628
SCR	.625	-.445	.038	-.460	-.490
SEC	.434	-.393	-.045	-.362	-.345
UTI	-.432	.524	-.042	.831	.713
(II)	RES	SCR	SEC	UTI	
RES	.909				
SCR	.537	.854			
SEC	.302	.445	.915		
UTI	-.601	-.465	-.352	.912	

Table 2: Inter-construct correlations and square roots of AVE

Furthermore, we used the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) to reinforce our findings. All HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of .85 (Henseler et al., 2015), further validating discriminant validity.

Structural model

Following Benitez et al.'s (2020) guidelines for PLS-SEM, we conducted an exhaustive path analysis of the structural model. We utilized determination coefficients, cross-validated redundancy, and bootstrapping techniques to evaluate the significance of coefficients at a $p < .05$ level. Our analysis revealed an R^2 value of .624 for the intention to use SST, which is consistent with findings from similar studies, thereby affirming the robustness of our model.

Regarding the direct effects (H1-7), usefulness (path coefficient = .223***), ease of use (path coefficient = .131***), and hedonic value (path coefficient = .316***) were positively associated with intention to use SST. Resistance against SST is negatively correlated with the usage intention (path coefficient = .265***). Additionally, resistance ($R^2 = .326$) was shaped by distraction (path coefficient = .148***) and social risks (path coefficient = .398***). Security concerns (path coefficient = .049) showed no significant effect on resistance. Further examination via mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of the resistance drivers, distraction ($p < .01^{**}$) and social risks ($p < .001^{***}$), on the intention to use SST.

To investigate the moderation effect of fan identification (H8a and H8b), we employed the product indicator approach, as endorsed by Benitez et al. (2020) for latent variables. This technique involves multiplying each indicator of the latent independent variable by each indicator of the moderator variable, resulting in indicators for the latent interaction variable. We then examined these interaction variables to evaluate the moderation effect. As predicted, fan identification significantly moderated the relationships: it weakened the positive effect of hedonic value (path coefficient = -.104**) and strengthened the positive relationship between social risks and intention (path coefficient = .120**). Figure 2 summarizes the results of the analysis.

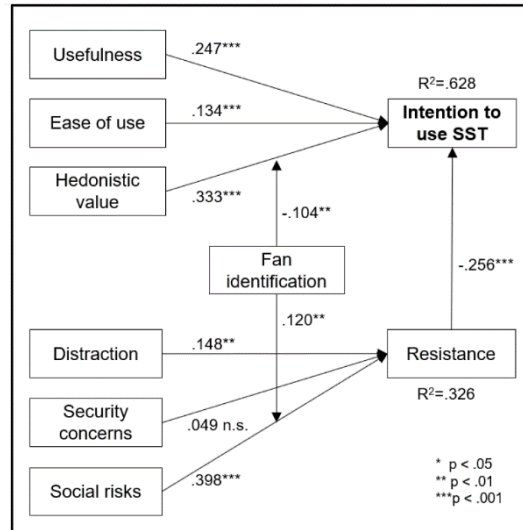


Figure 2: Structural model

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes significantly to the theoretical understanding of technology adoption in the sports context. By integrating TAM, IRT and the concept of fan identification, we provide a comprehensive framework that explains the drivers and barriers of SST. This multi-theoretical approach bridges a critical gap in the literature, which often examines these dimensions in isolation.

First, our findings extend the scarce body of research with SST focus, which have mainly consisted of case studies and conceptual works (Kainz et al., 2020; Melander, 2016; van Heck et al., 2021). Our research, however, provide a rarely seen quantitative study, testing these former concepts on a highly informative sample of sport event attendees. By validating that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic value are pivotal in predicting the intention to use SST we confirm the relevance of traditional TAM constructs in hedonic contexts like sports entertainment. By incorporating IRT, we elucidate how perceived risks, such as distraction from the live event and social risks, negatively impact SST adoption. This adds a novel perspective to the existing literature, emphasizing that resistance factors are especially crucial as acceptance factors in understanding fan-related technology. Moreover, our research highlights the moderating role of fan identification (Theodorakis et al., 2009), demonstrating that highly identified fans exhibit different adoption and resistance behaviors compared to less identified fans. This nuance underscores the importance of considering differences in fan identity, enriching the theoretical landscape of sports marketing and consumer behavior (Stegmann et al., 2023).

Despite our focus on traditional sports, the theoretical implications of our study offer valuable insights for e-sports research as well. Given the overlapping motives for live spectatorship between traditional sports and e-sports (Pizzo et al., 2018), certain SST drivers, particularly usefulness and hedonic value, may similarly enhance e-sport events. However, e-sport spectators might exhibit different behaviors and preferences regarding social interaction, as digital engagement is more deeply ingrained in the e-sport community compared to traditional sports fans (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Therefore, a focused study on SST usage in e-sports would be the next step. Our study supports the expanding view that technology acceptance models need to consider contextual and individual factors (Venkatesh et al., 2012). The incorporation of fan identification into the TAM and IRT frameworks parallels recent trends in consumer behavior research, which emphasizes the role of identity and emotional attachment in technology adoption (Carter & Grover, 2015). This integration demonstrates the applicability of our model beyond the sports context, suggesting that similar identity-related factors could influence technology acceptance in other highly emotional and identity-driven domains such as music concerts, festivals, or political events. In sum, our study not only validates and extends existing theoretical models but also introduces a nuanced understanding of the interplay between acceptance and resistance factors in the context of SST. These insights pave the way for future research to explore other moderating variables and to apply our integrated model in different technological and cultural settings, thereby broadening the scope and applicability of technology acceptance theories.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of our study provide actionable insights for sports stadium managers, technology developers, and marketers aiming to enhance fan engagement through SST. First, recognizing the significant drivers of SST adoption, perceived usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic value, stadium managers should focus on implementing user-friendly and enjoyable technologies that enhance the overall fan experience. Ensuring that SST are intuitive and add tangible value to the stadium visit can significantly boost adoption rates.

Enhancing the hedonic value of SST through gamification elements, as suggested by Won et al. (2022), can significantly increase fan enjoyment and engagement. Gamified experiences, such as interactive games and rewards systems, can make the stadium visit more enjoyable and immersive, encouraging repeated visits and higher levels of fan interaction. Addressing the barriers identified in our study is also crucial. To mitigate concerns about distraction, stadium managers can design SST in a way that complements rather than competes with the live event.

For instance, providing real-time replays or interactive features that enhance the viewing experience without pulling attention away from the game. Additionally, social risk can be reduced by fostering a community atmosphere where SST usage is normalized and encouraged, perhaps through targeted marketing campaigns or fan engagement initiatives that highlight positive social aspects of using these technologies.

Lastly, the moderating effect of fan identification suggests that marketing strategies and app implication should be tailored to different levels of fan types. For highly identified fans, it is essential to emphasize how SST can enhance their deep connection with the team, such as exclusive content or loyalty rewards. For less identified fans, the focus should be on the entertainment and convenience aspects of SST to attract a broader audience.

Limitations

As usual, our study has several limitations. First, it focuses on the specific context of German sports fans, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or regional settings. The sports fan scenes in Europe, particularly in Germany, are known for their deep-rooted traditions and community-oriented culture, which differ significantly from the more entertainment-focused fan culture in American sports (Schubert et al., 2016). This cultural difference can influence SST adoption and perception. Second, the cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, preventing insights into long-term adoption behaviors. The use of newsletter subscribers as participants, who likely exhibit a higher level of commitment to their teams, may have introduced bias into our results. Additionally, fans of other sports beyond ice hockey and basketball may yield different results, as spectator motivations can vary significantly across sport categories, such as team versus individual sports, aggressive versus non-aggressive sports, and stylistic versus non-stylistic sports (Wann et al., 2008). Despite these limitations, our findings remain valuable as they offer comprehensive insights for enhancing fan engagement and experience.

Conclusion and future research

This study provides an integrated framework for understanding the adoption and resistance of SST by combining the TAM, IRT, and fan identification concepts. The findings reveal that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic value are significant drivers that enhance fans' intentions to use SST. Conversely, distraction from the live event and social risks serve as notable barriers, negatively impacting SST acceptance. Interestingly, security concerns, often highlighted as a critical issue in technology adoption, did not show a significant impact in this context. A critical insight from our research is the moderating role of fan identification. Fans

with a strong connection to their team are less influenced by hedonic aspects and more concerned about social risks. This finding underscores the importance of recognizing different fan segments and tailoring SST accordingly. For instance, highly identified fans may benefit from SST features that reinforce their team loyalty, while casual fans may appreciate the entertainment more. Addressing both, the drivers and barriers of SST acceptance, this research offers a holistic understanding of how to effectively integrate digital technologies into sports venues. It underscores the importance of designing SST to complement rather than compete with the live event.

While this study provides valuable insights, avenues for future research are suggested. Especially, expanding the research to different cultural and regional settings would provide a broader understanding of SST adoption. For instance, American sports fans may respond differently to SST, given the entertainment-oriented nature of American sports. Moreover, future research could investigate additional moderating variables, such as demographic factors or psychological traits, to understand better how different fan characteristics influence SST acceptance. Understanding these nuances can help in designing SST experiences that cater to the specific preferences of diverse fan groups.

By addressing these research avenues, scholars can further enhance the understanding of SST, contributing to the development of more effective strategies for integrating technology into the live sports experience, thereby enriching the digital fan experience.

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Paper 10: Enhancing Preventive Health through Apps: An Extended Health Belief Model Approach for Widespread Adoption

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Abstract

Preventive health applications (PHA) are digital tools designed to facilitate preventive healthcare measures, such as regular check-ups and early disease detection. Despite potential benefits, PHA are not widely used, and existing implementations often lack quality. Furthermore, there is limited research on these apps. This study investigates the determinants influencing the willingness to use PHA by employing an extended Health Belief Model. Data were collected through an online survey from 248 participants and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. Results indicate that perceived technical barriers significantly deter the intention to use PHA, while perceived medical benefits and susceptibility positively influence usage intention. Additionally, health motivation impacts perceived benefits, and privacy concerns are linked to technical barriers. Our approach provides a novel perspective by incorporating health-related beliefs and motivations, bridging a significant gap in understanding health technology adoption. These insights offer implications for designing more effective PHA.

Keywords: Preventive health technology, Health belief model, Digital health measures, Health behavior

Introduction

The rising incidence of cancer on a global scale underscores the urgent need for effective preventive strategies. In 2020, approximately 10 million people worldwide died as a result of cancer (Sung et al., 2021). Despite significant advancements in therapy, the high rate of new cases remains a pressing challenge. Experts emphasize that up to 40 percent of cancer cases could be prevented through primary preventive measures (Islami et al., 2018). In Germany, where this study was carried out, 89 percent of the population recognizes the importance of cancer prevention (Msd, 2022). However, a separate study from the same year found that only about 43 percent of respondents in Germany regularly participate in medical preventive check-ups (Radtke, 2022a). This discrepancy between the perceived importance of prevention and actual participation in preventive check-ups can be attributed to various factors, including a lack of information, reminders for appointment scheduling, as well as uncertainties and negative feelings (Msd, 2022). Against this backdrop, developing innovative approaches to sustainably increase participation in preventive check-ups is crucial.

The increasing tendency to seek health-related information on the Internet and the perceived benefits of health apps in Germany highlight the growing acceptance of digital solutions in healthcare (Radtke, 2022b). The diversity of health apps is reflected in a wide range of applications covering various areas, from providing information about diseases to supporting personal fitness or nutritional goals (Enste et al., 2010).

In light of this, promoting preventive health applications (PHA) appears to be a promising approach. Such an application could primarily provide a comprehensive overview of various early detection measures and remind users of appointments. Furthermore, it could reduce uncertainties about the healthcare system and serve as a central source of information, facilitating the search for appropriate measures. The precise PHA implementation can vary depending on the specific health issues they aim to address, particularly for conditions linked to genetic heritability. For example, PHA could play a crucial role in preventing diseases such as breast cancer, colorectal cancer, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, which are well-known for their strong links to genetic predisposition and represent significant public health concerns (McPherson et al., 2000). Moreover, these diseases have established guidelines for early detection and prevention, including regular screenings, lifestyle modifications, and medical interventions (Grundy et al., 2019). These preventive measures align well with the functionalities that PHA can offer, such as personalized reminders for screenings, educational content on lifestyle changes, and tools for monitoring health indicators. By incorporating

tailored functionalities, PHA can empower individuals to take proactive steps towards managing their health, ultimately reducing the prevalence of these genetically influenced diseases. Although existing apps offer similar functions, they are absent from the lists of popular health apps and have poor ratings in the app stores (Aok, 2024; Ärzteblatt, 2021). Consequently, practical PHA implementations are currently non-existent, despite a manageable range of necessary functions (e.g., appointment reminders, digital punch card). This raises the question of what requirements such an app must meet to achieve broad acceptance of digital health prevention. While prior research has primarily addressed general health apps (Askari et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021) or focused on specific applications like COVID-19 tracing (Fortagne et al., 2021) and nutrition apps (Svensson et al., 2016), a thorough examination of PHA in the realm of physical preventive care has been absent. This paper therefore addresses the research question: *Which factors determine the intention to use health prevention apps?*

To address this research question, we first present the significance of health prevention and the current state of research on preventive apps. Then, we introduce the Health Belief Model (HBM) as theoretical foundation. Enriched by suitable context factors, it offers a holistic approach to explaining health behavior. In doing so, we explicitly set ourselves apart from the large amount of research that deals with medical apps using theories of technology acceptance and supplement the literature with the perspective of health attitudes. To validate the suggested research model, we conducted a survey with 248 participants. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicated that perceived technical barriers, medical benefits, and susceptibility influence the intention to use PHA. Privacy concerns and health motivation also play critical roles with indirect effects on the intention to use PHA, while effort barriers were not confirmed as significant inhibitor. Based on these results, theoretical and practical implications for future research are discussed.

Literature Review

Despite the growing interest in digital health solutions, research on the use of PHA remains limited. However, numerous studies on related topics, such as general health apps, provide valuable insights into the determinants of PHA usage. This section explores these insights and their implications for understanding the willingness to use PHA. A systematic literature review by Borghouts et al. (2021) investigated barriers and facilitators affecting user engagement with digital interventions in mental health, such as apps and websites. The study revealed that severe mental health symptoms could increase interest in digital interventions, highlighting the potential for digital tools to attract users with significant health concerns. The digital format's

flexibility, enabling users to access resources and record health data conveniently, was also emphasized. However, technical issues and privacy concerns were significant barriers to sustained use. Kreyenschulte and Bohnet-Joschko (2022) examined the expectations and needs of young adults regarding digital health innovations through focus group interviews. Their findings underscored the perceived benefits of health apps, such as providing critical information for preventive measures and the ability to manage health data digitally. Time savings emerged as a significant advantage, indicating that convenience is a crucial factor for younger users. These insights suggest that PHA should prioritize user-friendly interfaces and effective information delivery to meet user expectations. In a different demographic, Askari et al. (2020) focused on older adults in the Netherlands and their intention to use medical apps. The study found that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and self-efficacy positively influenced the willingness to use these apps, while anxiety had a negative impact. This highlights the importance of addressing usability and building confidence among older users to enhance their engagement. Bettiga et al. (2020) conducted a survey to understand user willingness to adopt a mobile health application for cardiovascular prevention. The results indicated that perceived usefulness and ease of use were determinants of acceptance. Furthermore, technological readiness and innovativeness were significant factors, suggesting that PHA need to be both practical and appealing to tech-savvy users to gain widespread acceptance. Luo et al. (2021) explored the motivation behind the continuous use of health apps. They found that individuals with a higher perceived susceptibility to diseases were more likely to adopt protective measures, leading to a positive attitude towards health apps. This implies that PHA should emphasize the user's health risk awareness to encourage usage. Kim and Han (2021) investigated the determinants driving older adults to continue using health apps. Trust in technology, outcome expectations, and privacy concerns were significant factors, indicating that PHA must ensure data security and manage user expectations effectively to retain older users. Overall, these studies suggest that severe health issues can drive interest in digital health solutions.

However, technical issues and privacy concerns remain significant barriers. The diverse benefits of health apps, particularly for preventive measures, are evident, but the successful adoption of health technology depends on addressing usability, trust, and privacy concerns. Despite these valuable insights, there remains a notable gap in research specifically addressing the factors influencing the adoption of PHA in an understanding of prevention of diseases that have not yet occurred. Our study aims to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of these determinants, thereby contributing to the underexplored area of digital health prevention and offering practical implications for the development and implementation of effective PHA.

Theoretical foundations and hypotheses

Health Belief Model

The HBM is a widely recognized theory in the field of health behavior research, developed in the 1950s by social psychologists Hochbaum, Leventhal, Kegeles, and Rosenstock. The model emerged in response to the observation that many individuals did not adopt preventive measures or participate in screening tests for early disease detection, despite the public health emphasis on disease prevention at that time (Rosenstock, 1974). The HBM seeks to explain and predict health behaviors by focusing on the attitudes and beliefs regarding health and disease (Becker, 1974). The HBM posits that health behavior is influenced by two main factors: the value placed on avoiding illness (or getting well) and the belief that a specific health action will prevent or cure illness. These beliefs are shaped by the following key components: (1) Perceived susceptibility: This refers to an individual's subjective assessment of their risk of developing a particular health condition (Rosenstock, 1974). The perception of risk can range from denial of any risk to a strong belief in personal vulnerability. (2) Perceived severity: This component deals with an individual's belief about the seriousness of contracting an illness or leaving it untreated. It encompasses the potential medical, social, and emotional consequences (Rosenstock, 1974). (3) Perceived benefits: This factor relates to an individual's belief in the efficacy of the advised action to reduce the risk or seriousness of impact (Rosenstock, 1974). Those who believe that a certain action will be beneficial in preventing or mitigating an illness are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors. (4) Perceived barriers: These are the potential negative aspects of a particular health action, such as inconvenience, expense, danger, or discomfort (Rosenstock, 1974). The perception of these barriers can deter individuals from engaging in beneficial health behaviors. (5) Cues to action: These are factors that trigger the decision-making process to accept a recommended health action. Cues can be internal (e.g., symptoms) or external (e.g., media campaigns, advice from others) (Becker, 1977). The HBM also considers additional modifying factors, such as demographic variables (age, gender), socio-psychological variables (personality, social class), and structural variables (knowledge about the disease) that can influence an individual's perceptions and thereby their health behavior (Rosenstock, 1974). The applicability of the HBM extends beyond its initial focus on disease prevention. It has been widely used to understand a range of health behaviors, from chronic disease prevention to vaccination uptake (Che Mohamed et al., 2019). For instance, it has been applied in the context of analyzing the adoption of COVID-19 tracing apps, aiming to warn potentially infected individuals (Walrave et al., 2020).

Given its comprehensive approach to understanding desirable health behavior, the HBM is particularly suitable for examining the willingness to use PHA. Representative of our research objective, we employ the intention to use PHA as the outcome variable of our research model. It describes a person's willingness to perform a particular action with a technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Hypotheses development

For our study, we adapt the core constructs of the HBM to the context of PHA. We exclude the cues to action variable due to the difficulty of retrospectively capturing short-term triggers that spur health actions. We also exclude the perceived severity component because the focus of our study is on preventive behaviors rather than the response to existing conditions, which perceived severity predominantly influences. In addition to the HBM factors, we integrate additional factors to specify our model towards the willingness to use PHA. Perceived susceptibility is critical in driving preventive behaviors within the HBM, influencing the willingness to use PHA. Studies have shown that higher perceived susceptibility increases the likelihood of engaging in preventive actions, such as vaccination (Wong et al., 2020). These findings suggest that individuals who perceive themselves at higher risk are more inclined to use PHA. *H1: Perceived Susceptibility positively correlates with the intention to use PHA.* Research indicates that individuals who recognize the benefits of preventive actions, like breast self-examination (Lee Champion, 1985) and healthy eating (H.-S. Kim et al., 2012), are more likely to engage in these behaviors. Similarly, the perceived benefits of using health apps, such as COVID-19 tracing apps, enhance their acceptance and usage (Walrave et al., 2020). *H2: Perceived medical benefits positively correlate with the intention to use PHA.* Perceived effort deter health-promoting behaviors, as seen in studies on breast self-examination (Lee Champion, 1985) and mammography participation (VanDyke & Shell, 2017). Lower perceived barriers regarding time and convenience are associated with higher participation rates in preventive measures. Since usable PHA should be time-saving and breaking down contact barriers, a lower effort for the personal health management should be crucial for acceptance (Wong et al., 2020). *H3: Perceived effort barriers negatively correlate with the intention to use PHA.* Concerning that current PHA concepts show rather poor implementations, we further distinguish between effort-related and technical barriers to comprehensively understand the unique challenges each poses. This differentiation allows for targeted interventions to improve PHA adoption. Technical barriers include issues like lack of instructions for app use, compatibility problems with certain smartphones, or limited access to modern devices (Harborth et al., 2023). Studies on COVID-19 tracing apps highlight that addressing these

barriers is essential for improving user acceptance (Fortagne et al., 2021). Thus, minimizing technical barriers is crucial for the successful implementation of PHA. H4: Technical barriers negatively correlate with the intention to use PHA. To extend the HBM-based hypotheses with further suitable constructs from related research contexts, we introduce health motivation as next influencing factor. Health motivation refers to the inner driving force for health-related behavior (Jayanti & Burns, 1998). It drives individuals to engage in preventive health behaviors. Studies show that higher health motivation correlates with increased engagement in health-promoting activities, such as preventive measures against COVID-19 (Mahindaratne, 2021). Assuming that motivated individuals are more likely to recognize and value the benefits of preventive measures, we hypothesize a direct effect of health motivation on perceived medical benefits. H5: Health motivation positively correlates with perceived medical benefits from PHA. Finally, we strived to have a closer look at potential technical barriers and therefore adapt the construct privacy concerns from related studies (Fortagne et al., 2021). Privacy concerns pertain to users' worries about the security of their personal data, especially regarding apps that might collect extensive information or fail to protect it adequately (Xu et al., 2011) and are major obstacles to the adoption of health apps. Research shows that privacy concerns significantly impact the willingness to use mobile applications, particularly health-related ones (Gu et al., 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, privacy concerns outweighed health concerns, highlighting their importance in app acceptance (Chan & Saqib, 2021). Addressing these concerns is vital for reducing technical barriers and enhancing app usage. It is reasonable to assume that privacy concerns influence technical barriers first because users who worry about data security are likely to perceive technical limitations, such as inadequate data encryption or poor privacy policies, as significant barriers. H6: Privacy concerns positively correlate with the technical barriers of PHA. Figure 1 summarizes the proposed hypotheses.

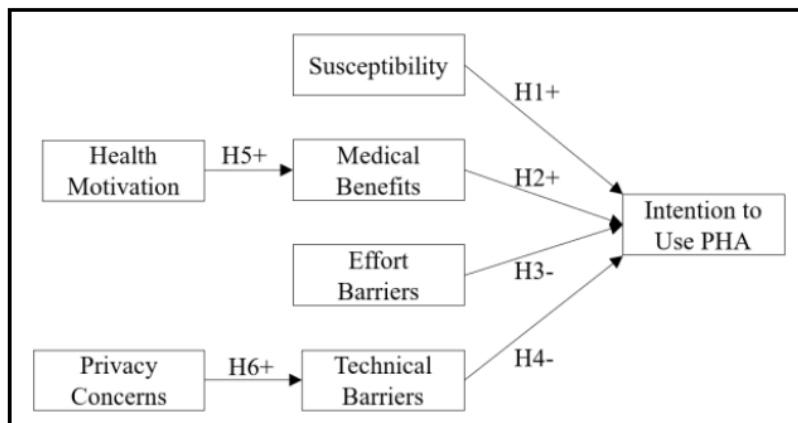


Figure 1: Research model

Methodology

Data collection and sample description

To gather data for this study, an online survey was conducted in Germany in January and February 2024 and was disseminated through various social media platforms. Initially, participants received a brief introduction explaining the survey's focus on severe, chronic physical diseases that can be detected through regular medical check-ups. Then, potential PHA implementations and functionalities were presented. Of the 248 participants, 100 were male (39.8%), 149 were female (59.4%), and two identified as non-binary (0.8%). The average age was 33.6 years, ranging from 18 to 71 years. The sample displayed a high level of education, which will be addressed in the limitations: 22.7% held a master's degree; 23.5% held a bachelor's degree; and 17.5% had completed vocational training, a specialized job training. Additionally, 20.3% had a high school diploma, 10.4% had a secondary school diploma, 3.2% had a lower secondary school diploma, and 2.4% had no formal school diploma. Regarding employment status, 53.8% of respondents were employees, followed by students at 30.7%. The largest income group, comprising 27.5% of respondents, net-earned between €2,001 and €3,000 monthly, while 22.7% earned between €1,001 and €2,000. About 14.3% did not disclose their income. Asked for their general subjective health condition, 75.5% rated themselves in the upper part of the scale (“rather good”, “good”, “very good” subjective health condition).

Operationalization of constructs

To measure the constructs, we employed established scales from prior research, translated them to German and slightly modified them towards our context. Each construct was assessed using multiple items with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For an overview on the questions, we refer to the appendix. Perceived susceptibility was measured using items adapted from Champion (1984), capturing the degree to which individuals believe they are at risk of developing physical health issues. Likewise, perceived medical benefits were evaluated with items derived from Champion (1984), assessing the perceived advantages of engaging in preventive health measures, such as preventing future health problems. Perceived effort barriers were measured using items adapted from Che Mohamed et al. (2019). This construct captures the obstacles that might hinder individuals from participating in preventive health check-ups, including feelings of embarrassment and the required time. Perceived technical barriers were assessed with items adapted from Harborth et al. (2023). These items measure the potential technical difficulties that users might face when using PHA, such as concerns about understanding how the app works. The items for health

motivation were derived from Che Mohamed et al. (2019) and assesses the intrinsic motivation to maintain and improve health, including the desire to discover emerging health problems early. Privacy concerns were measured using items adapted from Gu et al. (2017), evaluating the apprehensions users might have regarding privacy of their personal data when using PHA. Finally, behavioral intention to use a PHA was assessed using items adapted from Tavares and Oliveira (2016). This construct measures the likelihood of individuals adopting and regularly using PHA once it becomes available.

Results

Measurement model

To validate our proposed research model, we employed structural equation modeling using the partial least squares approach (PLS-SEM). This method is highly effective for evaluating complex path models involving latent variables (Benitez et al., 2020). Utilizing SmartPLS 4, we configured the algorithm for path weighting with a maximum of 1,000 iterations and a stop criterion of 10^{-7} . To confirm convergent validity, the external factor loadings needed to be above .708 (Hair et al., 2019), composite reliabilities above .8 (Nunnally, 1978), and the average variance extracted (AVE) at least .5 (Barclay et al., 1995). Table 1 demonstrates that all criteria for reliability and convergent validity were met.

	. α	CR	AVE
Behavioral intention	.956	.972	.920
Health motivation	.711	.753	.523
Effort barriers	.786	.831	.627
Medical benefits	.802	.870	.629
Privacy concerns	.935	.953	.836
Susceptibility	.740	.818	.607
Technical barriers	.908	.935	.783

Table 1: Reliability and convergent validity

Discriminant validity was rigorously tested to ensure that construct indicators are distinct from one another. Using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, we compared the square roots of the AVEs with the corresponding off-diagonal inter-construct correlations (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 2, the square roots of AVEs exceeded the inter-construct correlations, thus confirming discriminant validity for all constructs. Additionally, we employed the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) to strengthen our findings. As depicted in Table 3, all HTMT values

were below the recommended threshold of .85 (Henseler et al., 2015), further reinforcing the discriminant validity of our constructs.

(I)	IN	HM	EB	BN
IN	.959			
HM	.363	.723		
EB	-.048	-.187	.792	
BN	.285	.598	-.291	.793
PC	-.169	-.093	.155	-.186
SC	.153	.074	.114	.095
TB	-.253	-.233	.301	-.207
(II)	PC	SC	TV	
PC	.914			
SC	.016	.779		
TB	.400	.161	.885	

Table 2: Inter-construct correlations and square roots of AVE

Note: IN=Behavioral intention, HM=Health motivation, EB= Effort barriers; BN= Medical benefits; PC=Privacy concerns, SC=Susceptibility, TB=Technical barriers

	IN	HM	EB	BN	PC	SC
HM	.442					
EB	.039	.347				
BN	.319	.704	.358			
PC	.179	.106	.204	.212		
SC	.143	.252	.211	.156	.077	
TB	.272	.285	.400	.226	.432	.237

Table 3: Discriminant validity – Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

To address potential concerns regarding collinearity and common method bias, we calculated the variance inflation factors (VIF). As shown in Table 4, none of the VIF values exceed the threshold of 3.3, indicating that our structural model is free from collinearity and common method bias issues (Hair et al., 2019).

	IN	BN	TB
HM		1.000	
EB	1.183		
BN	1.139		
PC			1.000
SC	1.057		
TB	1.146		

Table 4: VIF factors

Structural model

Adhering to Benitez et al.'s (2020) guidelines for PLS-SEM, we performed a comprehensive path analysis of the structural model. We utilized determination coefficients, cross-validated redundancy, and bootstrapping techniques to evaluate the significance of coefficients at a $p < .05$ level. Our analysis yielded an R^2 value of .154 for the intention to use PHA, which seems relatively low but will be discussed further in the limitations section.

Calculating the direct effects, the analysis revealed that technical barriers had the strongest impact on the intention to use PHA (H4, path coefficient = $-.254^{**}$), followed by medical benefits (H2, path coefficient = $.241^{**}$), and susceptibility (H1, path coefficient = $.162^*$). The correlation between effort barriers and the intention to use PHA was not significant, leading to the rejection of H3. Health motivation was strongly correlated with medical benefits (H5, path coefficient = $.598^{***}$), while privacy concerns showed high significance in correlation with technical barriers (H6, path coefficient = $.400^{***}$). Figure 2 visualizes the direct effects of the PLS-SEM. Accordingly, with the exception of H3, all hypotheses were confirmed.

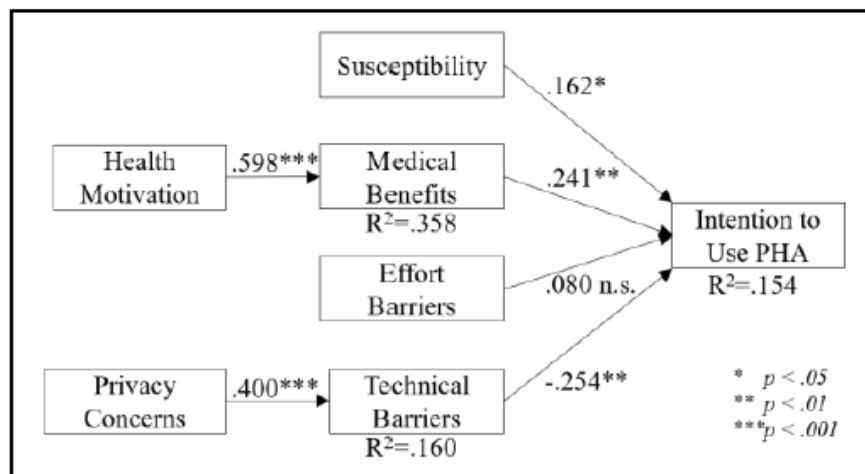


Figure 2: Structural model results

We further tested for indirect effects of the first-level variables (health motivation and privacy concerns) on the intention to use PHA via their respective mediators. This analysis demonstrated that health motivation has a significant indirect effect on the intention to use PHA via medical benefits (path coefficient = $.144^{**}$). Similarly, the indirect negative effect of privacy concerns via technical barriers was confirmed (path coefficient = $-.101^{**}$).

Discussion

Summary of the results

In this study, we identified a significant research gap: comprehensive preventive apps for physical health have not been adequately studied from the user perspective, with existing research focusing primarily on specific diseases or mental health. Additionally, current applications often fall short in usability, hindering their widespread acceptance. Therefore, we aimed to identify the determinants influencing the intention to use PHA by employing an extended HBM. Results from the conducted PLS-SEM revealed that technical barriers, perceived medical benefits, and perceived susceptibility had a significant impact on the intention to use PHA. Health motivation indirectly effects the intention to use PHA via medical benefits, while the negative indirect effect of privacy concerns runs via technical barriers. Effort barriers did not show a significant correlation. These results underscore the importance of technical usability, perceived health benefits, and individual risk perception in the adoption of health prevention apps, which will be elaborated further in the following chapters.

Theoretical implications

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to examine the intention to use PHA using a comprehensive model based on the HBM. Previous research has focused on the general use of health apps (Askari et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021) or more specific applications like COVID-19 tracing apps (Fortagne et al., 2021) and nutrition apps (Svensson et al., 2016). While apps for disease prevention such as type 2 diabetes and skin cancer (Jeffrey et al., 2019; Sangers et al., 2021) and mental health apps (Borghouts et al., 2021) have been studied, a comprehensive examination of PHA in the context of physical preventive care has been lacking.

Our study addresses this gap by presenting a model that predicts the usage of prevention apps, integrating variables such as health motivation, perceived technical barriers, and privacy concerns to expand our understanding of individual health attitudes and contextual factors. The findings revealed that technical barriers had the strongest impact on the intention to use PHA, highlighting the critical role of perceived technical barriers in user adoption. This supports previous research showing that technical challenges significantly hinder the acceptance of health-related mobile applications (Jeffrey et al., 2019; Smoll et al., 2021). Future studies should continue to incorporate and address these barriers to enhance app adoption. Additionally, medical benefits and perceived susceptibility were significant predictors of app usage, aligning with established views that these factors are crucial in preventive health

behaviors (Becker, 1974). However, the non-significant impact of effort barriers suggests a need for further research on the varying influence of the determinants across different contexts.

The strong correlation between health motivation and medical benefits underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation in recognizing the benefits of preventive measures. This finding suggests that enhancing health motivation could be an effective strategy to increase the perceived value of using PHA. Privacy concerns, while not directly impacting the intention to use, significantly correlated with technical barriers. This indicates that privacy issues may exacerbate perceived technical challenges, thereby indirectly affecting app adoption. This nuanced understanding highlights the need for future research to further investigate the interplay between privacy concerns and technical barriers in the health context. Considering the evolving nature of health issues and shifts in people's perceptions of health, future research could benefit from incorporating newer HBM supplements. For example, constructs like social influence, especially in the context of online health communities, and perceived enjoyment, could offer fresh perspectives on user engagement with PHA (Gao et al., 2015). By updating the HBM with these elements, future studies can better capture the complexities of modern health behaviors and provide more relevant recommendations for designing effective digital health interventions. In summary, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of PHA by extending the HBM with relevant variables. It provides a comprehensive framework that can be applied in future research to further explore and enhance the adoption of health prevention technologies. Thereby, we contribute to the literature with a first comprehensive work on PHA usage intention based on a quantitative analysis.

Practical implications

The findings from this study offer several practical implications for the development and implementation of PHA. By addressing key factors such as technical barriers, medical benefits, health motivation, and privacy concerns, developers and healthcare providers can enhance the acceptance and usage of these apps. Technical barriers were found to have the strongest impact on the intention to use PHA. To mitigate these barriers, developers should focus on creating user-friendly interfaces that require minimal technical knowledge to navigate. For example, including clear, step-by-step instructions and video tutorials can help users understand how to use the app effectively. Ensuring compatibility with a wide range of devices and operating systems is also crucial. Providing robust customer support, including chatbots or 24/7 help desks, can assist users in overcoming any technical difficulties they may encounter.

The perception of medical benefits significantly influences the intention to use PHA. Developers and marketers should emphasize the health benefits of using the app in their communication strategies. For instance, they can use testimonials and case studies that demonstrate how the app has helped users achieve better health outcomes. Educational content, such as articles and videos that explain the benefits of preventive health measures, can also be integrated into the app. By providing personalized health insights and actionable recommendations, users can see the direct benefits of using the app for their health, thereby increasing their motivation to engage with it. The effect of perceived susceptibility the importance of increasing users' awareness of their personal risk for developing health issues. To leverage this, app developers and healthcare providers should include features that educate users about their specific health risks based on their medical history and lifestyle. Personalized risk assessments and targeted health alerts can make users more aware of their vulnerability, thereby motivating them to engage with the app. Additionally, marketing strategies should emphasize the potential health threats that PHA can help mitigate, thereby enhancing the perceived need for such tools. Health motivation plays a crucial role in determining the perceived benefits and subsequent use of PHA. To boost health motivation, apps can incorporate gamification elements such as rewards, badges, and challenges that make preventive health activities more engaging. Personalized goal-setting features can help users set and achieve specific health objectives, fostering a sense of accomplishment and motivating continuous use.

Privacy concerns were identified as a significant factor influencing technical barriers and, indirectly, the intention to use PHA. To alleviate these concerns, developers must prioritize data security and privacy. This includes implementing robust encryption methods to protect user data and clearly communicating privacy policies to users. Apps should offer transparency about what data is collected, how it is used, and who has access to it. Providing users with control over their data, such as options to opt-out of data sharing or delete their data, can build trust (Xu et al., 2011). Additionally, obtaining certifications from reputable privacy organizations can reassure users about the app's commitment to protecting privacy (Rifon et al., 2005).

Overall, PHA use can vary significantly depending on the health issue being addressed, with particular relevance to diseases linked to genetic heritability. For instance, individuals with a family history of specific cancers, such as breast or colorectal cancer, may find PHA highly beneficial for managing their health proactively. These apps can offer personalized screening reminders, educational content about genetic risk factors, and connections to genetic counseling services. In these cases, the perceived susceptibility component of the Health Belief Model

plays a crucial role, as individuals aware of their genetic predisposition are more likely to perceive a higher personal risk and thus engage in preventive behaviors. Additionally, PHA can be tailored to address other genetically linked conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, providing users with lifestyle modification tips and regular monitoring tools. By integrating features such as family health history tracking and personalized alerts for lifestyle changes or medical check-ups, PHA can significantly enhance the management and prevention of genetically influenced diseases. In addition to genetically linked diseases, PHA can also be highly effective in managing other chronic conditions, such as hypertension and obesity, by offering continuous monitoring and personalized lifestyle recommendations. PHA could integrate features like daily health tips, medication reminders, and exercise trackers to help users maintain healthy routines and manage their risk factors, thus promoting overall well-being and preventing the onset of more severe health complications.

Limitations

As usual, this study is not free of limitations. First, the R^2 value of .154 for the intention to use PHA indicates that the model explains only a modest portion of the variance, suggesting that other factors were not included. This lower R^2 can be justified by the fact that we approached the question from the HBM perspective, rather than a technology acceptance perspective, actively excluding factors like perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. This approach addresses a research gap, as numerous studies have already explored technology acceptance, whereas our focus on health belief provides new insights into PHA usage.

Additionally, the sample is also limited to a specific, rather high-educated demographic, which may not be representative of the broader population. Despite these limitations, our results provide valuable insights into the factors influencing the adoption of PHA, offering a fresh perspective that enriches existing literature and informs future research and development.

Finally, we recognize that adopting a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, could further enhance the robustness and validity of this study. For example, interviews with healthcare professionals, such as general practitioners and oncologists, could provide expert insights into patient needs and concerns. Meanwhile, focus groups including diverse participants, such as individuals with a family history of genetic diseases, older adults, and tech-savvy younger users, would help identify specific barriers and motivations not captured in surveys.

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Appendix B: International Conference Contributions – Abstracts

Anderski, M., Stegmann, P., Fuller, R., Dickson, G., & Ströbel, T. (2024). “He's one of our own!” Examining the impact of transfers to the German Bundesliga on fan behaviour and purchase intention in Asia. 32nd Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Paris, France.

Anderski, M., Bartsch, S., Puchner, G., Kuhn, P., & Ströbel, T. (2024). On the way to Player Sustainability: An explorative study to develop a player sustainability index for professional football players. 2nd Sustainable Sports Symposium, Heidelberg, Germany.

Anderski, M., Stegmann, P., Fuller, R., Dickson, G., & Ströbel, T. (2024). “He's One of Our Own”: An Experimental Study Examining the Effects of Country of Origin and Club Levels on Fans Behavior and Purchase Intentions among Asian Fans of the German Bundesliga. 27th annual conference of the Arbeitskreis Sportökonomie e.V. in cooperation with the International Association of Sports Economists (IASSE), Bayreuth. Germany.

Brand, L., Anderski, M., & Ströbel, T. (2024). Unpacking Sport Brand Co-creation: An Empirical Examination of Brand Co-creation Performances. 32nd Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Paris, France.

Anderski, M., O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Fuller, R., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2023). A Multi-Actor Perspective on Athlete Brand Activism. The Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC) 2023, Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand.

Anderski, M., O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Fuller, R., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2023). Human Brand Activism: Developing an Athlete Brand Activism Continuum Based on a Multi-Actor Perspective. 31st Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Anderski, M., Griebel, L., Ströbel, T., & Ridpath, B. D. (2023). Shine Bright Like a Diamond! An Analysis of the NIL Rule and its Impact on Athlete Brand Building from a Multi-Actor Perspective. College Sport Research Institute (CSRI) Conference, South Carolina, USA.

- Anderski, M., Riedmüller, F., & Ströbel, T. (2022). No Player is Bigger than the Club? Examining a Paradigm Shift from Team Identification towards Athlete Brand Identification in Professional Football. 30th European Association for Sport Management Conference (EASM), Innsbruck, Austria.
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- Griebel, L., Anderski, M., & Ströbel, T. (2022). eSports Extensions of Traditional Sports Club Brands: Opportunities for Brand Co-Creation Processes? 19th Sport Marketing Association (SMA) Annual Conference, Charlotte, USA.
- Anderski, M., Griebel, L., Stegmann, P., & Ströbel, T. (2021). Empowerment of Human Brands: Brand Meaning Co-Creation on Digital Engagement Platforms. 29th European Association for Sport Management Conference (EASM), online.
- Anderski, M., Griebel, L., Stegmann, P., & Ströbel, T. (2021). The Role of Digital Engagement Platforms for Athlete Branding. FISU World Conference; 30th Winter Universiade, Lucerne Switzerland.
- Griebel, L., Ströbel, T., & Anderski, M. (2021). Rethinking Brand Management within Sports: Advancing to a Multi-Actor Perspective. 29th European Association for Sport Management Conference (EASM), online.
- Anderski, M., Griebel, L., & Ströbel, T. (2021). Crises encourage innovations: The 28th European Sport Management Virtual Conference during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sport und Gesellschaft*, 18(1), 113-117.