

STAR FOOTBALLERS' BRAND BUILDING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: DIGITAL PRESENCE, AUTHENTICITY, AND MARKET VALUE

CONSTRUÇÃO DE MARCA DE JOGADORES DE FUTEBOL AMERICANOS NAS REDES SOCIAIS: PRESENÇA DIGITAL, AUTENTICIDADE E VALOR DE MERCADO

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Abstract

Today's football players are no longer merely athletes but strategically constructed personal brands that generate substantial social and economic value. In the digital era, social media plays a pivotal role in this process by enabling direct interaction with fans while offering sponsors and brand partners an authentic channel to reach target audiences. Despite the growing relevance of athlete brand building, insights into the strategic mechanisms shaping footballers' personal brands remain limited, particularly in smaller European football markets. This study examines how football players evolve into successful star brands, which strategic and tactical tools contribute to this process, and how digital presence influences reputation and market value. The research is grounded in the Model of Athlete Brand Image and the Athlete Brand Authenticity Model, providing a structured framework for analysing footballers as market actors. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth expert interviews with sports marketing professionals, player agents, sponsorship managers, and social media strategists. The analysis includes perspectives related to the Hungarian football context, while also incorporating international examples discussed by the interviewees. The findings indicate that both on-field performance and off-field activities play a central role in athlete brand building. While consistent sporting performance primarily reinforces perceived authenticity and credibility, off-field activities and digital communication contribute to shaping visibility and audience engagement. These dynamics are particularly relevant for footballers operating in

Resumo

Os jogadores de futebol de hoje não são mais meros atletas, mas sim marcas pessoais estrategicamente construídas que geram valor social e econômico substancial. Na era digital, as mídias sociais desempenham um papel fundamental nesse processo, permitindo a interação direta com os fãs e oferecendo aos patrocinadores e parceiros de marca um canal autêntico para alcançar o público-alvo. Apesar da crescente relevância da construção da marca do atleta, o conhecimento sobre os mecanismos estratégicos que moldam as marcas pessoais dos jogadores de futebol ainda é limitado, principalmente em mercados de futebol europeus menores. Este estudo examina como os jogadores de futebol se transformam em marcas de sucesso, quais ferramentas estratégicas e táticas contribuem para esse processo e como a presença digital influencia a reputação e o valor de mercado. A pesquisa se baseia no Modelo de Imagem da Marca do Atleta e no Modelo de Autenticidade da Marca do Atleta, fornecendo uma estrutura organizada para analisar os jogadores de futebol como atores de mercado. Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa, o estudo se baseia em entrevistas aprofundadas com profissionais de marketing esportivo, agentes de jogadores, gestores de patrocínio e estrategistas de mídias sociais. A análise inclui perspectivas relacionadas ao contexto do futebol húngaro, incorporando também exemplos internacionais discutidos pelos entrevistados. Os resultados indicam que tanto o desempenho em campo quanto as atividades fora dele desempenham um papel central na construção da marca do atleta. Enquanto o desempenho esportivo consistente



smaller markets such as Hungary, where brand-building opportunities are more limited compared to footballers playing in top European leagues and for strong national teams.

Keywords: Athlete Brand Building. Social Media. Football. Authenticity. Market Value.

reforça principalmente a autenticidade e a credibilidade percebidas, as atividades fora de campo e a comunicação digital contribuem para moldar a visibilidade e o engajamento do público. Essa dinâmica é particularmente relevante para jogadores de futebol que atuam em mercados menores, como a Hungria, onde as oportunidades de construção de marca são mais limitadas em comparação com jogadores que atuam nas principais ligas europeias e em seleções nacionais fortes.

Palavras-chave: Construção de Marca do Atleta. Mídias Sociais. Futebol. Autenticidade. Valor de Mercado.

1 INTRODUCTION

Athlete branding, or athlete brand building, has gained increasing importance in recent years as sport has become deeply embedded in the logic of the global market economy. A growing number of companies choose to feature athletes in their marketing communication campaigns, seeking to associate their products and services with credibility, performance, and emotional appeal. At the same time, athletes aim to maximise the benefits of such collaborations not only in financial terms, but also in relation to long-term reputation, visibility, and career sustainability.

In contemporary professional football, players are able to influence their level of visibility and success not solely through their on-field performance but also through strategically managed brand-building activities. Footballers operate in an increasingly mediatized environment where sporting achievement alone is no longer sufficient to secure enduring public attention or commercial relevance. Social media platforms in particular have transformed the relationship between athletes, fans, and sponsors by enabling direct, continuous, and highly personalised communication. Through these channels, football players can generate substantial reach, construct narratives around their careers and identities, and attract sponsors whose values and objectives align with their personal brand.

As a consequence, athletes can no longer be regarded solely as sports performers but must also be understood as market actors functioning as brands. By leveraging their

personal brand equity, footballers exert considerable social and economic influence that extends beyond the boundaries of sport (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Samoylina, 2015). Their public image can shape consumer attitudes, influence purchasing decisions, and even contribute to the international visibility of clubs, leagues, and national football systems.

Although athlete brands can be examined from various theoretical perspectives, a common element across existing models is the athlete themselves as a product, together with the marketing communication surrounding them (Papp-Váry, 2019; Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). In this context, brand building aims to differentiate the athlete from competitors, establish a distinctive position in the market, and generate competitive advantage. This process depends simultaneously on the “product”, understood as sporting performance, personality, and lifestyle, and on how these elements are communicated to audiences through both traditional and digital media.

The increasing strategic importance of social media further intensifies this process. While digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for visibility, engagement, and monetisation, they also expose athletes to reputational risks. Inconsistent messaging, perceived inauthenticity, or off-field controversies can rapidly undermine accumulated brand value. As a result, authenticity, coherence, and strategic awareness have become central requirements of contemporary athlete brand building.

In light of these considerations, the present research seeks to examine how digital presence and online brand-building activities influence a football player’s visibility, public perception, and long-term brand value. Rather than approaching athlete branding as a purely promotional activity, the study conceptualises it as a strategic and multi-dimensional process in which sporting performance, communication practices, and perceived authenticity interact. Particular attention is devoted to the role of social media as a space where on-field achievements are translated into symbolic and economic value through narratives, visual representation, and continuous audience engagement.

By drawing on the Model of Athlete Brand Image and the Athlete Brand Authenticity Model, the research integrates performance-based and perception-based perspectives on athlete brand building. Through a qualitative research design based on expert interviews with professionals from sports marketing, player management, sponsorship, and digital communication, the study aims to capture industry-level insights

that are often underrepresented in quantitative analyses. In doing so, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how football players can consciously manage their digital presence to enhance credibility, foster emotional connections with audiences, and strengthen their position within the sponsorship market over the long term.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The role of social media in athlete brand building

The emergence of social media has brought about numerous new phenomena and initiated innovative brand-building processes among athletes, enabling them to develop their personal brands more easily than the iconic sports figures of earlier eras (Samoylina, 2015). Today, sport and brand building have become closely interconnected, increasingly shaping the functioning of the modern sports industry (Mereu, 2021).

Beyond their on-field performance, athletes have also become important actors in the business sphere through their media presence, primarily via social media platforms. They can be understood as effective, multi-textual, and multi-platform promotional entities. This means that in their media appearances, star athletes present themselves through multiple narratives and assumed roles, as a result of which they can no longer be interpreted solely as athletes (Choi, 2007; Johnson Morgan, Summers, & Sassenberg, 2008). Star footballers, beyond the sporting context, may function as entertainers on social media platforms, commercially valuable commodities, and role models for fans and followers (Andrews & Jackson, 2001).

As previously indicated, in today's digitalised environment elite athletes have far more opportunities to gain visibility than legendary sports figures of earlier decades. In the past, public perceptions of star athletes were primarily shaped by traditional mass media, such as television, newspapers, and radio. In contrast, social media applications now enable athletes to engage with their fans on a daily basis (Samoylina, 2015). Through these tools, athletes can actively influence the image that develops around them. They employ a wide range of instruments and strategies to reach audiences, and the effectiveness of these efforts depends on multiple factors (Su et al., 2020).

The growth of an athlete's brand value is no longer determined exclusively by on-field performance, but also by how fans perceive the athlete off the field and by the types of sponsorship engagements the athlete chooses to undertake (Hodge & Walker, 2015). This perception is shaped by the athlete's credibility and trustworthiness, as well as by the attitudes they communicate, which may be decisive for brands when selecting endorsement partners (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014).

Consequently, athletes can exert a significant influence on fans' brand perceptions and purchasing decisions not only through their sporting achievements, but also through their off-field behaviour, social involvement, and social media activity (Kajos, 2019). Moreover, a well-developed athlete brand is capable of enhancing not only the athlete's reputation but also fan engagement with the sport, the team, or the individual athlete (Hasaan & Fisne, 2021).

This dynamic is clearly illustrated by the transfers of globally recognised footballers such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, which generated not only sporting consequences but also substantial media and economic effects. Ronaldo's move contributed to the increased global visibility of the Saudi Pro League, while Messi's transfer to the United States significantly enhanced international attention toward Major League Soccer. Through their presence, leagues that had previously received limited global exposure became internationally visible, substantially increasing the reach and commercial revenues of their new clubs.

At the same time, social media also entails considerable risks. Negative fan feedback, scandals, or crises of credibility can rapidly erode an athlete's accumulated brand value (Hasaan & Kerem, 2017). Therefore, the conscious management of digital presence through professional content creation, strategic partnerships, and social responsibility initiatives has become a key factor in contemporary athlete brand building (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014).

2.2 Endorser image

The concept of endorser image examines the factors that make athletes credible and effective when representing a product or service (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014). The classical Source Credibility Model identifies three key dimensions: attractiveness,

trustworthiness, and expertise. These dimensions determine not only advertising effectiveness but also the value of an athlete's personal brand (Ohanian, 1990).

In the case of star footballers, endorser image and athlete brand building often function as mutually reinforcing processes (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014). A carefully selected sponsorship that aligns with the athlete's personality, lifestyle, and values can enhance credibility, whereas an ill-suited partnership may damage the brand (Ohanian, 1990).

For example, David Beckham deliberately collaborated with premium brands that were consistent with his image as an elegant global icon, while Cristiano Ronaldo's "CR7" brand was strengthened through partnerships related to fitness and luxury lifestyle, in addition to sporting performance (Papp-Váry, 2009; Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024).

In consumer decision-making, not only the product itself but also the credibility of the individual representing it plays a crucial role (Tolson, 2001; Napoli et al., 2014; Toft et al., 2020; Cook, 2021). Consequently, in modern sports marketing, the strategic alignment between personal brand building and sponsorship partnerships determines a footballer's long-term market value (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014).

2.3 Model of athlete brand image

As professional sport increasingly becomes a commercial industry, star athletes appear as cultural products in the eyes of audiences, the media, and corporate sponsors alike (Johnson Morgan, Summers, & Sassenberg, 2008). Within the sports domain, brand image building has also gained growing importance, aiming to maximise a footballer's brand value through the application of appropriate brand management practices (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014).

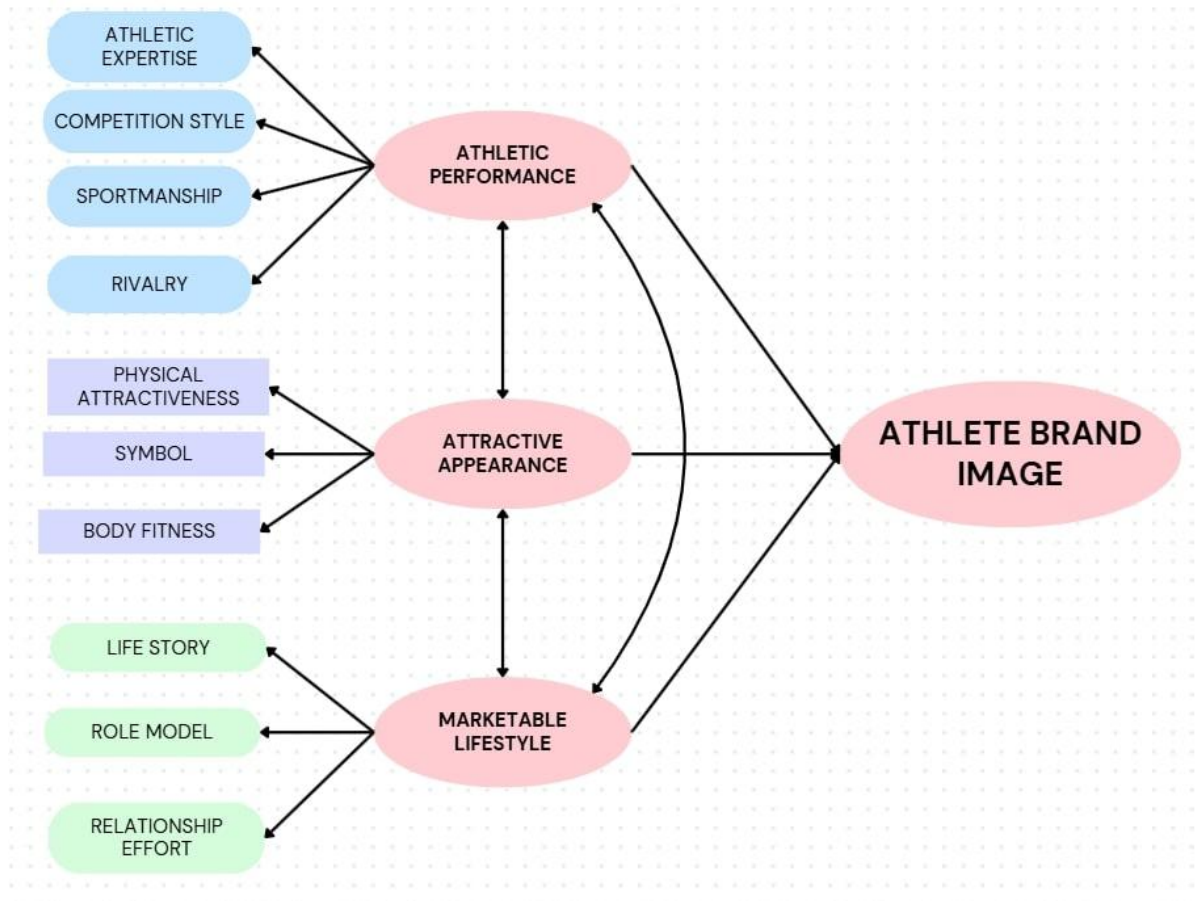
Accordingly, the marketing of sports assets, such as football clubs or individual players, is fundamentally centred on the promotion of brand image (Cordiner, 2001). To understand the theoretical foundations of athlete brand building, several models have been developed to provide a structured explanation of how athlete brands are formed and which factors determine their value.

One of the most widely recognised frameworks is the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), which identifies three core dimensions essential to athlete brand building:

sport performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014, see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The MABI Model



Source: authors' own editing (2025), based on Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2014)

Sport performance encompasses playing skills, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). This dimension refers to the athlete's on-field results, technical abilities, and competitive behaviour, which are fundamental conditions for maintaining long-term reputation. The success of footballers such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi is primarily rooted in their outstanding performance, which enabled them to develop into global brands (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024).

Competitive style includes the unique solutions and actions displayed on the field that distinguish an athlete from teammates and opponents. The more distinctive an

athlete's playing style is, the more recognisable they become, which strengthens their brand position relative to others (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014). Such elements may include goal celebrations, free-kick techniques, or characteristic movement patterns. In the case of Zlatan Ibrahimović, for example, Nike built an entire advertising campaign around his long-range goal scored against England.

Sportsmanship also represents a decisive factor in brand building for athletes (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014). For instance, although Vinícius Júnior, a player of Real Madrid, is widely recognised for his footballing skills, he is viewed negatively by some fans due to frequent on-field conflicts, disputes with opposing supporters, or confrontations with players from other teams.

Finally, rivalry plays a significant role in shaping an athlete's brand. Having a prominent rival can help a player define their brand identity by positioning themselves in contrast to another athlete (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). Such rivalries encourage fans to form opinions and assist them in deciding which values and characteristics they identify with and which they reject (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). The most prominent rivalry of the past decade undoubtedly occurred between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, who not only delivered exceptional performances but also competed in the same league in Spain, facing each other regularly (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024).

Attractive appearance also plays a key role in brand building, particularly in the contemporary media environment, where visuality and social media presence are decisive factors (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014). This dimension includes stylistic elements and attributes that can function as identifiable trademarks (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). It encompasses the athlete's physical appearance, aesthetic appeal, personal style, and distinctive visual characteristics that contribute to image formation. The potential of physical attractiveness is further reflected in its ability to attract the attention of broader audiences, thereby expanding the brand's potential consumer base (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024).

The symbolic subdimension represents the athlete's unique style and characteristic signature elements (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). In the case of athletes, features such as iconic hairstyles, clothing choices, or distinctive body language are particularly important, as they enhance recognisability and memorability among audiences (Papp-Váry, 2009).

Marketable lifestyle is the factor that strengthens an athlete's brand beyond the sporting context, as it determines how relationships are formed with audiences, sponsors, and the media (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). This dimension includes the athlete's off-field values and personality, since building a successful brand today can no longer rely solely on sporting performance (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). Brand identity becomes stronger when it is aligned with the individual's personality and lifestyle (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). Presenting the human side of the athlete creates positive impressions among fans, which further reinforces brand credibility and attractiveness (Napoli et al., 2014; Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024).

This dimension also includes active social media presence, interaction with fans, social responsibility initiatives, and charitable or activist activities (Ilicic & Webster, 2016), as well as the narratives athletes construct around their careers and personalities (Korim & Papp-Váry, 2024). Athletes who authentically represent values and share engaging content are more likely to attract sponsors and foster fan loyalty, as audiences connect not only with their performance but also with their personality (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2014).

2.4 Athlete brand authenticity model

Another relevant approach in this field is the Athlete Brand Authenticity Model, which places authenticity at the centre of athlete branding (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). The model is based on the assumption that an athlete brand can only be sustainable in the long term if on-field performance and off-field behaviour are aligned with each other (Hasaan & Fisne, 2021). For fans, authenticity means that the athlete consistently represents certain values, communicates sincerely, and does not display behaviour in private life that contradicts the publicly projected image (Napoli et al., 2014; Hasaan & Fisne, 2021).

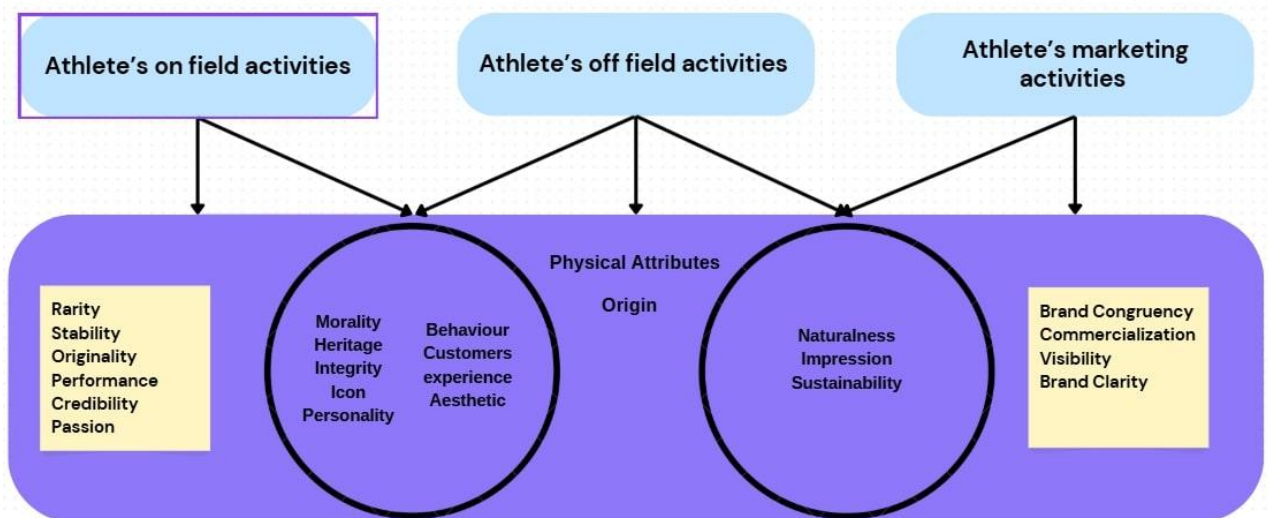
The model examines athlete authenticity along three main dimensions: on-field activities, off-field activities, and marketing activities (Hasaan & Fisne, 2021). On-field activities include the athlete's playing skills and their ability to consistently deliver the expected level of performance. This dimension also covers sportsmanship and the degree of passion the athlete demonstrates toward the sport (Hasaan & Fisne, 2021). Off-field activities emphasise social responsibility, charitable engagement, and the cultivation of

personal legacy. Finally, marketing activities refer to the extent to which sponsorship collaborations align with the athlete's identity, as well as the athlete's communication style and the consumer experiences they provide, all of which contribute to maintaining brand sustainability within the economic sphere (Kajos, 2019).

Authenticity is shaped by several attributes, including originality, integrity, morality, iconic status, personality, and consumer experience (Tolson, 2001; Toft et al., 2020). Together, these factors determine the extent to which fans perceive an athlete as authentic and worthy of admiration or emulation (Hasaan & Kerem, 2017).

Figure 2

Structure of the Athlete Brand Authenticity Model



Source: authors' own editing (2025), based on Hasaan and Fisne (2021)

This is well illustrated by examples such as Marcus Rashford's campaign against child food poverty, which strengthened his authenticity and social influence (Varley, 2020), or Lionel Messi's modest personality and consistent performance, which have contributed to the long-term stability of his brand. At the same time, contradictory or seemingly artificial behaviours, such as occasional on-field exaggeration or simulation by certain players, may undermine an athlete's credibility and, consequently, weaken brand value (Mereu, 2021).

Overall, athletes' marketing activities extend beyond self-promotion and play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining long-term brand authenticity. Successful

brand building requires athletes to consciously manage their public presence, apply appropriate marketing techniques, and continuously maintain relationships with their audiences (Hasaan & Fisne, 2021).

3 METHOD

Within the framework of the primary research, a qualitative research design was applied. In the course of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven experts, focusing on football players' brand-building processes and sponsorship opportunities.

The objective of the research was to gain a broader understanding of how star footballers can successfully build their personal brands today and how they are able to create a positive image in the minds of fans. In addition, the study examined which strategies footballers should apply on social media platforms, what types of content are most worth sharing, and what differences exist in branding and sponsorship opportunities when compared to foreign football players.

The seven interviewees were classified into four main groups: 1) Sports marketing experts, 2) Player agents, 3) Sponsorship managers, 4) Social media managers.

The in-depth interviews were conducted both online via Google Meet and through face-to-face meetings with the interviewees. The interview guide consisted of a total of 18 questions. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 50 minutes. When interviews were conducted in person, participants invited the researchers to their offices in order to facilitate the discussion. Prior to each interview, participants were asked for permission to record the conversation. The audio recordings were subsequently reviewed, transcribed in Microsoft Word, and then analysed. Responses to individual questions were compared in order to identify themes and issues on which experts expressed similar views.

This research method was selected because, given the specialised nature of the topic, in-depth expert interviews were able to provide more relevant and nuanced insights than a questionnaire-based survey among fans.

Experts were primarily identified and contacted through the LinkedIn platform. In several cases, additional interviewees were recommended by participants after the

completion of interviews. Consequently, a purposive sampling method was applied, complemented by snowball sampling to identify further relevant experts for the study.

The interview questions were structured into four main sections: 1) the significance of athlete brand building, 2) the role of social media, 3) sponsorship opportunities and brand partnerships, 4) future trends and challenges.

In the section focusing on the importance of brand building, the aim was to explore which factors and methods experts consider decisive in athlete brand building and what makes an athlete brand successful and credible. Interviewees were also asked to share examples of successful collaborations between players and brands.

The second part of the interviews addressed the role of social media. Questions primarily focused on identifying which social media platforms athletes should use and what types of content enable them to engage fans most effectively.

The third section examined football players' sponsorship opportunities and brand partnerships. This part sought to identify the factors that make collaborations between players and sponsors successful, as well as the differences in sponsorship opportunities available to Hungarian football players and Hungarian companies compared to their foreign counterparts. Experts were also asked which criteria footballers should consider when selecting potential brand partners.

The fourth and final section focused on future trends and challenges. This part addressed the direction in which athlete brand building is expected to evolve, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with emerging trends and new technologies, and the extent to which these developments may influence athlete brand building in the future.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the in-depth interviews provide a comprehensive overview of how football players can develop their personal brands in the contemporary sports environment and highlight the fundamental conditions without which they cannot become star brands.

The research also revealed the range of opportunities available to Hungarian football players and the extent to which the sponsorship opportunities of Hungarian companies differ from those offered by international corporations.

Overall, the results indicate that social media has opened new perspectives for star footballers in brand building. At the same time, it also entails risks that must be managed consciously if athletes aim to build a sustainable and successful brand in the long term.

4.1 Key success factors of athlete brand building

Based on the responses obtained from the in-depth interviews, one of the most important conditions for successful brand building is that a football player consistently delivers a high level of on-field performance, as this is what primarily captures fans' attention. Without stable and outstanding sporting performance, a football player is unlikely to attract the interest of sponsors.

According to the first interviewed player agent, on-field performance is a key determinant of a footballer's success, as it represents the core of the profession and serves as the foundation of brand credibility. The interviewee also emphasised that players should only associate themselves with initiatives they can represent authentically.

The second interviewee, also working as a player agent, argued that athlete brand building and on-field performance are inherently interconnected, yet should still be addressed separately. In this regard, awareness and intentionality were highlighted as crucial, as football players must be willing to make sacrifices and step outside their comfort zones in order to consciously develop their brand image.

There was a general consensus among experts that strong on-field performance lends credibility to athletes' off-field activities. According to the third interviewee, who leads a sports marketing company, an athlete's personal story also plays an important role in achieving success. This interviewee similarly stressed that performance is the primary source of authenticity, while both internal and external characteristics, communication with fans and sponsors through the media, and unique personality traits further shape brand strength.

When asked about their favourite collaborations between athletes and brands, several interviewees referred to the partnership between Nike and Cristiano Ronaldo as

an outstanding example. A sports and event manager, who previously worked as a player scout, emphasised that the longevity of this collaboration, which has existed since 2003, is exceptional in the context of sports sponsorship. A fourth player agent added that the partnership could be sustained due to Ronaldo's consistently high performance level and strong character, making it one of the most prominent sponsorship relationships in the sports industry.

In summary, authenticity emerged as a central requirement for star footballers seeking success, primarily derived from consistent on-field performance, complemented by a strong off-field character. Athletes must also be able to establish meaningful communication with fans and maintain value congruence, meaning that they communicate messages aligned with their personal identity and values. An athlete's background and personal journey are likewise important, as fans are more likely to connect with players when they understand where they come from and the path they have followed.

4.2 The importance of social media in the brand building of star footballers

According to the interviewees, social media has become one of the most important tools for star footballers, as audiences are present on these platforms and can follow players' activities on a daily basis. Appropriate communication with fans and the nature of shared content were highlighted as particularly important factors.

A well-structured social media presence enables football players to achieve a more advantageous negotiating position with sponsors and to access broader commercial opportunities. The interviews revealed that fans are most effectively engaged through content that offers insight into players' everyday lives as well as content related to sporting activities. Examples include post-training photos taken in the locker room, short pre-match videos providing insight into match preparation, and images captured during training sessions. Personal content also encompasses hobbies, holiday-related posts, and images or videos presenting dietary routines.

Particular importance was attributed to moments that allow fans to see footballers in situations they would not normally have access to, offering a behind-the-scenes perspective on their daily lives. Sharing such personal moments can significantly enhance

fan engagement. At the same time, social media provides a platform for communicating sponsorship collaborations. However, athletes must ensure that sponsored content appears in an integrated manner and is aligned with their personal brand. Consistency of messaging across different social media channels was also emphasised as essential.

One player agent noted that athletes should be aware of the specific target audience they wish to reach with each post, as every type of social media appearance serves a distinct purpose. Sport-related posts typically engage a narrower fan base, while content related to private life can reach a broader audience. Posts offering insights into personal life often attract the attention of tabloid media, enabling players to gain visibility among wider segments of the public. As a result, both content types contribute to public discourse, albeit addressing different audience groups.

At the same time, experts stressed that football players must be particularly cautious about what they post, as certain content can severely damage brand image. One interviewee cited the case of Kurt Zouma, who shared a video on social media several years ago depicting the abuse of a cat. The video spread rapidly online, and public reaction was overwhelmingly negative, with followers distancing themselves from the player's actions.

Authenticity in content creation was identified as a key consideration. If a player feels uncomfortable appearing in videos, focusing on text-based content may be more appropriate. Forced or unnatural appearances can undermine credibility; therefore, content production should always be aligned with the athlete's personality.

According to the interviews, Instagram emerged as the most important social media platform for football players, due to its visual nature and suitability for sharing sport-related content. Facebook, TikTok, X, and streaming platforms were also mentioned as relevant channels, as they reach different audience segments. LinkedIn was highlighted as a particularly noteworthy platform for building professional relationships. A well-developed LinkedIn profile can enhance an athlete's market value and credibility not only during their playing career but also after retirement. A frequently cited example is İlkay Gündoğan, who has built an audience of nearly 60,000 followers on LinkedIn through regular, thought-provoking posts, primarily focused on football-related topics.

4.3 Sponsorship opportunities for footballers and companies in Hungary and abroad

Sponsorship opportunities for football players differ significantly between Hungary and international markets, due to a range of structural and contextual factors.

First, a clear distinction can be observed between female and male football players. According to one player agent, in the case of female footballers, physical attractiveness and perceived visual appeal play a more decisive role in sponsorship decisions, often closely linked to younger age. In contrast, for male footballers, on-field performance is considered far more important, and age is less determinative when companies evaluate potential partnerships.

Experts consistently emphasised that the success of sponsorships primarily depends on authenticity and coherent image building. Brands seek footballers who can function as reliable long-term partners and positively reflect corporate values. Therefore, alignment between the values of the player and the sponsor is essential, as a poorly chosen collaboration may damage the reputation of both parties.

Authenticity is further strengthened when athletes avoid frequently changing sponsors and instead consciously build long-term partnerships with one or two brands. Sponsorship effectiveness increases when an athlete's unique personal traits and life story align with the brand's narrative, resulting in messages that audiences perceive as both credible and appealing.

Interview findings indicate that successful sponsorships are fundamentally rooted in shared values. Collaborations are perceived as authentic when an athlete's personality and personal journey are consistent with the brand's message and when audiences trust the athlete's endorsement. Particularly effective examples include sponsorships in which a footballer's life story, such as rising from modest beginnings, is closely integrated into the brand narrative.

It was also observed that athletes delivering outstanding performance are especially attractive partners for technical and innovation-driven brands, where excellence and technological advancement can be easily associated with sporting achievement.

A sports marketing expert highlighted the case of Dominik Szoboszlai, a Hungarian footballer currently playing for Liverpool FC and serving as the captain of the

Hungarian national team, noting that his sponsorship with Magyar Telekom, one of Hungary's leading telecommunications companies, focuses strongly on his personal story of progression and development. This narrative reflects Telekom's brand values by emphasising growth and advancement from limited resources. A similar value-based alignment characterises Szoboszlai's long-term partnership with Red Bull, a global energy drink brand associated with performance and ambition. This collaboration is further reinforced by the fact that Szoboszlai previously played for both FC Red Bull Salzburg and RB Leipzig, making the partnership not only symbolic but also organically embedded in his professional career.

This collaboration was also discussed by a player agent, who considered Szoboszlai's partnership with Red Bull particularly authentic due to the long-standing and distinctive relationship that has evolved between the player and the brand over several years.

According to interviewees, one of the key prerequisites for successful sponsorship is mutual commitment. Clear contractual terms and long-term adherence to agreed conditions are essential. Experts stressed that harmony between the athlete and the brand is necessary to build durable partnerships. Flexibility and gradual development also play important roles, as the ability to fine-tune collaborations increases the likelihood of shared success.

However, several examples illustrate that even promising sponsorships may fail to meet expectations, highlighting that poorly aligned partnerships can result in long-term losses for both parties. One player agent cited the case of Sergio Ramos and Nike, arguing that Nike lost significant potential when the partnership ended, given the strong branding opportunities associated with the player.

Another player agent shared a personal professional experience without naming the athlete involved. One of their clients signed a sponsorship contract with Vitaminwater, but the collaboration ended shortly after its launch. Two days after signing the agreement, an image of the athlete consuming Fanta, a competing soft drink brand, appeared on social media, leading to the immediate termination of the partnership.

Experts also highlighted the importance of on-field behaviour. According to one player agent, even strong performance may be overshadowed if a footballer frequently receives red cards, engages in physical altercations, or repeatedly clashes with referees.

Negative behaviour can lead to undesirable brand associations, potentially discouraging sponsors. From a corporate perspective, this is critical, as a player's conduct may directly influence brand image.

Overall, interviewees agreed that successful sponsorships require mutual trust and value alignment. If collaborations do not function as expected, partnerships are typically concluded discreetly rather than publicly framed as failures. Authenticity may be jeopardised when athletes share content that sponsors consider unacceptable, particularly regarding political or controversial social issues. Furthermore, smooth day-to-day cooperation is essential; a lack of competence or alignment between parties may lead to the dissolution of the partnership.

Experts stressed that sponsorship decisions should not be guided solely by financial considerations. Athletes should represent values they genuinely identify with and endorse products they personally use. Authenticity also requires sensitivity to the values of the athlete's club and fan base, as conflicts in these areas may generate reputational risks.

In certain cases, an athlete's brand strength may exceed that of the sponsoring company, as was notably the case with David Beckham during the later stages of his career. According to one player agent, this creates opportunities for athletes to acquire ownership stakes in companies. Sponsorship may also take non-monetary forms, such as supporting causes, offering advisory roles, or endorsing smaller brands with strong expertise but lower brand recognition.

This dynamic is particularly evident among the world's biggest stars, such as elite footballers or basketball players, whose global visibility and influence can independently enhance sponsor brand value. One player agent noted that companies increasingly aim to collaborate with athletes capable of elevating the sponsor's brand. When the sponsor brand initially elevates the athlete, the partnership is typically in an early developmental phase.

As an example, the agent referred to Dominik Szoboszlai's collaboration with McDonald's, where the corporate brand significantly outweighs the athlete in brand value. In contrast, partnerships such as Novak Djokovic and Citizen, a Japanese watch manufacturer, illustrate situations where the athlete's brand strength may rival or exceed that of the sponsor, making the athlete a central driver of brand value.

According to a sports marketing executive, such scenarios may pose challenges but should not be viewed negatively. In many cases, it can be strategically advantageous for an athlete's brand value to surpass that of the sponsoring company.

In recent years, several examples have emerged in which athletes nearing the end of their careers have changed sponsors after existing partners declined contract renewal. In such cases, accepting a long-term agreement with a smaller brand may be beneficial, particularly if the partnership extends beyond the athlete's active career. A prominent example is Roger Federer's collaboration with Uniqlo, which enabled brand continuity beyond professional competition and facilitated the transition into post-career brand identity.

A sport marketing expert also emphasised that charitable engagement can significantly strengthen an athlete's brand value. For example, when a player's family is personally affected by a serious illness and the athlete chooses to support a cancer-related charity, the organisation may have lower brand value than the athlete. However, the personal involvement and emotional connection enhance the credibility of the initiative and can positively influence the player's brand image.

Based on the interviews, it is relatively rare for a footballer's brand image to exceed the reputation of the club they play for. In the past decade, such situations were most frequently discussed in relation to Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Ronaldo's transfer to Al Nassr illustrated how a player's global visibility and perceived credibility can open new markets, as a series of international stars moved to the Saudi league after his arrival. A comparable example is David Beckham's move to Los Angeles, which functioned as a catalyst not only for the club but also for the broader United States market.

Experts nevertheless stressed that a football player can never truly be "bigger" than the club, because the team provides the sporting and community context in which the brand can function. A footballer's follower base or global visibility may surpass that of a specific club, but this typically occurs only at the peak of a career or close to its conclusion, and only in the case of the world's most prominent stars. Managing such situations requires conscious communication and strategic planning, as they may have reputational and economic consequences for both the club and the athlete.

The sports marketing company director added that in the 1970s it was common for global stars to move to the United States in order to popularise football. In addition to

strong earnings, they became ambassadors of the sport on the American continent and thereby gained access to new markets. However, such moves also involve risks. In Cristiano Ronaldo's case, the expert raised the question of how the transfer to Saudi Arabia may have influenced public perception, as the human rights situation in the region is widely debated. The interviewee argued that this challenge can be managed through appropriate communication. In Ronaldo's case, the narrative highlighted his intention to contribute to the development of the sport and his belief in the league's potential.

As a negative example, the expert mentioned Jordan Henderson, who had previously been associated with advocacy for the LGBTQ community. When Henderson moved to Saudi Arabia, he faced substantial criticism from fans because the values he was perceived to represent were seen as inconsistent with the social and political context of the host country. Due to a lack of perceived value congruence, audiences considered Henderson less credible, which negatively affected his brand value, even though at that time his personal brand strength was perceived as higher than that of the Saudi league.

According to one player agent, in such circumstances a player may feel they hold substantial influence and may attempt to leverage it. This can complicate negotiations with the club, as the player seeks increasingly favourable contractual conditions. A former scout among the interviewees noted that this can be beneficial from the player's perspective because stronger bargaining power may result in better terms when extending a contract. It can also increase a player's attractiveness to major clubs and improve their negotiating position with large companies. At the same time, the interviewee argued that such situations may become a burden, as the player faces greater performance pressure than teammates and receives increased media scrutiny.

Interview evidence suggests that it is beneficial for clubs to sign a player with strong brand value. As a recent example, one player agent referred to Naby Keïta's transfer to Ferencváros, which is one of Hungary's most successful and historically significant football clubs based in Budapest. Keïta, a former Bundesliga and Premier League player and a Champions League winner with Liverpool FC, has a follower base of several hundred thousand on social media. This international visibility enables the Hungarian club to reach audiences who may previously have been unfamiliar with it, thereby extending its global exposure beyond its traditional fan base. However, from the player's perspective, it is important not to position oneself above the club in terms of

values or mindset. The agent argued that both parties must manage this relationship carefully to avoid negative consequences.

The next topic addressed the opportunities available to Hungarian footballers in comparison with foreign players. Based on the interviews, Hungarian footballers face more limited opportunities than their international counterparts. One reason is the smaller and more constrained market, which does not provide the same level of media exposure and visibility as major football countries such as Germany, England, or Spain. The limited international use of the Hungarian language also makes global communication more difficult, while lower purchasing power and a less developed sponsorship culture further reduce market potential.

Experts highlighted that the relative underperformance of Hungarian football over recent decades has contributed to lower perceived prestige for Hungarian players internationally. At present, Dominik Szoboszlai was described as the only Hungarian footballer with truly global brand value, whereas other players may primarily be attractive within regional markets. For Hungarian companies, choosing a Hungarian player as an advertising face is often more cost effective and may fit local audiences more naturally. In contrast, international companies tend to prioritise athletes who are valuable at the international level.

One player agent emphasised the substantial difference between sponsorship opportunities in Hungary and in foreign leagues. While top leagues frequently involve contracts worth millions of euros, in Hungary it can already be considered an achievement if a player receives product support rather than financial compensation. Abroad, athletes are more active in sponsorship collaborations and companies also tend to engage more openly with athletes.

In Germany, for example, a top tier player such as Thomas Müller has been consistently visible in campaigns for major corporations such as Adidas or Audi, whereas Hungarian footballers have access to far fewer comparable opportunities.

According to one player agent, football is socially divisive in Hungary, which also affects sponsorship opportunities. Audiences may find it difficult to accept players who deliver weak on-field performance while receiving relatively high salaries also appearing in advertising campaigns. As a result, companies are particularly sensitive to whether on field performance aligns with the communicated image. The agent argued that the social

perception of sport plays a key role in determining which sports and athletes become attractive to advertisers. Previously, sponsorships were more often directed toward sports considered more successful in Hungary, such as water polo. Today, demand for national team footballers has increased, as indicated by sold out matches and greater media coverage.

The research also examined how the opportunities of Hungarian companies differ from those of foreign firms. Two player agents argued that Hungarian companies typically allocate less funding to sponsorship than foreign firms. Another agent suggested that the opportunities are not necessarily different, but the corporate approach and willingness to invest tend to differ. This interviewee also noted that many companies globally have reduced marketing expenditure. In their view, the key issue is not whether a company is Hungarian or foreign, but whether the company has the strategic intent to enter sponsorship and then assesses what the Hungarian market can realistically support. If a company's marketing budget is limited due to lower sales volumes, it cannot spend as much as firms operating in larger markets. The willingness to invest depends on market share, growth ambitions, and the resources allocated to achieve those goals.

One interviewee recounted a case involving a major global brand where agreement could not be reached because the marketing budget was insufficient to secure one of the most well known Hungarian players. For companies, this remains a business decision, and if the expected return is not convincing, they will not proceed.

A sports marketing professional argued that when two players are perceived to be at a similar level, brand selection becomes easier. As an illustrative example, the interviewee compared Dominik Szoboszlai and Mohamed Salah, both playing for Liverpool FC, noting that Salah's home market in Egypt is considerably larger than that of Hungary. This provides greater monetisation and sponsorship potential for brands. The interviewee emphasised that Hungary is a very small market and, as a consequence, Hungarian companies struggle to compete. The expert also suggested that Hungarian players and clubs have limited chances to reach top tier equipment manufacturer partnerships, because these firms primarily cooperate with the biggest clubs and strongest teams. As a result, Hungarian players rarely reach a level where such brands pay significant endorsement fees. At most, athletes may be used as promotional faces or

receive apparel such as shoes or tracksuits, but beyond that, opportunities are perceived as restricted within the Hungarian context.

The interviewee also highlighted perceived challenges related to the mentality of players, sponsors, and clubs, which they linked to the distinct business model of football in Hungary compared to other countries. The expert stated that since 2012, financial resources have flowed into Hungarian sport through different channels than in many international contexts. They referred to publicly available information on clubs' and federations' websites, suggesting that a substantial share of revenues comes from TAO funding. TAO refers to a Hungarian corporate tax based support scheme that channels earmarked contributions into spectator sports. In this view, because clubs can rely on this funding structure, they face less pressure to generate revenues through sponsorship, which influences both institutional strategy and stakeholder thinking. Consequently, the interviewee argued that visible sponsorship driven business logic has become less central in Hungary.

4.4 Future opportunities and challenges for footballers in the context of technological development

The interviews revealed that future trends and emerging technologies simultaneously offer opportunities and risks for athlete brand building. In the globalised media environment, footballers are able to reach vast audiences within a short period of time. At the same time, accelerated information flows and the development of artificial intelligence pose serious threats. Through AI technologies, manipulated images and videos can now be produced with relative ease, potentially distorting public perceptions of athletes. Therefore, conscious digital presence management and adequate protective measures have become indispensable.

Experts emphasised that players must pay particular attention to their communication, as statements and content shared on social media may have long-term effects on their credibility. Content creation must remain authentic and high quality, as audiences are quick to identify forced or inauthentic appearances.

According to the sports marketing company director, a global challenge lies in the need to manage presence across a growing number of platforms. Nevertheless, the

interviewee argued that athletes today possess all the necessary conditions to build and control their personal brands independently. This is largely due to the fact that players earn more than ever before and have access to a broader range of opportunities. This also applies to support staff. As highlighted, if a player is able to invest in a personal dietitian, physiotherapist, or even a personal stylist, they are likewise able to dedicate attention to brand building, provided that such an intention exists.

One player agent noted that highly successful athletes generally do not need to deal with these issues directly, as they typically have dedicated teams managing their social media presence. A player scout suggested that footballers should also explore new revenue generation opportunities, such as non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and other forms of unique digital collectibles.

In summary, the digital environment and the advancement of artificial intelligence present footballers with numerous opportunities and challenges. With appropriate knowledge and conscious use, these challenges can be managed effectively. It is essential to identify fraudsters and malicious actors at an early stage, before they can cause significant harm to an athlete's reputation. In addition, given the accelerated pace of the modern media landscape, footballers should strive to produce refined and high-quality content on their social media platforms.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was to explore how footballers can build their personal brands in the modern digital environment, with particular attention to the role of social media and sponsorship relationships. Based on the literature review and the in-depth expert interviews, successful athlete brand building can be understood as consisting of three main components: consistent and high-level on-field performance, authentic and conscious communication, and carefully selected sponsorships that are aligned with the athlete's values. Sporting performance provides the fundamental source of credibility for footballers. Sponsors, media actors, and fans are primarily drawn to athletes who consistently demonstrate a high level of performance on the field. In addition, social media enables footballers to establish direct relationships with fans, shape personal narratives, and achieve global reach. However, these opportunities are accompanied by

risks. Forced or inauthentic content, as well as scandals, can rapidly undermine an athlete's carefully constructed image. The findings indicate that Hungarian footballers face more limited opportunities in terms of brand building and sponsorship potential compared to players competing in top foreign leagues. The smaller market size, weaker media environment, and the unique Hungarian language, which differs significantly from most other languages, all contribute to the fact that Hungarian players are generally able to build brands primarily at a national or regional level, rather than achieving broader international visibility. At the international level, only a very limited number of Hungarian footballers currently possess global brand value. In practice, this applies almost exclusively to Dominik Szoboszlai, who is the most marketable Hungarian player and collaborates with several internationally recognised brands. His sporting performance has been widely acknowledged, as illustrated by the Premier League's official Facebook page using an image of his spectacular free kick goal against Arsenal as a cover photo. In addition, Szoboszlai's appealing appearance has contributed to broader public attention, including among audiences beyond traditional football fans. For many young and talented Hungarian footballers, Szoboszlai can serve as a role model in terms of career development, both in football and in sponsorship representation, as his career path has thus far been characterised by deliberate and well-considered decisions.

Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the research, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, the results provide valuable exploratory insights into the mechanisms of athlete brand building, particularly within the football context of a smaller European country, Hungary. Future research could extend this work by applying quantitative methods and larger, more diverse samples, thereby enabling the examination of causal relationships between digital presence, perceived authenticity, and brand value. In addition, comparative cross-national studies could further enhance understanding of how structural, cultural, and market-related factors shape athlete branding opportunities in smaller football nations. As digital platforms and emerging technologies continue to evolve, future studies may also explore how innovations such as artificial intelligence, data-driven content strategies, or new monetisation models influence the long-term sustainability of footballers' personal brands.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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