

The Effects of Influencer Athletes on Sports Marketing in New Media

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Introduction

The impact of athlete endorsements on sports marketing in the context of new media represents a transformative paradigm in the way brands interact with consumers. Athletes have recently emerged more frequently on digital platforms as important sports figures who can reshape consumer behavior and brand narratives. As the number of users of digital media increases, the visibility of athlete influencers who combine both consumer products and personal brands with sports marketing increases. Social media provides the dynamism for athletes to be closer to their fans and consumers than ever before. Increased athlete awareness opens the door to sponsorship deals, and thus athlete endorsements are taking their place in marketing as the preferred method of reaching supporters (Karg & Lock, 2014). Brands benefit from the high number of social media followers of these athletes.

New media allows athletes to create authentic connections with their fans and create effective marketing campaigns that often outperform traditional advertising methods. Athletes' unique narratives and credibility resonate strongly with younger demographics, especially Generation Z and Millennials, increasing engagement and loyalty to brands (Jiang et al., 2023). In particular, the rise of athlete influencers is also driving significant changes in consumer expectations for authenticity and transparency in marketing. Athletes are no longer just endorsers, but active participants in the marketing process, often using social media platforms to advocate for causes that align with their personal values. This evolution is leading brands to adopt more nuanced strategies and balance traditional marketing methods with the innovative approaches championed by athlete influencers. The ability of athlete influencers to influence audiences through innovative content and emotional connections offers brands a unique way to increase awareness, build loyal users, and drive sales. This paradigm evolution marks a significant departure from traditional marketing approaches. This ongoing evolution points to the need for brands to remain agile and responsive to changing consumer behavior and technological advancements in the digital age (Lee & Kim, 2022).

It is known that the visibility and roles of athletes changed significantly with the emergence of social media in the 2000s. Athletes began to develop their own personal brands, interact directly with their fans, and influence purchasing decisions through platforms such as X, Instagram, and YouTube. The relationship between brands and athletes is becoming more reciprocal, with athletes using their increasing follower counts to negotiate more lucrative deals and gain more control over their supporters (Brison & Geurin, 2021). As digital platforms grow, influencer marketing continues to gain momentum. As the internet and new media spread via fiber optic cables, many

athletes are becoming influencers in their own right, using their personal platforms to produce original content that appeals to younger audiences. This process allows brands to tap into the established trust that athletes have established with their fans, often leading to more effective marketing campaigns that outperform traditional advertising methods. The introduction of new technologies, including augmented reality and virtual environments, is further increasing the integration of athletes into the marketing field. As brands explore innovative ways to combine physical and digital elements, they are engaging audiences through inclusive and immersive experiences on digital platforms (Murdough, 2009). The visibility of women's sports and the increasing popularity of e-sports are opening up new avenues for influencer marketing, allowing brands to connect with different demographic groups and capitalize on emerging trends. Today, brands are connecting deeper with fans through strategic partnerships with athlete influencers, thus continuing the paradigm evolution in sports marketing (McClearen & Nishime, 2023). As a result, brands that understand the evolution in history and recognize the important role of digital media are changing their life cycle upwards. Brands are said to be in a better position to create campaigns that resonate with their target audiences and leverage the unique talents of influencer athletes in the modern marketing environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to convey the contribution of the increasing influencer athlete effect in new media to marketing by examining the current literature.

New Media Platforms

In the portfolio of communication channels used by marketing professionals, online channels constitute the main actors of the digital marketing strategy. Providing points of contact between the consumer and the brand story, social media does not only include consuming social media content, but also provides the freedom to share the content with which it interacts. Shared messages, images and content can quickly go viral and become highly appreciated shares (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

New media platforms offer various advantages to athletes and sports organizations. The interactive structure of these platforms, their infrastructure that offers the opportunity for dialogic communication, enables two-way conversations that increase fan participation and strengthen loyalty and support. Just like the unifying effect of sports, digital media activates the audience and unites them with the athlete on digital platforms. The experience of being connected to the athlete they admire strengthens athlete-fan communication by expanding participation and interaction. The digital ecosystem offers athletes and sports brands the opportunity to support their brand image with innovative and unique content and create positive perception. Digital media platforms mediate the establishment of reliable connections in the interactive ecosystem between fans (consumers), brands and athletes who act as a bridge between the two (Kunkel & Biscaia 2020). In addition, social media marketing, which is generally more cost-effective than traditional marketing methods, makes it accessible to sports organizations of all sizes. The emergence of new media platforms has transformed the trends in sports marketing and enabled athletes to connect with their fans and sponsors in unprecedented ways (Yadav et al., 20239). Athletes have the opportunity to build their brands and increase their influence through segmentation and specific positioning on different new media platforms.

Social media is becoming an integral part of sports marketing strategies due to its wide reach and interactive structure. Mobile technologies provide convenience in implementing strategies that leverage the media-sport-consumer triangle (Stavros et al., 2022). Platforms such as X, Instagram, YouTube, Tiktok and Snapchat allow athletes to interact with their fans globally, creating a sense of community and loyalty among

followers. Instagram is used as an effective and efficient platform for athletes to showcase their lives and careers through visual content thanks to its millions of users (Li et al., 2021). Likewise, the X platform allows athletes to provide instant updates and insights into their experiences and increases fan interaction during events (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022).

Athletes are increasingly viewed as influencers and are leveraging their platforms to expand their sponsorship potential and marketability. For example, on LinkedIn, professional athletes can network with sponsors and explore business opportunities, while YouTube allows them to monetize their content based on viewer engagement. TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform, encouraging creative content by appealing to younger audiences, and TikTok is being used as an alternative medium for athletes targeting younger demographics (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Athlete influencers Effect

Athlete endorsements are emerging as a powerful marketing tool in the field of sports marketing, especially in the new media environment. The unique position of athletes as role models and influencers allows them to create significant effects on consumer behavior and brand interaction. Branded athletes have a unique positive perception with their supporters by differentiating themselves from other athletes with their performance, attractive appeal and lifestyle (Arai et al., 2013).

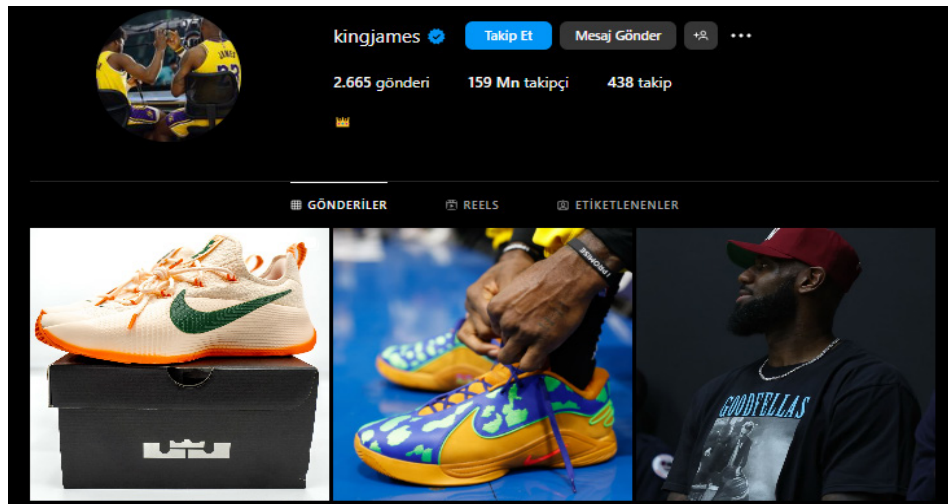
One of the main reasons why athlete endorsements are so effective is the authenticity and reliability that athletes provide to the institutions and products they support. Positive effects emerge when the power provided by an ambitious argument is matched with the supporter of the product. Consumers find influencers' experiences more trustworthy. When the positive perception of athletes in terms of source reliability is combined with product quality, brand and image goals are more easily approached (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Athletes often have compelling personal narratives that resonate with fans, creating trust and a sense of connection. Fans see the endorsements of their favorite athletes as genuine suggestions, not just promotional products. Research shows that when brands that collaborate with influencers compare traditional influencers to sports influencers, they find sports influencers more convincing due to their naturalness. In a study comparing favorite athletes and bloggers followed on digital platforms, surveys confirm that athletes are more likely to buy products promoted or endorsed by sports influencers due to their familiarity and naturalness. Almost half of the respondents stated that they are more likely to buy products recommended by athletes (Voráček & Bernardová, 2021). As a result, the unique value that athlete endorsements provide in reaching consumers is emphasized. Athlete influencers play an important role in shaping consumer trends and preferences. Their ability to set trends (whether it is showcasing sportswear or endorsing performance equipment) allows them to remain at the forefront of consumer awareness. Marketers often use this influence by aligning their offerings with existing preferences demonstrated by athlete endorsements, which leads to significant increases in sales.

One of the cornerstones of successful athlete influencer marketing is authenticity. Athletes can maintain their influence by being transparent about their partnerships and only promoting products that align with their personal values and interests. This alignment not only fosters trust among followers, but also increases the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. When choosing influencers, brands often evaluate an athlete's popularity, engagement levels, and previous partnerships, and try to ensure that the partnership is real and relatable to their target audience (Göksu, 2018). Athletes are generally individuals who have gained fame outside of social media platforms. Their influence is not derived from the content they produce, but from their success in their active sports lives. Although brands are well-known, customers may not engage with

brand posts because they are looking for other reasons to engage. Here, athletes who are known for their credibility, authenticity, and success hold the key to engagement. Brands prefer to collaborate with athletes who have gained fame outside of social media platforms when the shared content is supported by an influential endorser (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Figure 1

LeBron James Instagram Account [Source: <https://www.instagram.com/kingjames/>]



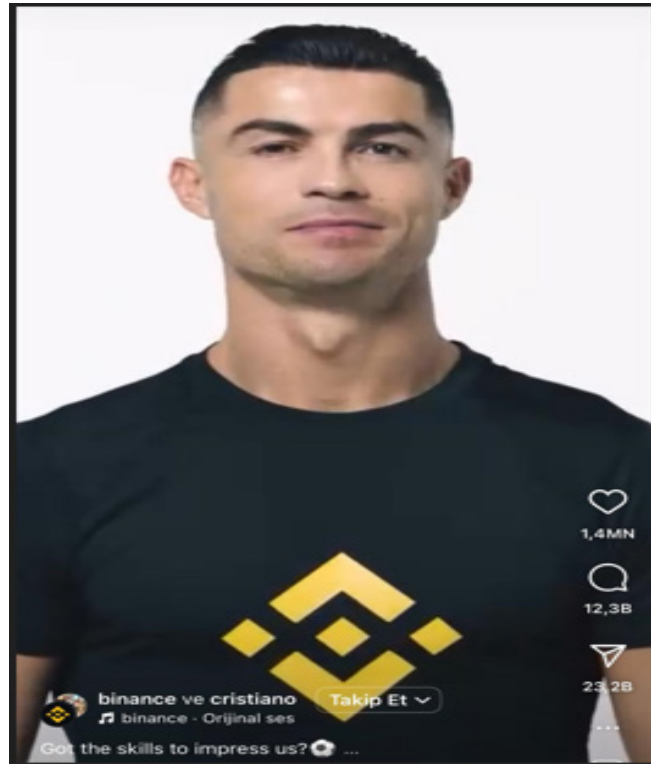
As a leader who has the courage to use his own personal values and understanding, James's personal brand strength, athletic performance, financial gains, public actions and statements are portrayed positively in the media. James, who has received a lot of interaction on social media with his leadership in "Black Lives Matter" activism, is said to have contributed to creating a value-oriented and trusted profile with a global audience (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Nike's partnership with LeBron James is given as an example of the supportive effect of athlete endorsements on product sales and brand visibility. James' partnership with Nike, a well-established and leading sports brand, with a unique athletic performance and leadership characteristic, has resulted in one of the most successful athlete signature sneaker lines.

Influencer marketing in the sports industry is emerging as a powerful strategy for brands looking to truly engage with consumers. Athletes are prominent figures in this space, using their credibility and follower count to effectively promote products and services. Statistics show that campaigns featuring athletes generate increased engagement, trust, and significant ROI, especially among the desirable Gen Z and younger demographics (Bush et al., 2004). Brands that leverage athlete influencer marketing can leverage these relationships to increase brand visibility, loyalty, and conversion rates across channels. A study examining tweets from US athletes during the 2018 Olympic Games showed that brand posts received more engagement than other posts by athletes (Brison & Geurin, 2021).

Cristiano Ronaldo, who has over 600 million followers on Instagram (@cristiano, 2024) and is known to be one of the highest-earning athletes in the world, shows his supportive and approving effect not only in sports but also in other sectors. A financial sector company called Binance, which wants to gain strength from his influence compatible with his talents in sports and making money, has partnered with Cristiano Ronaldo, a powerful name in the social media ecosystem (Figure 2). The popularity of the approver and the rate of spread in digital media lead brands to cooperate in order to benefit from interaction. Posts and videos that receive millions of likes and shares provide the expected benefit in terms of reaching the target audience of brand messages (Mallipeddi et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Cristiano Ronaldo Instagram Account [Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DDCBQ_YsZlz/]



Innovative content strategies are often adopted on social media platforms to engage viewers, athletes, and brands. For example, athletes share product experiences through fun and spontaneous videos that resonate with their followers, making promotional content seem more like a personal recommendation than an advertisement. By showcasing products in real environments (e.g. during training or in real life), relatability and consumer connection with athletes are increased (Hambrick & Kang, 2015).

Another effective strategy is to align marketing efforts with athletes' personal advocacy and social causes. This strategic alignment enhances consumer connections and ensures that the brand's message resonates meaningfully with its target audience (Deflem, 2023). Brands that partner with athletes who are passionate about specific topics increase their target market's interest in their products and can connect more deeply with consumers. Successful athlete influencer marketing is also supported by engagement metrics and audience insights. Brands are encouraged to analyze not only reach but also engagement rates, such as likes, comments, shares, and saves on influencer posts (Clavio, 2020). High engagement rates indicate genuine interest and connection, ultimately making athlete influencers more valuable than mere follower numbers. Some companies exploring new media platforms are providing brands with the data they need to refine their strategies and optimize their partnerships with athlete influencers (Özdengül & Aydın, 2022).

As influencer marketing becomes more prevalent, traditional marketing strategies are increasingly integrating influencer partnerships. Brands are realizing that traditional marketing alone may not be able to effectively engage younger consumers who predominantly consume digital content. Athlete influencers, who have both the credibility of traditional sports figures and the reach of digital influencers, serve as a bridge between these two marketing worlds.

Conclusion

The landscape of sports marketing is poised for transformative change as new media and influencer marketing increasingly integrate. As the digital age continues to expand,

emerging technologies are said to play a significant role in shaping future marketing strategies. At this point, the presence of athlete role models, their impressiveness within the digital ecosystem, their uniqueness in terms of success and physical attractiveness, their strong bond with their fan bases and their talents in setting trends are becoming indispensable for brands. It is anticipated that collaborations with athletes who interact well with their fans and endorsements from athletes will bring brands one step closer to their goals. The posts and comments of athlete endorsers, who are known for their success, attractiveness and trustworthy stance throughout their careers, on digital media platforms can affect all individuals, especially adolescents and women. Athlete endorsers who successfully use different social networks create innovative and unique content and direct their followers.

The future of sports marketing will also be impacted by changing consumer behaviors and preferences. With an increased focus on sustainability and social responsibility, brands that align with social values and prioritize authentic connections with fans will be more likely to succeed in this new environment. Understanding the nuances of these behaviors will be important for marketers looking to create meaningful campaigns that resonate with today's audiences.

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