



Section 5. Economics

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BRANDING ATHLETES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The article examines current trends in the formation and development of the personal brand of professional athletes in the era of rapid digitalization of the media space. The article analyzes the changes in marketing strategies of athletes who are moving from traditional sponsorship to creating their own digital media assets. Special attention is paid to the role of social networks as the main tool for direct communication with the audience. Athletes can not only showcase their athletic achievements, but also monetize their image through developing their own content, creating a loyal community, and establishing partnerships with brands. The paper also examines the risks associated with real-time reputation management, including the impact of platform algorithms on athlete engagement and personality perception. In this article, based on the analysis of empirical data, we identify the key factors that affect the value of a personal brand in the digital age. In addition, we offer recommendations on how to integrate new media into the overall professional development strategy of an athlete. The main idea of the article is that in the modern world, a personal brand is becoming an independent business asset that can ensure the financial stability of an athlete both during his active career and after completion.

Keywords: *personal brand, personal branding, digital marketing, athletes, social networks, media assets, image monetization, reputation management, sports management, digital transformation*

Relevance of the study

In the era of rapid development of digital technologies, professional sports are undergoing significant changes. The athlete's personality becomes the main tool of marketing communication, going beyond exclusively sporting achievements.

This research is becoming particularly relevant in light of the fact that traditional

ways of promotion based on mass television and print media are giving way to interactive digital platforms where the athlete acts as an independent media brand. In the age of social media, the audience expects athletes not only to demonstrate professional skills but also to create authentic content that evokes emotional attachment and promotes loyalty.

However, the digital environment also brings with it new challenges: the high speed of information dissemination, the risk of reputational crises in real time, and dependence on platform algorithms that can both promote brand growth and limit its reach.

Researching the ways athletes adapt to these conditions is of great importance for understanding how they can effectively use their image, establish long-term relationships with the audience, and ensure their financial stability. This makes this topic relevant both for the theory of sports management and for the practical work of athletes and their agency teams.

The purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to theoretically justify and comprehensively analyze the strategies for building a personal brand for professional athletes in the context of digital transformation of the media landscape, as well as to identify the key factors that influence the success of brand monetization in modern market conditions.

To achieve this goal, it is planned to study how the use of new media and social networks is changing the way athletes interact with fans and business partners, and formulate practical recommendations for optimizing athlete image policy to maximize their digital capital.

Materials and research methods

The research methodology is based on a combination of methods from various disciplines, such as marketing, communication studies, and sports sociology. In the course of the work, both general scientific methods, such as analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction, as well as special methods designed to analyze digital activity, were used.

The empirical basis is data from social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, of the world's leading athletes, as well as reports from sports marketing analytics agencies over the past five years. In addition, examples of successful and unsuccessful communication strategies in the sports industry were reviewed.

To study the style, frequency, and nature of athletes' publications, the method of con-

tent analysis was used, which allowed us to identify patterns in the formation of their image.

In addition, a comparative method was used to analyze approaches to brand creation in various sports and in different regional markets. To interpret the data obtained, statistical modeling was used to understand how different types of content affect key performance indicators such as engagement rate (ER), reach, and number of subscribers. This allowed us to confirm the hypothesis that the authenticity of content directly affects the economic sustainability of an athlete's personal brand.

The results of the study

The history of creating athletes' brands in the digital age represents a rapid transition from the passive perception of athletes as objects of mass culture to the active management of their own media empire.

In the early stages, before the advent of digital technology, large media holdings and corporations such as Nike or Coca-Cola tightly controlled athletes' brands. At that time, the athlete was only the face of an advertising campaign that was broadcast through television, the press and radio. Control over his image belonged to agencies and sponsors who created an idealized image, far from reality. This image was unattainable, flawless, and tied to athletic achievements at the stadium. The interaction with the fans was one-sided, and the athlete's role in shaping his own image remained insignificant.

In the mid-2000s, with the advent of the first social networks, the situation began to change dramatically. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and later Instagram provided athletes with the opportunity to communicate directly and openly with the audience. This marked the beginning of an era of personal brand democratization.

Athletes received a tool that allowed them to go beyond the "tracksuit" and enter a new era. During this transition, viewers began to demand something else. The fans were no longer content with dry statistics and scripted interviews. There was a desire to bring more humanity, to look into the daily lives, preferences, and emotions of athletes who had previously been hidden behind the walls

of training complexes (Fedyushina E. A., Kvasov D. O., 2021).

Initially, some athletes and their teams were hesitant about social media, delegating its management to SMM (social media marketing) managers who produced content that was not much different from official press releases. However, it soon became clear that athletes who demonstrated authenticity were the most successful when it came to building brand value.

The next stage of branding development was linked to the increasing complexity of digital platform algorithms and the professionalization of content. By the mid-2010s, it became clear that social media was not just a platform for publishing but a valuable business asset. There were even agencies specializing in personal brand management for athletes.

Content stopped being spontaneous and started following clear content strategies. These strategies take into account peak audience activity hours, current trends, promotion features on different platforms, and the need to maintain high engagement through the Engagement Rate (ER) indicator (Dolgikh U. O., 2017). Athletes began using storytelling to talk not only about their victories but also about how they overcome difficul-

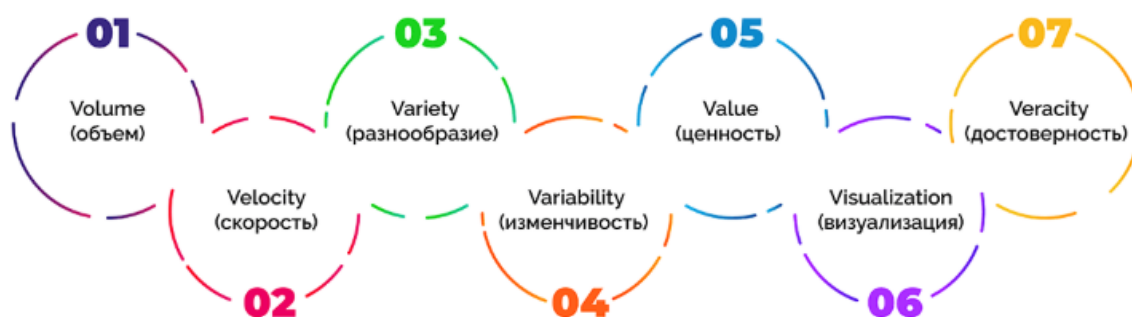
ties, recover from injuries, follow diets, and engage in personal hobbies. This allows them to establish deep emotional connections with their fans. As a result, advertisers began to evaluate athletes not only by sports rating but also by the “digital influence index,” which takes into account the size and quality of their audience.

Currently, branding is undergoing rapid changes due to the merger of sports and show business in the digital economy. The athlete’s personal brand becomes an independent business unit capable of functioning independently of their sports career.

It is important to note that the introduction of modern technologies into the branding system of athletes has fundamentally transformed the world of sports marketing. Athletes have transformed from passive participants in advertising contracts into high-tech media hubs capable of actively interacting with their fans (Yakovlev A. A., 2022).

The basis of this transformation is deep data analytics systems and Big Data technologies, which allow not only broadcasting information to a wide audience but also micro-targeting, dividing fans into segments based on psychographic and behavioral characteristics (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Characteristics of Big Data



Modern technology platforms such as Salesforce and specialized CRM systems designed to manage sports content provide athletes and their teams with unique opportunities. These platforms allow tracking the level of audience engagement in real time, analyzing the effectiveness of each publication, and adjusting the promotion strategy depending on the reaction of subscribers from different geographical regions.

Personal brand management is becoming an increasingly complex science, where intuitive decisions are replaced by algorithmically verified actions aimed at increasing the return on investment (ROI) for sponsors and partners. Table 1 provides examples of how technology can be used to improve the effectiveness of personal brand management.

Table 1. CRM systems for sports content management

No.	Indicator	Characteristic
1	Contact Management	Storing data about clients, partners, sponsors, and fans. Dividing the database into segments to ensure an individual approach to each.
2	Marketing Automation	Sending news, promotions, and updates via email and social media. Develop targeted campaigns to attract new customers.
3	Analytics and reporting	Tracking customer interactions and evaluating the effectiveness of various strategies. Data analysis for predicting customer behavior.
4	Event Management	Organization and control of sports events. Ticket sales and registration management.
5	Social network	Interact with fans through platforms. Tracking mentions and reviews.

A significant technological advancement has been the introduction of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies, which have transformed the way athletes, engage with fans, reducing the distance between them to almost nothing.

Thanks to the integration of AR filters on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, fans can “try on” their favorite athletes’ equipment, participate in virtual training sessions, and even find themselves in a virtual space that replicates a professional team’s locker room, creating an immersive experience. These tools enable athletes to take their content beyond static visuals, offering interactive experiences that deepen the emotional connection with their fans. Additionally, the development of AI technologies has allowed for the automation of content creation and community management, making it easier for athletes to maintain a strong online presence.

AI algorithms help optimize SEO parameters for athletes’ personal websites, predict the viral potential of a particular post based on trend analysis, and even generate personalized responses to fan comments. This allows athletes to maintain high levels of engagement even with millions of fans, which would be impossible to manage manually.

Another aspect of technological influence is the use of blockchain technology and NFTs (non-fungible tokens). These have created new models for monetizing and interacting with fans. Athletes can issue digital collectible

cards or tokenize rights to exclusive events, creating closed communities on crypto platforms. This allows them to commercialize their popularity directly, bypassing traditional intermediaries like sports federations and media holdings. It creates an ownership economy, where fans become investors in the success of their idols.

In addition, modern streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube Live have changed their approach to content delivery, focusing not on carefully prepared commercials, but on a “live” presence. The use of professional studio equipment for home streaming, including high-quality motion capture systems and modern streaming programs such as OBS Studio, allows athletes to conduct live broadcasts of gameplay, training sessions, or Q&A sessions at the level of television broadcasts.

Biometrics and wearable device technologies are also beginning to play an important role in shaping a brand based on the principle of “digital transparency.” Athletes are increasingly sharing data about their workouts, heart rate, and recovery through apps like Strava or Whoop. This allows them to integrate their personal brand into the ecosystem of fans who strive for self-improvement. Thanks to this, the athlete turns from an unattainable hero into a mentor whose path to success can be tracked and repeated.

However, despite the vast opportunities offered by digital technologies, the process of creating a personal brand for a modern

athlete is fraught with a number of serious problems. These problems can not only slow down the growth of popularity but also cause irreparable damage to reputation.

One of the most serious problems faced by modern athletes is the so-called “transparency trap.” This is a phenomenon where the boundaries between professional and personal life are becoming increasingly blurred, and the desire to be closer to fans through social media leads to excessive openness. In pursuit of large audiences, athletes are often willing to sacrifice their privacy, which creates the illusion of accessibility. However, this also makes them vulnerable to public opinion, which in the digital age reacts instantly and is often aggressive.

Any mistake, careless statement, or unfortunate shot posted in a fit of emotion or in a state of fatigue can quickly spread through the algorithms of social networks such as Twitter or Instagram, turning into a large-scale scandal. Dealing with a crisis requires complex and expensive crisis management communication. The digital memory of the Internet does not forgive mistakes, and even ten-year-old content retrieved from archives can lead to the “cancellation” of an athlete. This makes long-term brand planning very risky.

Another significant challenge is the fragmentation of the audience and the need to be present on multiple platforms, which demands a significant amount of time and mental effort, often diverting attention from the main goal – achieving sports results. Athletes face a difficult choice: either to delegate brand management to a team of social media managers, risking losing authenticity and turning their accounts into a soulless advertising showcase, or to independently create content, which can lead to professional burnout.

In a world where TikTok and Reels algorithms demand that feeds be updated several times a day, high-quality, deep content is being overshadowed by “fast-food” content, which reduces the semantic load and depth of a brand. Additionally, there is the issue of dependence on social platform algorithms: changing coverage policies or monetization rules can reset years of hard work overnight, depriving an athlete of direct access to their

audience. This creates an unstable brand architecture where success depends on external, uncontrollable technological intermediaries.

Athletes face the need to spend a lot of effort and resources on maintaining digital hygiene, moderation of comments, and protection of personal space. This creates psychological stress, which directly affects their fitness. In addition, there is the problem of “confidence inflation.” Due to the large number of advertising integrations and partner posts in the market, the audience develops “banner blindness” and skepticism. When every athlete’s post seems like a hidden advertisement for NFT projects, sports nutrition, or betting shops, their brand loses its value in the eyes of fans and turns from a symbol of achievement into a commercial tool. This contradiction between the need for monetization and maintaining a sincere relationship with the audience is becoming the “bottleneck” of modern sports marketing.

In conclusion, it is impossible not to mention the problem of digital inequality and the technological difficulties associated with the protection of intellectual property. In an era when artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms make it possible to create deepfakes or use images of athletes in unauthorized campaigns, brand protection is becoming a complex legal and technical task.

Athletes must constantly ensure that their copyrights are not violated in the global digital space. This requires in-depth knowledge not only in sports but also in the field of cyber law and blockchain technologies, which are used to protect the rights to digital assets.

However, the main problem is the fragility of digital success. In a world where trends only last a few days, building a long-term and sustainable brand is becoming an increasingly difficult task. The athlete must find the perfect balance between technological adaptability, his authenticity, and psychological stability. This is especially difficult in conditions of intense training and competition.

Conclusions. Summing up the results of the study of athletes’ branding in the digital age, we can conclude that the transition of professional sports to the virtual space has led to fundamental changes in perception. Now sporting achievements are becoming

only the foundation, not the ultimate goal. Today, we are witnessing the transformation of the athlete's image from a classic hero whose value was determined only by medals and records to a full-fledged media character acting according to the laws of the content industry. However, despite the huge potential for monetization and influence, this transition is fraught with systemic risks that require athletes and their environment to develop a new level of strategic thinking.

In today's world, a personal brand is not just a lifestyle demonstration but a complex system that requires a balance between emotional connection with the audience and privacy. To achieve success, you need to be able to delegate the operational management of your social media account to professional teams while maintaining your personality. In addition, it is important to be prepared to adapt to the constantly changing algorithms of the platforms.

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