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Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa

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“Strategies for Personal Branding in Sports: A Comprehensive Analysis”

Author: Mihaela Mitu

Romania

Tutored by Professor: Benoit Séguin



Abstract

In the competitive world of sports, personal branding has emerged as a critical strategy for athletes aiming to differentiate themselves, forge strong connections with fans, and attract lucrative sponsorship opportunities. This research explores the role of personal branding for athletes, particularly within the Romanian sports sector. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with students from the National University of Physical Education and Sport (UNFES) and qualitative interviews with a leading Romanian fencer and a PR agency, the study investigates how athletes can effectively manage and enhance their public image via digital platforms. The findings offer valuable strategies for building authentic, consistent, and engaging personal brands that drive fan engagement, increase visibility, and attract sponsorship opportunities. These insights are essential for athletes, sports managers, and marketing professionals navigating the increasingly digital landscape of sports branding.

Résumé

Dans le monde compétitif du sport, l'image de marque personnelle est devenue une stratégie essentielle pour les athlètes qui cherchent à se différencier, à forger des liens solides avec les supporters et à attirer des opportunités de sponsoring lucratives. Cette étude explore le rôle de l'image de marque personnelle pour les athlètes, en particulier dans le secteur sportif roumain. Grâce à une approche mixte, combinant des enquêtes quantitatives auprès d'étudiants de l'Université nationale d'éducation physique et de sport (UNFES) et des entretiens qualitatifs avec un escrimeur roumain de premier plan et une agence de relations publiques, l'étude examine comment les athlètes peuvent gérer et améliorer efficacement leur image publique par le biais de plateformes numériques. Les résultats offrent des stratégies précieuses pour construire des marques personnelles authentiques, cohérentes et engageantes qui stimulent l'engagement des fans, augmentent la visibilité et attirent des opportunités de sponsoring. Ces informations sont essentielles pour les athlètes, les managers sportifs et les professionnels du marketing qui naviguent dans le paysage de plus en plus numérique de l'image de marque du sport.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
2.1. Personal branding: the core of the paper	6
2.2. Personal branding: main setting and implications.....	7
2.3. Personal branding through social media.....	7
2.4. Determining the most appropriate type of personal branding.....	9
2.5. Leveraging Social Media: The Key to Athletes Developing a Strong Personal Brand	11
Chapter 3 – Methodology	13
3.1. Collection of interview data.....	13
3.2. Collection of questionnaire	14
4.1. Interpreting interviews.....	15
4.1.2. Ana Maria Brânză's Interview	15
4.1.3. PR Company's Interview	17
4.2. Questionnaire Results.....	18
Chapter 5 – Recommendations and conclusion.....	42
Recommendations and Action Plan.....	42
CONCLUSIONS.....	44
References	45
Appendices 1 – QUESTIONNAIRE	50
Appendices 2 - Ana Maria Branza's interview	57
Appendices 3 - PR Company's interview	58

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the highly competitive world of sports, personal branding has become an essential tool for athletes looking to differentiate themselves, build lasting connections with fans, and secure lucrative sponsorship deals. In an era dominated by digital platforms, where visibility and interaction are key, athletes must strategically manage their public image to stand out in a crowded marketplace. This paper aims to explore the critical components of effective personal branding for athletes, with a particular focus on the Romanian context.

The importance of a strong personal brand extends beyond the field of play; it influences how athletes are perceived by fans, sponsors, and the media. A well-crafted personal brand can lead to increased recognition, enhanced marketability, and greater opportunities both during and after an athlete's career. However, developing and maintaining such a brand requires a deep understanding of the strategies that resonate with target audiences and the platforms that offer the most significant impact.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to uncover these strategies, combining quantitative data from a questionnaire distributed to students at the National University of Physical Education and Sport (UNFES) with qualitative insights from interviews with Ana Maria Brânză, a renowned Romanian fencer, and a specialized PR agency. The research investigates the role of social media in personal branding, the types of content that most effectively engage audiences, and the challenges athletes face in balancing their sporting commitments with the demands of brand management.

Through this analysis, the paper seeks to identify best practices for personal branding in sports, offering practical recommendations that can help athletes build authentic, consistent, and engaging brands. The findings are intended to serve not only athletes but also managers, marketers, and PR professionals working in the sports industry, providing them with actionable insights into the dynamics of personal branding in today's digital landscape.

As the landscape of sports continues to evolve, this research underscores the critical need for athletes to leverage digital platforms strategically, ensuring that their personal brand not only reflects their achievements but also resonates with the values and interests of their audience. By doing so, athletes can enhance their visibility, deepen fan engagement, and secure the commercial opportunities that are increasingly tied to a strong personal brand.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Personal branding: the core of the paper

Branding strategy is focused on long-term goals related to reputation, identity, and the value provided by the brand, covering elements such as brand value, market position, and customer perception. Conversely, marketing strategy is described as a tactical approach for delivering the brand's message to the audience through various channels, including digital marketing, PR, and advertising. While branding is about creating a consistent and recognizable identity, marketing focuses on the methods used to communicate this identity to the target audience effectively. The chapter then delves into PR techniques specific to the personal branding of athletes, noting that athletes, much like corporations, must build strong, recognizable identities that extend beyond their sports careers. Examples, such as the partnership between Michael Jordan and Nike, which resulted in the iconic Air Jordan brand, are used to illustrate the potential impact of effective personal branding. The importance of maintaining consistency across all platforms and managing public image through strategic use of social media, fan interaction, and crisis management. The study aims to identify the most effective elements for building a strong personal brand for athletes, with a particular focus on Romanian athletes. The chapter discusses the importance of social visibility and the strategic use of tools like social media, stressing the need for athletes to carefully craft their branding strategies to align with their values and audience expectations.

The research is driven by questions aimed at understanding the most suitable social media channels for Romanian athletes, the types of content that resonate most with their audience, and how personal attributes influence an athlete's brand. The study also seeks to explore the broader implications of these branding strategies on the athletes' marketability and public perception. The chapter acknowledges several limitations in the study, particularly the complexity of analyzing PR and branding strategies in sports, which are influenced by numerous external factors. It also addresses the challenges athletes face in balancing professional commitments with the demands of personal branding, highlighting the financial constraints and market saturation that complicate the development of a strong personal brand, especially for athletes in the early stages of their careers. The core of the paper is to analyze the sports market and determine the most effective strategies for personal branding. The chapter outlines the importance of understanding the target audience, their interests, and the types of content that engage them the most. It proposes a structured approach for athletes to build and

maintain a strong personal brand, focusing on consistency, authenticity, and strategic content creation as key elements for success. This chapter provides the theoretical foundation necessary for understanding the role of branding and PR strategies in the sports industry, particularly concerning personal branding for athletes, setting the stage for the analysis and practical applications discussed in the subsequent chapters of the document.

2.2. Personal branding: main setting and implications

Personal branding can be identified as the activity specific to managing a generic brand, but applied to an individual, not a particular company. Naturally, this type of branding compared to the conventional one has certain characteristics such as the need for positioning, acquiring certain characteristics or a certain set of skills in a certain field and especially positioning on the market / area in which it operates from professional considerations. It should be noted that personal branding towards professional branding, in the case of a company, for example, also has common factors such as image placement in the macroeconomic area, the need to have an attitude of impartiality in order not to affect social approaches (because issuing value judgments can attract social repercussions that in turn tarnish the personal image) and the need to gain and maintain a high level of credibility in the activity environment (Hasaan et al., 2024).

2.3. Personal branding through social media

In today's digital age, social media apps such as Instagram, Facebook and others are becoming essential tools for athletes in building and promoting their own personal brands. These platforms provide athletes with a global platform to showcase not only their athletic abilities, but also aspects of their personal lives, training, nutrition, relationships with coaches and teammates, and sometimes even intimate moments of everyday life (Sahli et al., 2023). Through constant posts, photos, videos and stories, athletes can give their fans a behind-the-scenes look at their lives and build strong emotional connections with their audience. Not only does this make them more accessible and closer to fans, but it can also strengthen and improve their relationship with them, which can lead to a more loyal and engaged fan base.

Through strategic contributions and creative content, athletes can define their personal story and highlight the values and passions that define them, making them role models and influencers for their fans and the sports community as a whole. In summary, social media applications are not just communication and advertising tools but are becoming a central

element in strategies for building the personal brand of athletes, offering them unique opportunities to expand their influence, diversify their sources of income and to turn their sporting success into a lasting success and influential career off the field (Mikhno & Zolotova., 2023). To successfully build a personal brand on social media, to build a brand personality, to generate a consistent online presence, to build correlations and an effective network, to adopt different social media platforms, to invariably measure brand efforts, a permanent presence in the online social environment is necessary (Xie et al., 2024). It is not enough to have a presence only in the digital environment, but also on social media, that is, by engaging in the social environment of the people whom one seeks to attract to his target audience (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). Personal branding is about generating your own identity and promoting it to influence how the audience perceives a person. With more than half of the world's people now using social media, these platforms have become some of the best places to reach audiences and promote personal image (Wong, 2023).

Instagram - visual platform that has been created for the formation of visual content such as photos, videos or descriptive texts. It is ideal for delimiting the target audience because people can choose in which of the niches the application contains they can operate.

Twitter or X - a powerful personal branding tool suited for short-form written content. Interestingly, it's a broad platform that also works very well for GIFs, images, and short videos. It allows real-time conversations, making it excellent for people whose personal branding strategy.

Facebook - anyone can post anything on Facebook, from photos and news to long-form posts.

LinkedIn - LinkedIn is often called the "Facebook of the professional world," as it is a business and employment-focused social media channel. There are different analytic tools to analyze your social media metrics. Some social media automation tools even have analytics capabilities. Some social media metrics to analyze include:

Table 1: Social media metrics

Item	Definition
Reach	the number of people that see your content
Impressions	the number of times your content is shown to users
Audience Growth Rate	how many new followers join your channel within a particular period
Engagement Rate	the number of engagements (reactions, likes, comments, shares) your content gets as a percentage of your followers
Amplification Rate	the number of shares your content gets as a percentage of your followers
Click-through Rate	the percentage of times your audience who see a post clicks a link in it to access additional

Maintaining a unique and consistent brand image and voice across all social media profiles lies in consistency that is essential when it comes to personal branding. It is important for the author to maintain that a person consists, without changes in temperament. This ensures trust and is memorable for those followers. Finding the right tone and image may require some trial and error, but all social media profiles should be updated to reflect consistent branding once it's established. To maintain a balance and consistency between multiple accounts or social media pages, several elements are needed. Establishing brand guidelines is the first aspect. Identifying a focus and goal for the digital world and ensuring that all social media posts revolve around established guidelines is a critical element in developing an image of yourself.

2.4. Determining the most appropriate type of personal branding

In order to determine which is the most appropriate way of personal promotion, the athlete must pay more attention to thousands of elements such as his personality, the values he has, the goals he sets himself, the target audience he wants to have, as well as the nature of the sport he practices (because there are defining elements for group sports, individual sports, but also other elements such as winter sports, summer sports, sports that can be practiced only at certain times of the year or only with certain devices or objects) (Swain et al., 2023). The brand approach consists of a mix of several elements such as the authenticity of the messages, the relocability that a message can have, its flow, the aspiration that the message influences, the

diversity it suggests (an important element that leads to the formation of a point of view or a personal, individual image and most importantly to differentiate itself from the rest of the people who seek to take over as much of the attention of the target audience as possible), the authority that the athlete can impose as a result of the statements made and lastly, the expertise that an athlete has and can use to create authority, originality and individualization (Kilag et al., 2023). The values, interests, and long-term objectives of the athlete should be considered in order to select one of these tactics and build a powerful personal brand. Finding their unique selling point and a distinctive storytelling angle that will help them connect with their target audience are crucial steps in communicating their message. To gain more knowledge and expert guidance on making decisions, speaking with sports branding and marketing specialists could also be beneficial.

Table 2: Definition of Athlete Brand Image Dimension

Athletic performance	An athlete's sport performance related features	Athletic expertise	An athlete's individual achievement and athletic capability (winning, skills, proficiency in their sport)
		Competition style	An athlete's specific characteristics of his/her performance in a competition
		Sportsmanship	An athlete's virtuous behavior that people have determined is appropriate (fair play, respect for the game, integrity)
		Rivalry	An athlete's competitive relationship with other athletes.
Attractive appearance	An athlete's attractive external appearance	Physical attractiveness	An athlete's physical qualities and characteristics that spectators find ecstatically pleasing
		Symbol	An athlete's attractive personal style and trademark
		Body fitness	An athlete's body fitness in his / her sport
Marketable lifestyle	An athlete's off-field	Life story	An appealing, interesting off-field life story that includes a message and reflects the athlete's personal value

	marketable features	Role model	An athlete's ethical behavior that society has determined is worth emulating
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Source: Arai et al. (2014)

Athletes represent a certain category of public figures who attract a special interest from individuals in society. It is this interest from society that underpins the development of a strong public image, if used properly. The way an athlete is perceived by the public is influenced by the entire environment in which the person operates. Athletes who possess different brands than the rest of the people who follow the social environment end up being positioned more favorably because of the favorable image they have. The fees that an individual recognized by it requests for promoting or participating in certain events or playing for a particular team increase significantly, with a directly proportional relationship between the degree of exposure, the level of notoriety of an individual and the level of remuneration that a person has. Thus, athletes who develop a strong personal brand end up enjoying more advantages over the average, standard athlete who has not invested time in forming and developing a strong personal brand. Forming a strategy for an athlete to enjoy these advantages occurs because of a strategy (Kim & Park., 2023)

2.5. Leveraging Social Media: The Key to Athletes Developing a Strong Personal Brand

Social media has become an indispensable utility for athletes in mandate to create and enhance their personal image. Beyond athletic prowess, today's athletes are likely to interact, sponsors and media through different ways to enhance their profile and generate an original, lasting impression. Social media consequently gives athletes a platform to relate directly to all interlocutors. As exposed, platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok offer athletes the possibility to share glimpses of their personal lives, training, and behind-the-scenes moments. By giving the public the possibility to observe what is happening in their world, athletes can humanize themselves, encouraging a sense of belonging and loyalty among their followers. This direct interplay provides a devoted fan base who are more likely to empathize with the athlete both on and off the field. Moreover, social media empowers athletes to govern their exposure and shape how they are perceived by their target audience. Through carefully curated posts and content, athletes present their values, interests and aspirations, consequently creating a specific personal brand. unique. Whether it's emphasis athletic endeavors, sharing motivational messages, or supporting products, athletes can adopt social media to emphasize their desired image and distinguish themselves from their competitors. In addition to connecting

with fans, social media is assimilated, interpreted as a powerful utility for athletes to attract lucrative sponsorship deals and endorsement opportunities. Brands are increasingly turning to athletes with large and engaged followers to encourage their products or services.

2.6. Key Points

The chapter underscores the critical role that social media platforms, especially Instagram and Facebook, play in the development and promotion of an athlete's brand. The necessity of maintaining authenticity and consistency in the content shared by athletes is highlighted, along with the strategic creation of content to enhance visibility and engagement with their audience.

Various techniques and tools that athletes can use to strengthen their brand are also explored, including the use of storytelling, forming strategic partnerships, and actively engaging with their fan base. Additionally, the chapter addresses the challenges that athletes may face in balancing their professional commitments with the ongoing demands of personal branding. The importance of remaining adaptable to changing market conditions and trends is also discussed, as this is vital for the long-term sustainability and growth of their personal brand.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

The case investigation was conducted in two distinct phases. The first phase involved conducting two qualitative interviews. The first interview was with Ana Maria Brânză, a prominent Romanian fencer, and the second was with a marketing company specializing in personal brand development. These interviews were structured to explore the practical and strategic aspects of personal branding in sports. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the processes and challenges involved in maintaining a public image, complementing the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire. The second phase of the case study involved a questionnaire to students at the National University of Physical Education and Sport (UNFES) using institutional email addresses. These email addresses are organizational and standardized, ensuring compliance with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) by not collecting personal data. The university generates a specific email format for each student, which is then integrated into a forwarding address system. This system allows a single email to be sent to numerous recipients, ensuring broad distribution of the questionnaire. Permission was obtained to use these institutional addresses, which facilitated the dissemination of the questionnaire to as many students as possible. Once an email is sent to a group address, all individual email addresses within that group receive it. This approach, common practice at UNFES, adheres to GDPR regulations while ensuring comprehensive reach. The uniform format of these email addresses, such as "Group.(group)@stud.unefs.ro," allows for efficient data management without compromising confidentiality.

3.1. Collection of interview data

The second part of the analysis consisted of conducting two interviews. The first interview is meant to provide a concrete picture of how performance athletes relate to the personal PR environment. For this aspect, a questionnaire was developed with a set of predefined questions that was submitted to Ana Maria Brânză, a performance athlete from Romania and international medalist. Furthermore, the PR and personal branding firm that Maria Brânză works with provided assistance for the second part of the study. We are able to observe how the athlete and the company spokesperson interact with the online environment because of their distinct points of view, which offer a comprehensive and cohesive overview. Ana Maria Brânză answered the interview in Annex number 3 about the company that collaborates with the athlete, and Annex number 2 about the interview she was rejected from. Both questionnaires can be examined in terms of form and structure.

3.2. Collection of questionnaire

The evaluation for the case investigation contains two distinct elements. The first time, the questionnaire govern was carried out with the use, of institutional email addresses, which is why the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) provision on classified information was complied with. The institutional email address at the National University of Physical Education and Sport (UNFES) is an organizational address. The university produces a certain kind of email address format for each person/student. In turn, these addresses are integrated in a forwarding address that is applied, to send a single piece of data to many people utilizing a single email address. The agreement was asked for these addresses to be taken over and exploited, utilized by the handling of the management to send the questionnaire to as numerous students as possible. The utilization of an organizational email address (an indirect but official communication channel) respects the rigor of the answers and the dominance over those who will answer the questionnaire.

As for the processing of email address data, this is possible without violating the GDPR regulation, as it is a common practice among UNFES students. The format of the email addresses is identical for all groups, being the same structure. For example, all addresses in the group are of the form "Group. (group)@stud.unefs.ro number" if the group number is the one identified in the timetable and which remains assigned to a group from the beginning of year 1 to the end of the study cycle, the terminology 'group' is identical for all formats and '@stud.unefs.ro' is the institutional domain managed by the organisation concerned.

The data were processed using specialized software for structuring the questionnaires, in this case Microsoft Form. The form, level of customization, and diversity of question forms that a researcher can use to create a questionnaire are appropriate to the nature of the questions in the questionnaire and to collect the necessary information. The settings allow all questions to be locked, i.e. forcing participants to answer all questions. For questions that are based on a specific activity, people had the ability to refuse not to answer, and the refusal of the question is included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 216 people, of which 54% men, 36% women, and the remaining 8.8% being represented by people who did not want to say their gender.

Chapter 4 - Results

The study's results are drawn from the two main sources: a quantitative questionnaire distributed to students at the National University of Physical Education and Sport (UNFES) and two qualitative interviews conducted with Ana Maria Brânză, a renowned Romanian fencer, and a specialized PR agency that collaborates with her.

4.1. Interpreting interviews

4.1.2. Ana Maria Brânză's Interview

Ana Maria Brânză is a high-performance athlete with a remarkable career in fencing, with a specialization in the epee event. She has participated in five editions of the Olympic Games, winning three medals: silver in the individual event in Beijing in 2008, gold with the team in Rio in 2016 and silver in the individual event in Tokyo in 2021. She has also won two world team titles and seven continental titles, both team and individual, along with numerous other trophies at World Cup and Grand Prix competitions. Due to the relatively low level of exposure that a specialized sport like fencing receives, Ana Maria made the decision to build her personal brand. Since fencing lacks the publicity that other sports do, she saw a chance to add value by getting more exposure for herself. Furthermore, Ana Maria's desire to inspire other athletes and give back to the community stems from her moral obligation to the sport that has shaped her life. They chose to concentrate on building a personal brand because of this as well as their desire to earn more money.

The "AMBitious" brand created by Ana Maria in collaboration with a specialized agency is closely aligned with her sports achievements and the message she wants to convey to the community. This alignment is essential for the consistency and authenticity of its brand. Ana Maria believes that "AMBitious" is not just a characteristic, but a definition of her person and career, reflecting the ambition and determination that have led to her remarkable sporting achievements. A crucial moment in the development of Ana Maria's personal brand was in 2013, when, at the suggestion of a friend, she created the official Facebook page. This initiative served as a personal diary where he added content related to his sports career, competitions and training camps. Over time, this has led to the formation of a dedicated community, and the development of the personal brand has come naturally and organically. The proposal for the "AMBitious" brand later came from the agency he was working with, but the initial decision to create the Facebook page was fundamental to the subsequent success.

To set herself apart and establish a connection with her audience, Ana Maria focuses on storytelling and authenticity. Instead of following a set posting schedule, she uses social media as an online diary and updates her posts in response to newsworthy events. Even after his athletic career ends, people are drawn in by his genuine approach and remain intrigued. The supportive and active community that has grown up around her highlights the value of having a genuine and intimate relationship with her fan base.

Ana Maria's brand is built around authenticity. Maintaining a genuine and reliable brand, in her opinion, requires disclosing both accomplishments and errors. Regardless of how easy or difficult certain parts of their careers may be, Ana Maria thinks that elite athletes need to stay true to themselves when speaking to the public. Transparency like this builds a solid rapport with the audience and fortifies an authentic brand. While developing her brand did not present Ana Maria with many significant obstacles, she notes that it was time-consuming and demanding to personally oversee social media aspects and attend events. She believes it is her responsibility to be present and engaged since people take the time to follow her. Ever since, Ana Maria has known that her continuous presence and active participation are what build her personal brand.

Personal campaigns like "Authentic by Ana Maria Brânză" and "Run for Your Birthday" were started by Ana Maria and greatly increased brand awareness. These programs supported significant social causes in addition to raising his brand's profile. Ana Maria was also an inspirational speaker, using success stories and motivational talks to reach a large audience and advance her brand. Ana Maria tailors her content for each platform, using Facebook for storytelling and Instagram to reach a different audience. She personally oversees her accounts and has a thorough understanding of her audience's tastes. Despite having started a vlog on YouTube, he abandoned the project because of the financial and time constraints associated with creating and editing the videos.

Ana Maria makes content adjustments based on audience reactions even though she doesn't regularly solicit direct feedback. She can tell if things are going well or if they need to be adjusted by looking at the audience's reaction to particular posts. It is able to keep the audience interested and engaged by taking a reactive approach. When making decisions about her personal brand, Ana Maria puts the common good, consistency, joy, realism, honesty, and inclusion first. It makes certain that these values are represented in every facet of its communication, upholding a consistent and genuine brand. In order to stay current and involved

in her social life, Ana Maria modified her brand strategy after quitting competitive sports in December 2021. She quickly adjusted to the new situation and remained in the public eye by continuing to participate in sports and create content that was pertinent to her community.

Aspiring athletes should be genuine and showcase all facets of their performance, even the less glamorous ones, according to Ana Maria's advice. In order to prevent personal brand development from having an adverse effect on sports performance, she highlights the significance of time management. Whatever the sport they play or the outcome, athletes need to understand that their experiences matter and have the power to motivate others. A memorable moment for Ana Maria was her first speech at a company, where she realized that she could be paid to share her story. As for criticism, Ana Maria turns them into a sources of motivation, remaining positive and focused on her goals. She advocates constructive criticism, but is firmly opposed to insults and inappropriate language.

4.1.3. PR Company's Interview

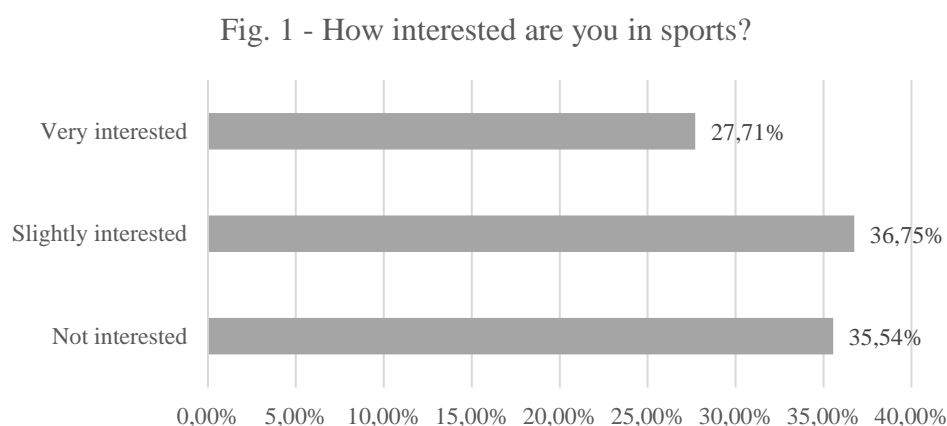
The PR firm that was interviewed also has a lot of expertise in developing and overseeing athlete personal brands. Creating a compelling and genuine image that showcases the athlete's accomplishments on the field as well as their moral principles is the major objective. Below is a detailed list of the Agency's responses to the questionnaire's questions that were resumed in order to highlight the important informations that is contained in each answer. Finding the athlete's **identity and basic values**, then matching them to their off-field objectives and public expectations, is how the agency kicks off the personal branding process for athletes. Every athlete is different from the others in their background, aptitudes, and disposition. In contrast, a more reserved but highly skilled athlete might highlight content that emphasizes their dedication and craftsmanship. For instance, a charismatic, community-oriented basketball player might benefit from a strategy that emphasizes local commitment and philanthropy. Analyzing the athlete's public perception through an audit is just one of the crucial steps in identifying their niche and leveraging their skills and passions.

A powerful personal brand is built on **authenticity**. Trust may be impacted by what fans and followers see as a lack of genuineness. Athletes' true selves, their convictions, and their ideals should all be reflected in their personal brand. By fostering a closer bond with the audience, this authenticity raises engagement and loyalty.

The brand should resonate primarily with the athlete and not completely conform to the expectations of the public. This is the main difference between a product/company brand and a personal/sports brand. It is essential to understand the athlete's **target audience**. Strategies may include interacting with fans on social media, sharing behind-the-scenes content, or addressing issues that are important to the audience but consistent with the athlete's beliefs. The goal is to create relevant and engaging content that builds a community around common values and interests. Building a personal brand requires the use of **storytelling techniques**. Communicating the athlete's journey, difficulties, victories, and lessons gained is essential. A deeper connection between the spectator and the athlete can be made with an interesting, relatable, and inspirational story. Techniques for grounding the story in everyone's reality include the use of vivid imagery, emotional appeals, and personal tales. Athletes can greatly enhance their personal brand through **strategic partnerships**. One way to increase an athlete's reach and credibility is to form partnerships with brands that align with their values or cater to their interests. The successful partnerships between Nike and Michael Jordan, for instance, helped to create a culture. Local examples include BRD and the "Big Three" (Nadia Comaneci, Gheorghe Hagi, and Ilie Năstase), who maintained their positive image in the eyes of the public by creating win-win situations. In addition, an athlete's values and dedication to the community can be reaffirmed through partnerships with charitable organizations or neighborhood projects.

4.2. Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire, completed by 216 students, revealed several key insights into social media usage and its impact on athletes' personal branding.

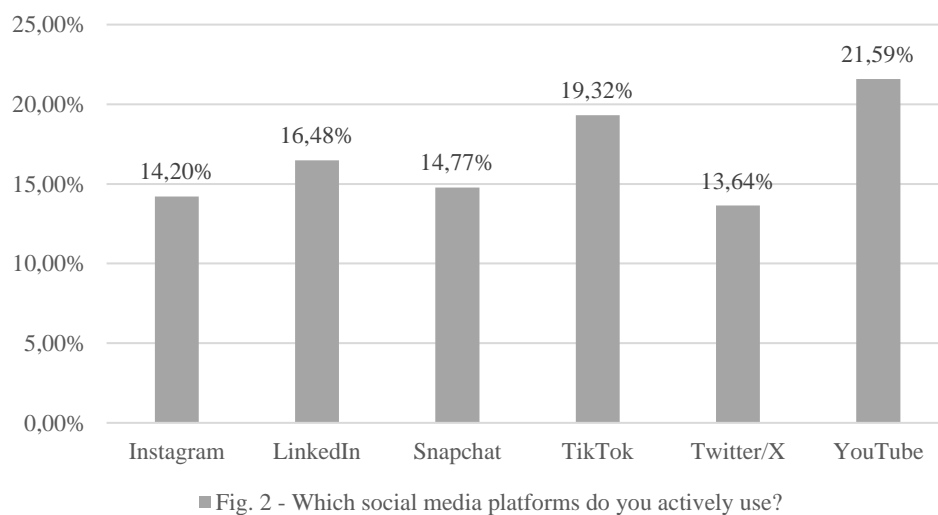


■ Fig. 1 - How interested are you in sports?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents' level of interest in sports, divided into three categories: "Not interested" (35.54%), "Slightly interested" (36.75%) and "Very interested" (27.71%). It is observed that most respondents show a moderate (36.75%) or low (35.54%) interest in sports, while only 27.71% are very interested. The statistics suggest that, although there is a significant segment of people interested in sports, a considerable part of the surveyed population does not have a strong interest. This diversity in the level of interest can influence athletes' personal branding strategies, as they need to address both the already interested audience and capture the attention of those less interested.

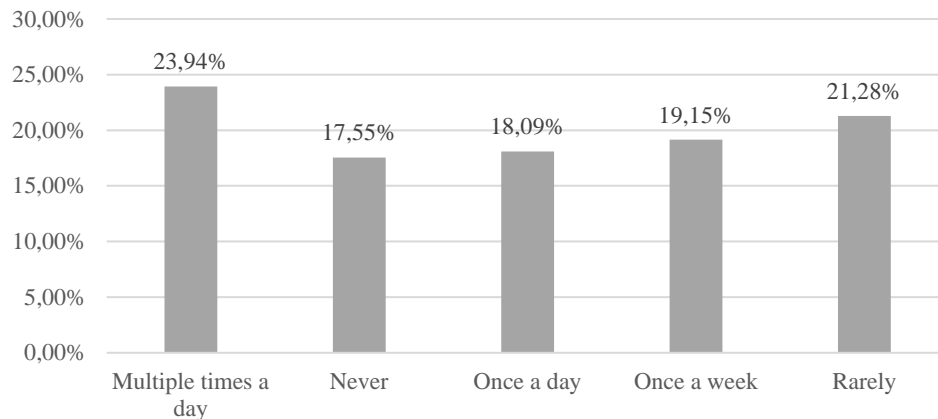
Fig. 2 - Which social media platforms do you actively use?



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Figure number 2 shows the active use of various social media platforms by respondents: Instagram (14.20%), LinkedIn (16.48%), Snapchat (14.77%), TikTok (19.32%), Twitter/X (13.64%) and YouTube (21.59%). It is noted that YouTube (21.59%) and TikTok (19.32%) are the most popular platforms, suggesting that these channels are essential for athletes' personal branding strategies. In contrast, Twitter/X and Snapchat have the lowest percentages, indicating lower usage. This means that athletes who want to maximize their visibility and interaction with fans should focus on creating content on YouTube and TikTok. Thus, athletes who want to have the greatest visibility in the shortest possible time can turn to these two social media channels to reach as wide an audience as possible in the shortest possible time.

Fig. 3 - How often do you typically use social media platforms?

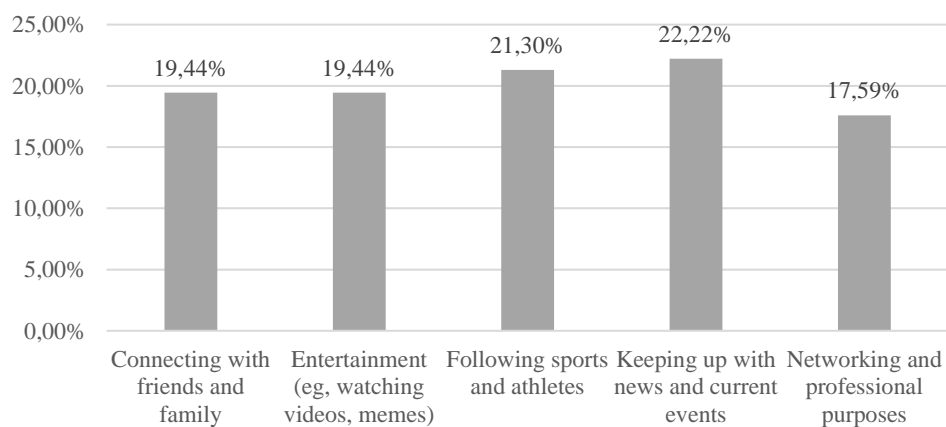


■ Fig. 3 - How often do you typically use social media platforms?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

There is a uniformity of the answers given regarding the degree of use of social media networks. Although almost 20% of people said they do not use the media (for sports purposes), most people access digital content at least once a day. As such, it is observed that this environment is favorable for athletes to form a strong personal image. The majority of respondents use social media at least once a day, which shows that there are ongoing opportunities for athletes to engage with their fans on a regular basis. Still, a notable 17% don't use social media at all, suggesting that some strategies should focus on other means of communication as well.

Fig. 4 - What do you primarily use social media for? (Select all that apply)

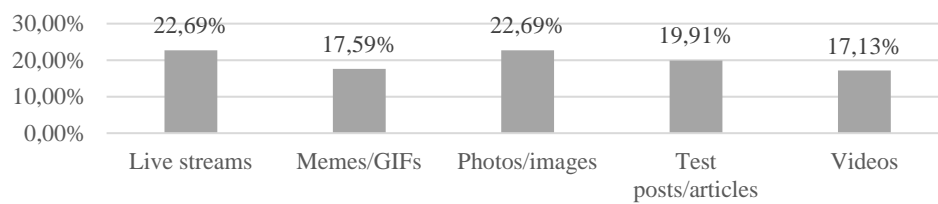


■ Fig. 4 - What do you primarily use social media for? (Select all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents use social media for various purposes, and only 21% of them use social platforms to follow athletes and athletes, with the rest having other concerns as their main activity. It is obvious that maintaining relationships and consuming entertainment are just as important as following athletes and news. This suggests that athletes should create content that not only focuses on their sports performance but also includes entertainment and topical aspects to capture the interest of a wider audience.

Fig. 5 - What type of content do you prefer consuming on social media? (Select all that apply)

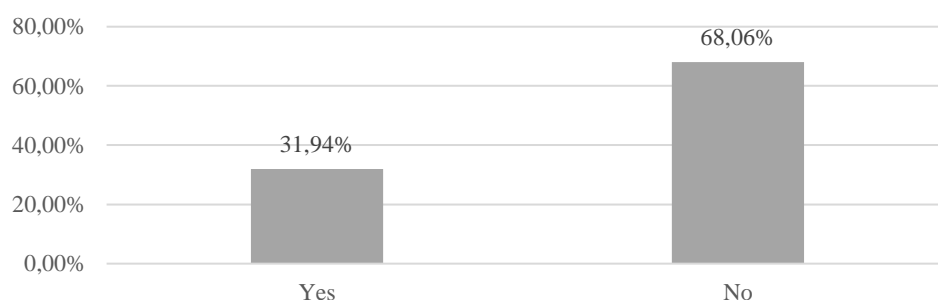


■ Fig. 5 - What type of content do you prefer consuming on social media? (Select all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Within figure number 5, respondents' preferred content types include: "Live streams" (22%), "Memes/GIFs" (17%), "Photos/images" (22%), "Text posts/articles" (19%) and "Videos" (17%). The metrics indicate a clear preference for visual content, especially photos and live streams. Athletes should capitalize on this type of content to attract and maintain fan interest by providing live streams from training, competitions, or special events. As such, the most effective way for athletes to promote themselves would be through authentic content, i.e. effective live broadcasts through which fans, and individuals in society have the ability to see them in the natural environment.

Fig. 6 - Do you follow any athletes on social media?

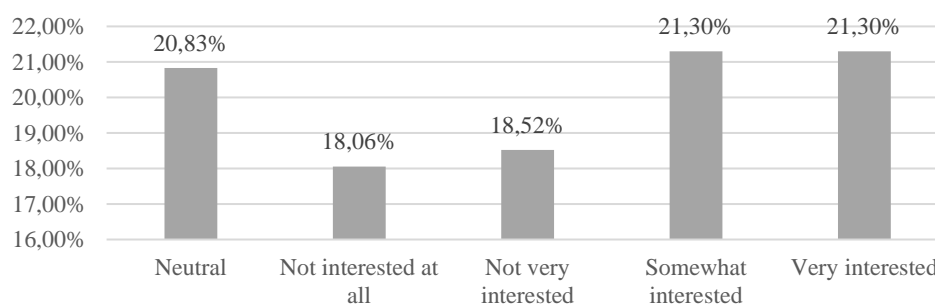


■ Fig. 6 - Do you follow any athletes on social media?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

According to figure number 6, 68% of respondents do not follow athletes on social media, while 31% do. The data suggests that there is significant potential for athletes to grow their following base. Athletes need to find ways to attract new followers through interesting and relevant content that resonates with a wider audience. The data are not clear, however, and a more detailed analysis is needed for future research

Fig. 7 - How interested are you in athletes-related content on social media?

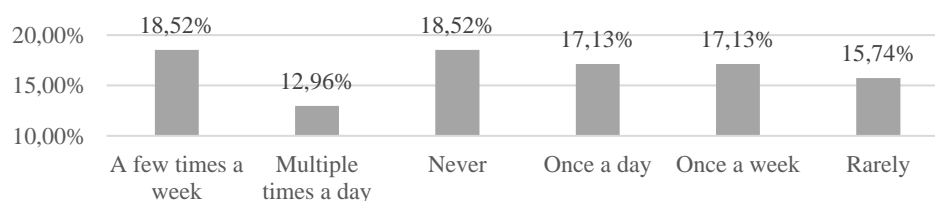


■ Fig. 7 - How interested are you in athletes-related content on social media?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Interest in sports-related content varies is predominantly positive. About 42% of respondents are interested in sports-related content, suggesting that there is a significant audience for such content. Athletes can create engaging content that maintains and increases that interest.

Fig. 8 - How often do you engage with athletes content on social media? (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing)

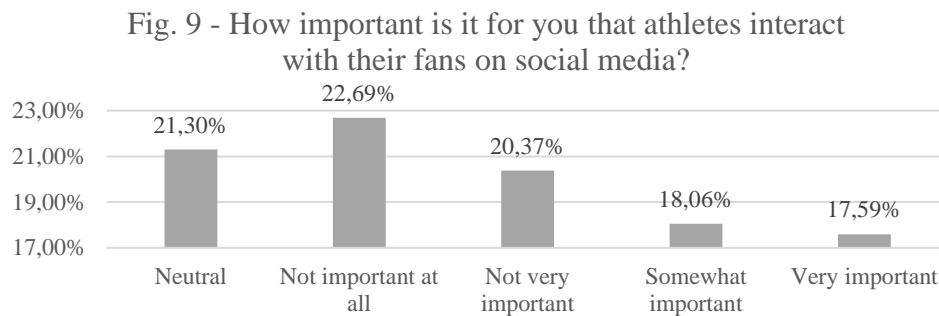


■ Fig. 8 - How often do you engage with athletes content on social media? (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The interaction with the athletes' content also has a homogenized character. Although there is a significant segment that frequently interacts with athletes' content, a considerable part (18%) does not interact at all. Athletes need to identify strategies to stimulate interaction, such as organizing Q&A sessions or creating more engaging content. It is noted that the data are

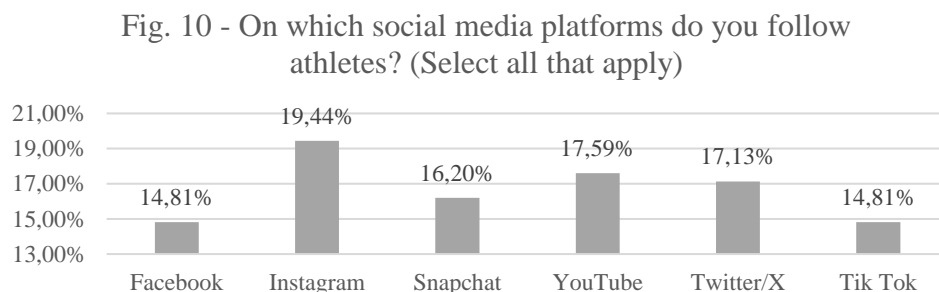
similar in terms of these data regarding the level of access to any form of content consumed by people, based on previous data. As such, there is enough room for athletes to start promotion processes on social media channels. The content is different, depending on the instrument used, as detailed in chapter two, so it must have a specific form, depending on the source. However, the possibility for athletes to extend their level of notoriety based on these environments is obvious.



■ Fig. 9 - How important is it for you that athletes interact with their fans on social media?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The importance of athletes' interaction with fans emerges from figure number 9. Although a significant part of respondents believe that interaction is not very important, a considerable percentage (35%) consider it important or very important. This suggests that athletes who actively interact with their fans on social media can build a more loyal and engaged fan base. Just as clothing brands are constantly looking to build customer loyalty through different campaigns, often reminder campaigns, athletes need a more intense level of popularization and promotion to capture attention and retain people with their own image.

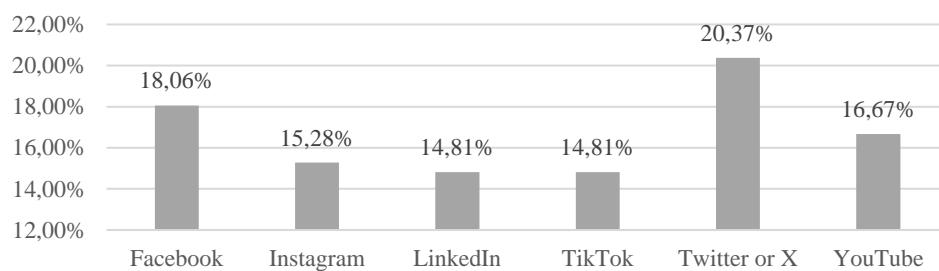


■ Fig. 10 - On which social media platforms do you follow athletes? (Select all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The most popular platforms to follow athletes are Instagram (19%) and YouTube (17%), followed by Facebook (14%) and YouTube (14%). Work data suggests that athletes should focus on these platforms to increase their visibility and connect with fans. It also suggests that Facebook, You Tube and Snapchat are not as popular for athlete tracking processes and as a result it is not identified for those who want to promote themselves from an athlete point of view to invest resources in these types of platforms.

Fig. 11 - Which social media platforms do you prefer to engage with athletes? (Check all that applies in order of preference, 1 being highest preference)

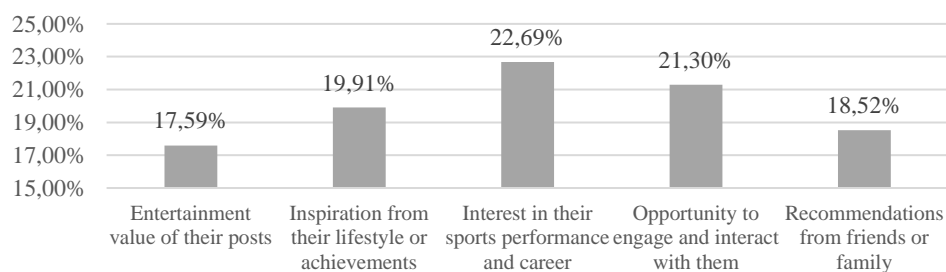


■ Fig. 11 - Which social media platforms do you prefer to engage with athletes? (Check all that applies in order of preference, 1 being highest preference)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents prefer to interact with athletes on Twitter/X (20.37%) and YouTube (16.67%), indicating the importance of these platforms in athletes' personal branding strategy. Instagram and TikTok are also popular platforms, but not as preferred for interaction. This shows that athletes should focus on creating interactive content and responding to comments on these platforms to maximize engagement.

Fig. 12 - What motivates you to follow athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)?

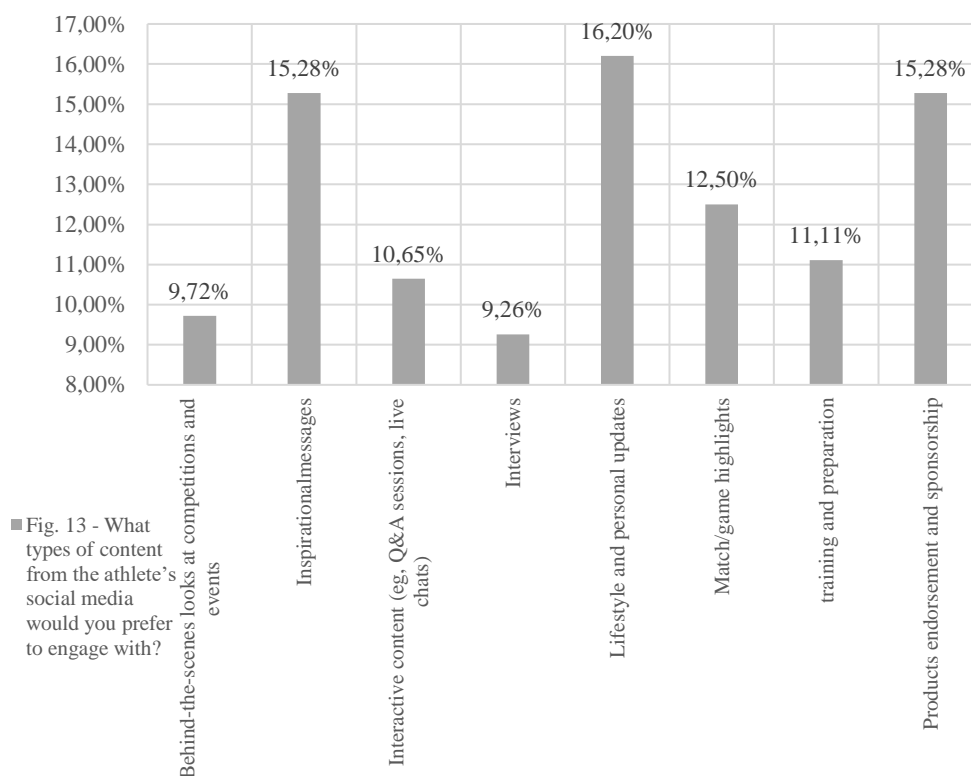


■ Fig. 12 - What motivates you to follow athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The main reasons of people, as the data collected in figure number 12 expire are: "Interest in their sports performance and career" (22.69%) and "Opportunity to engage and interact with them" (21.30%). This indicates that sports performance and interaction opportunities are key factors for followers. Athletes should focus on sharing details about their performance and creating opportunities for direct interaction with fans.

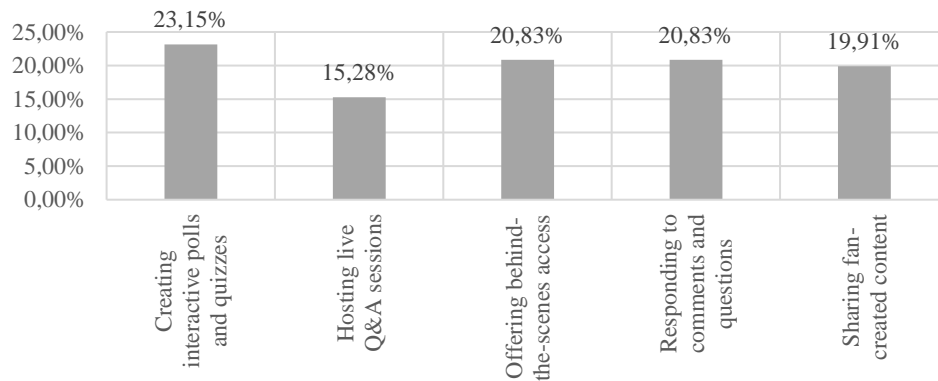
Fig. 13 - What types of content from the athlete's social media would you prefer to engage with?



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents prefer "Behind-the-scenes looks at competitions and events" (9.72%) and "Lifestyle and personal updates" (16.20%). Data suggests that authentic and personal content is highly valued. Athletes should provide behind-the-scenes glimpses and updates on their personal lives to attract and maintain the interest of fans. The higher the level of originality, the more they will be appreciated. Moreover, the less directed and more natural the content, the greater the degree of conviction and the more beneficial it is for the sport.

Fig. 14 - How would you like athletes to engage with you on social media? (Check all that apply)



■ Fig. 14 - How would you like athletes to engage with you on social media? (Check all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

"Creating interactive polls and quizzes" (23.15%) and "Responding to comments and questions" (20.83%) are preferred in terms of individuals' preferences on how they might interact. Athletes should integrate interactive polls, quizzes, and respond to comments to boost engagement. The emphasis is again on the originality of the material and on the creation of a personalized form of content.

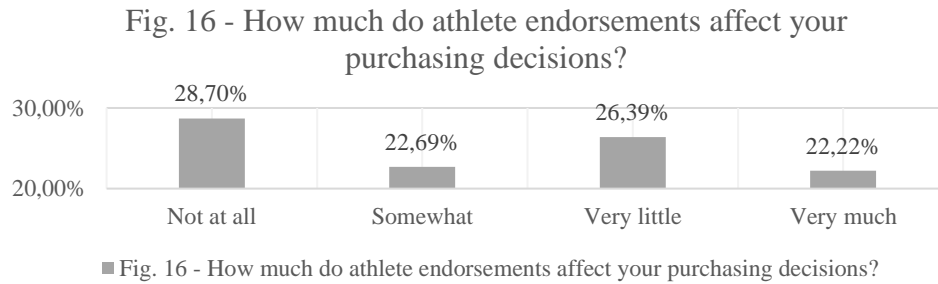
Fig. 15 - Has following athletes on social media influenced your opinions or behaviors? (e.g., lifestyle changes, product purchases)



■ Fig. 15 - Has following athletes on social media influenced your opinions or behaviors? (e.g., lifestyle changes, product purchases)

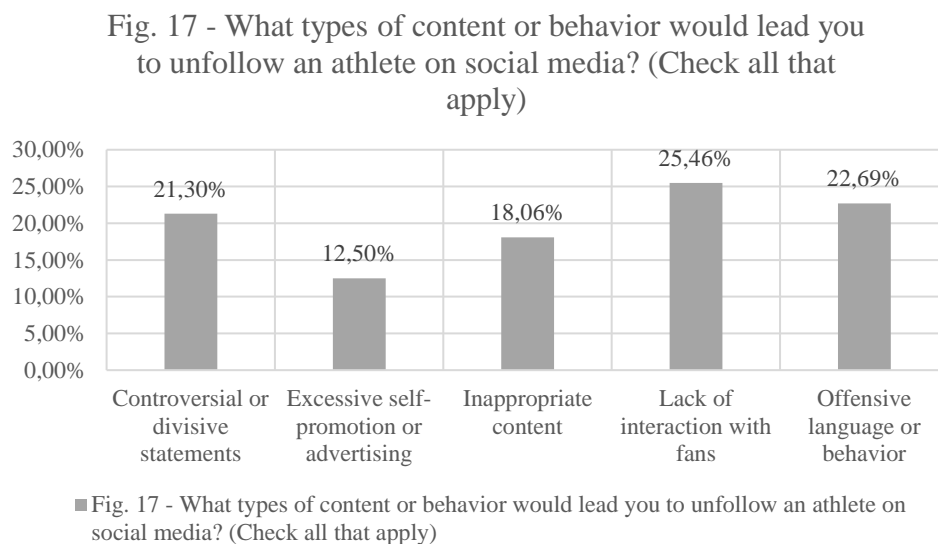
Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The majority of respondents (66.67%) have been influenced by athletes on social media, either in terms of lifestyle changes or product purchases. The questionnaire suggests that athletes have a significant impact on their fans' behaviour and opinions and should be aware of this in their branding strategy. Athletes are vectors of communication, and their state is very important in terms of the possibility of influencing choices.



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

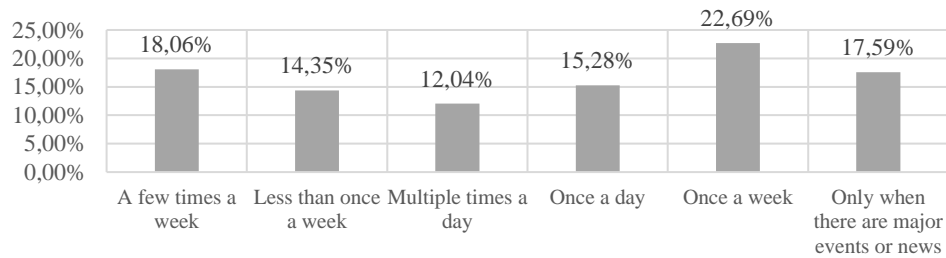
The data in figure number 16 indicate varying degrees of influence of athletes' recommendations on purchasing decisions. The values suggest that while some consumers are highly influenced, others are less affected by athletes' recommendations. The range of potential individuals to be loyal is large and there is a market for these people.



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

As previously stated, it is very important for athletes to be careful about the news that may be happening online. Any change in their image could lead to a reduction in the level of tracking. The online environment is very volatile, and information can circulate at very high speed and is often verifiable in the case of private news, and as a result, athletes must have a positive image in permeation. Most often, the biggest mistake an athlete can make is to forget about interacting with people, with followers, once they have reached a certain level of notoriety. It suggests that athletes need to maintain appropriate behavior and actively interact with fans to retain their followers.

Fig. 18 - How often should athletes post on social media to effectively engage with fans?

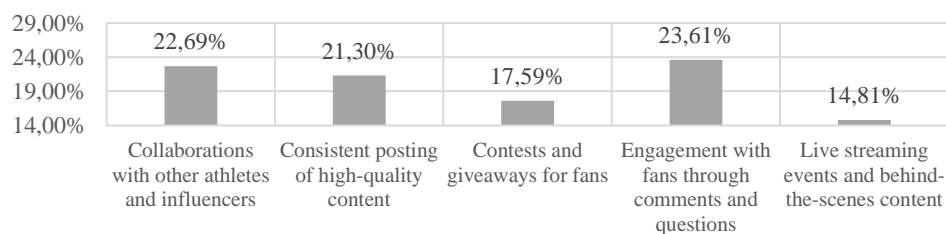


■ Fig. 18 - How often should athletes post on social media to effectively engage with fans?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Within figure number 18, the answers range from "A few times a week" (18.06%) to "Once a week" (22.69%). This suggests that fans prefer a moderate frequency of posts, regular enough to maintain interest, but not so frequent that it becomes overwhelming. On the principle of balance, athletes should have an average of one post every two days, in order to have a coherent and effective procedure. Too many posts, and the people will start to lose interest.

Fig. 19 - What strategies do you think are more suitable for the promotion of athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)



■ Fig. 19 - What strategies do you think are more suitable for the promotion of athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents consider "Engagement with fans through comments and questions" (23.61%) and "Collaborations with other athletes and influencers" (22.69%) to be the most effective strategies. This indicates the importance of direct interaction and strategic collaborations in the promotion of athletes. The authenticity and personalization of messages and containers is an extremely important and vital factor to capture people's attention as much as possible. Individuals thus feel the need to feel part of the process.

Fig. 20 - Have you ever seen an athlete with a strong image make a mistake on social media that negatively impacted their image?

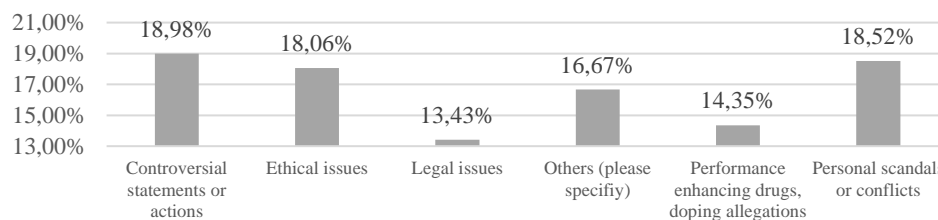


■ Fig. 20 - Have you ever seen an athlete with a strong image make a mistake on social media that negatively impacted their image?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents are almost evenly divided, with 50% saying "No" and 49% saying "Yes." This shows that mistakes on social media can have a significant impact on athletes' image and highlights the importance of careful management of their online presence. On signs, the degree of appreciation that the population has is different depending on the event that takes place. Although opinions are divided half-and-half, the data show that any change, derailment from behavior can be traded by degrading the public image.

Fig. 21 - If yes, what was the nature of the event/mistake?

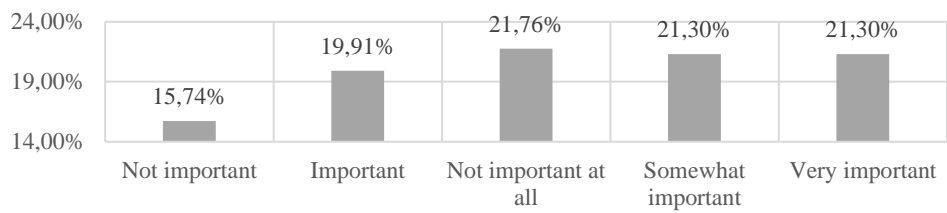


■ Fig. 21 - If yes, what was the nature of the event/mistake?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The main types of mistakes include "Controversial statements or actions" (18%) and "Personal scandals or conflicts" (18%), highlighting the need to avoid controversial behaviors and personal scandals to protect the image of athletes. Athletes who engage in quarrels or discuss public issues on social issues, morals or any inappropriate social aspect may suffer a negative change in their image and as a result will have to lose. Controversial statements are one of the main elements that alter the public image by the fact that, due to the new movements regarding gender equality and the possibility of identifying with elements other than the traditional ones, it is currently very easy through public statements to attract inappropriate attention through unpopular opinions.

Fig. 22 - How much importance do you place on athletes to give back to their communities or causes they care about?
(Check all that apply)

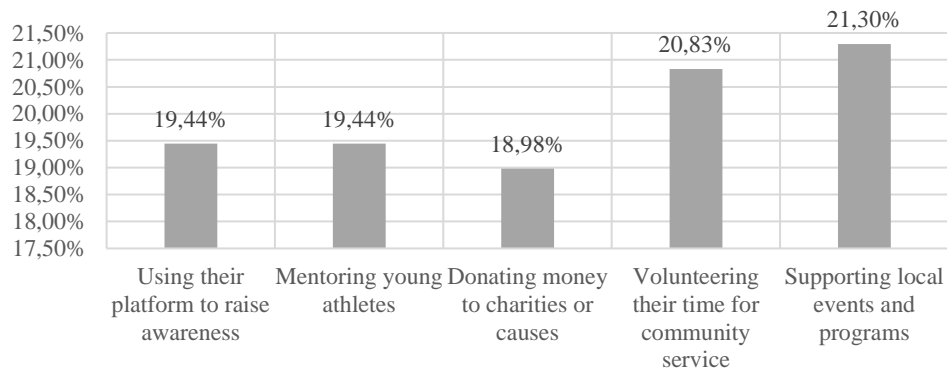


■ Fig. 22 - How much importance do you place on athletes to give back to their communities or causes they care about? (Check all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Respondents place a high value on this aspect, with "Very important" (21%) and "Somewhat important" (21%). This indicates that athletes who are actively involved in their communities and social causes can build a positive and lasting image. Athletes must first observe which sides their target audience is from.

Fig. 23 - In what ways do you think athletes can give back to their communities or causes they care about? (Check all that apply)

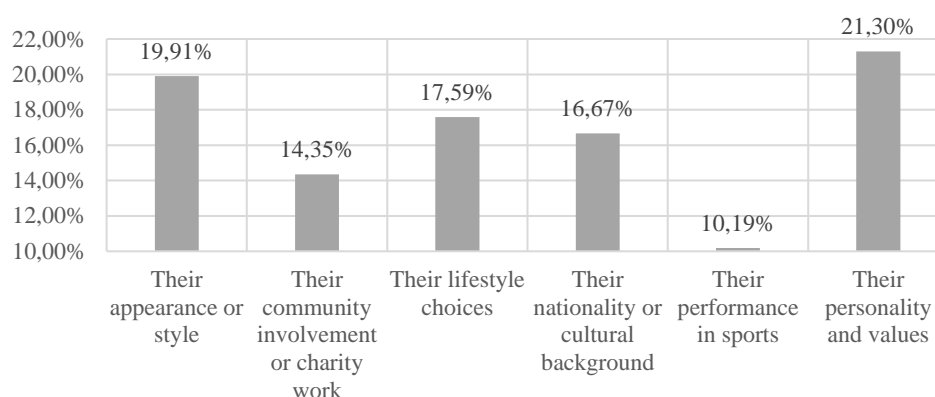


■ Fig. 23 - In what ways do you think athletes can give back to their communities or causes they care about? (Check all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

"Supporting local events and programs" (21%) and "Volunteering their time for community service" (20%) are considered the most effective methods. They suggest that athletes should be directly and visibly involved in community activities to earn the respect and admiration of fans.

Fig. 24 - What makes you identify with an athlete? (Select up to 3 options)

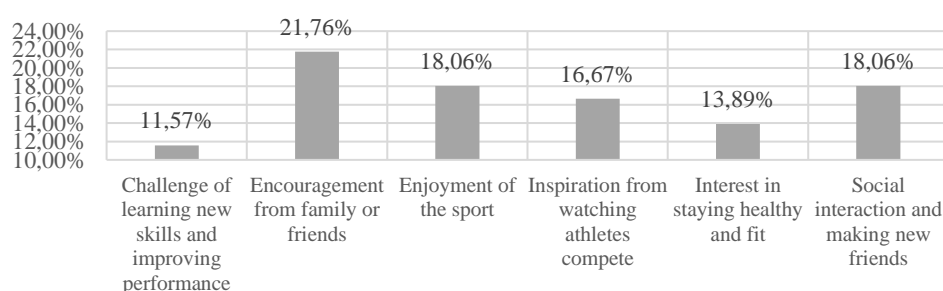


■ Fig. 24 - What makes you identify with an athlete? (Select up to 3 options)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The information in figure number 24 emphasizes the importance of maintaining a public image that reflects a combination of style, community involvement, lifestyle choices, and strong personal values. Athletes should be aware that their fans identify with them not only based on their sports performance, but also on the way they present themselves and behave off the field. Brands that collaborate with athletes should consider these various identifying factors in their marketing campaigns.

Fig. 25 - What were your reasons for starting to participate in sports? (Check all that apply)



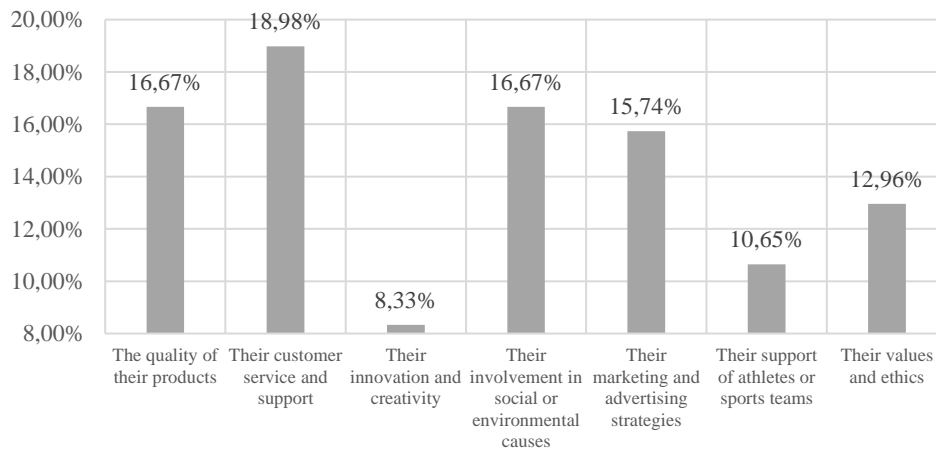
■ Fig. 25 - What were your reasons for starting to participate in sports? (Check all that apply)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The graph in Fig. 25 shows that the main reasons respondents started participating in sports include encouragement from family or friends (20%), social interaction and making new friends (20%), and enjoying playing sports (17%). These results highlight that the motivations for participating in sports are diverse, combining social, personal and health influences.

Athletes and brands should take these aspects into account when developing marketing campaigns and strategies, promoting the multiple benefits of sports to attract and maintain the interest of the public.

Fig. 26 - What factors make you identify with a brand?
(Select up to 3 options)

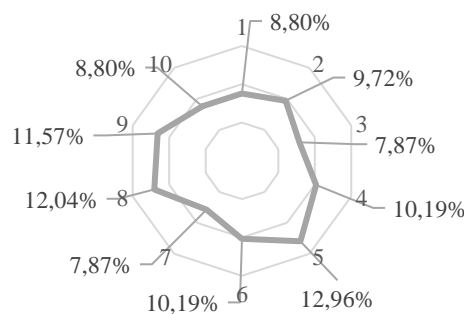


■ Fig. 26 - What factors make you identify with a brand? (Select up to 3 options)

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The graph in Fig. 26 indicates the key elements that ascertain respondents to identify with a brand, highlighting some major aspects. Customer service and corroborate is the highly significant factor, with around 18% of respondents finding it crucial, underlining the significance of a long-term correlation of trust and loyalty with consumers. The involvement of brands in social or environmental generates is also essential, chosen by 17% of respondents, showing that brands that contribute positively to society are highly valued.

Fig. 27 - How likely are you to start playing a sport because of a particular athlete's influence?

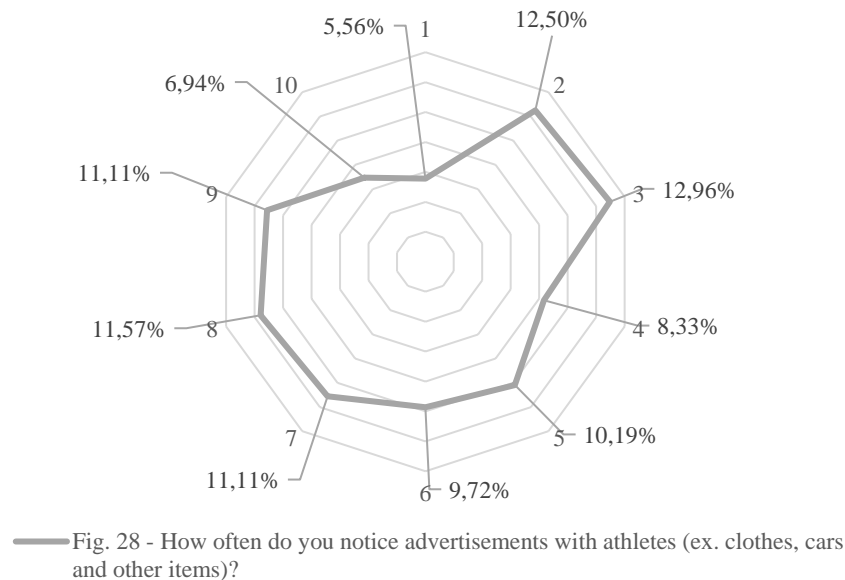


— Fig. 27 - How likely are you to start playing a sport because of a particular athlete's influence?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Analyzing the distribution of responses, it can be seen in figure number 27 that most respondents tend to be highly or moderately influenced by athletes. High scores (8-10) indicate a strong impact of athletes on decisions to start a sports activity. This underscores the crucial role athletes play as role models and sources of inspiration for their audiences. For athletes, this chart highlights the importance of maintaining a positive and motivating image. Involvement in sports promotion campaigns and exemplary behaviour both on and off the pitch can have a major impact on fans and encourage them to adopt an active lifestyle. This level of influence shows that athletes are not only entertainers, but also opinion leaders and promoters of health and fitness. Therefore, athletes' personal branding strategies should include elements that highlight the benefits of playing sports and inspire their fan community to be more active.

Fig. 28 - How often do you notice advertisements with athletes (ex. clothes, cars and other items)?



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Figure number 28 reveals that the bulk of respondents are commonly exposed to ads featuring athletes, with a greater, larger number of respondents indicating a high incidence of viewing (scores 8-10). This highlights the high visibility of athletes in mass advertising and their essential part, as brand ambassadors. For athletes, this frequent exposure can have many implications. First of all, collaborations with popular brands provide them a potent platform to encourage their personal image and values.

Fig. 29 - I talk to friends about the evolutions of my favorite athletes

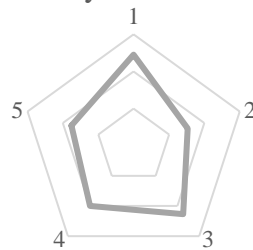
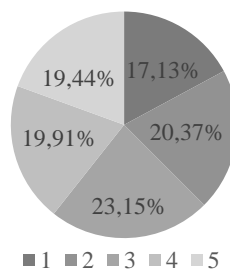


Fig. 29 - I talk to friends about the evolutions of my favorite athletes

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Analyzing the statement regarding the impact of athletes as an element of influence of athlete tracking, it is observed that most respondents discuss quite frequently the evolutions of their favorite athletes with their friends, with scores 1 and 2 accumulating almost half of the answers (44%). This indicates that athletes play an important role in respondents' social lives and everyday conversations. For brands, this chart highlights marketing opportunities. Athletes who are frequently discussed have a great influence and potential to amplify the messages of the brands with which they are associated. Marketing campaigns involving popular athletes can benefit from this frequency of discussion, generating continued interest around the products being promoted.

Fig. 30 - I ask for the opinion of friends on certain news of athletes



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The distribution of responses in graph number 30 indicates that, in general, there is considerable interest in news about athletes, but the level of interest varies. The majority of respondents (60%) occasionally or more frequently ask friends about this news, suggesting that athletes and their developments are important topics in their social conversations. This trend reflects the fact that athletes have a significant impact on daily discussions and are considered sources of inspiration or topics of interest to many. For athletes, this finding underscores the

importance of maintaining a consistent presence in the news and media. Frequent media appearances and updates on their performance and activities can keep fans interested and engaged in conversations. Athletes should be aware of the impact they have on social discussions and use social media platforms to stimulate and sustain these conversations.

For brands, this analysis points to opportunities to use athletes in their marketing campaigns. Athletes who generate constant interest and frequent discussions have the potential to amplify brands' messages and create a positive feeling around the products being promoted. Associations with popular athletes can increase the visibility and attractiveness of brands among consumers.

Fig. 31 - I change my mind about an athlete based on conversations I have with friends

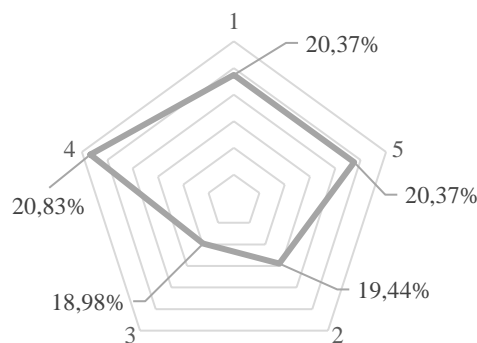


Fig. 31 - I change my mind about an athlete based on conversations I have with friends

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Figure 31 shows that about 60% of respondents occasionally or frequently change their opinion of athletes based on conversations with friends (scores 1, 2 and 3). This emphasizes the importance of social influence in forming and changing opinions about athletes. Discussions with friends are a significant source of information and re-evaluation of perceptions of athletes, reflecting that athletes need to be aware of how their actions and behaviors are discussed and perceived in social circles. For athletes, this finding highlights the need to maintain a positive and consistent public image. Their actions, both on and off the field, can significantly influence fan perceptions. Athletes should be mindful of how they are perceived and actively interact with their communities to control and guide positive conversations. For brands, this graph indicates that athletes can have a significant impact on public opinion and influence consumers'

perception of the products being promoted. Collaborating with athletes who have a positive image and who are frequently discussed in social circles can amplify brands' messages and generate a favorable perception of them.

Fig. 32 - What sports do you prefer to watch?

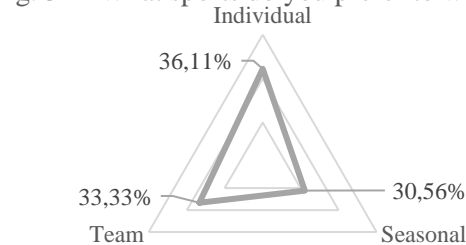


Fig. 32 - What sports do you prefer to watch?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The distribution of preferences according to the data obtained from the questionnaire shows that all three types of sports have a significant popularity, but individual sports are slightly more preferred than team and seasonal sports. This suggests that for a large portion of the audience, athletes' individual performances and personal achievements are more engaging and inspirational. For athletes, these data indicate the importance of promoting individual performance, even in team sports. Athletes who manage to highlight their individual contributions and build an image as leaders can attract a larger number of followers and fans.

Fig. 33 - What environment do you live in?

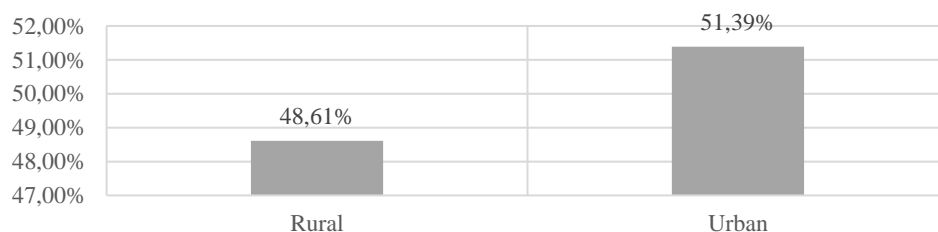
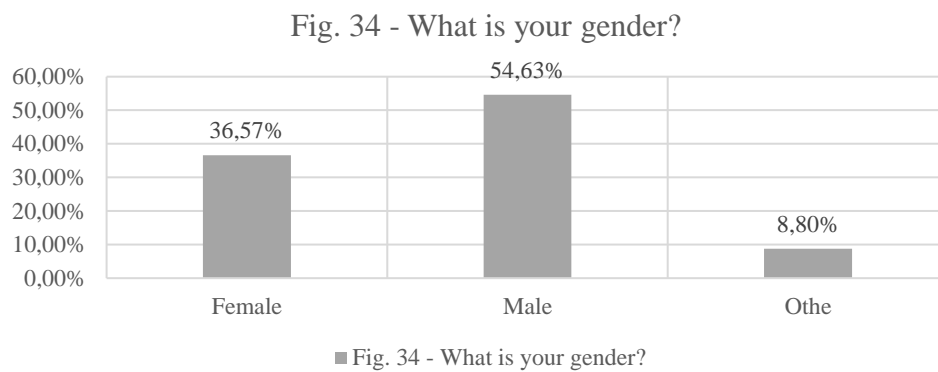


Fig. 33 - What environment do you live in?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

Athletes desire to recognize that their fan base encompasses people from diverse backgrounds with varied necessities and interests. Those in urban areas may have easier access to recent sports facilities and events, while those in rural areas may understand local events and community interactions more. Athletes should generate content that responds to both the urban enthusiasm for technology and innovation, as well as the classical and community values of

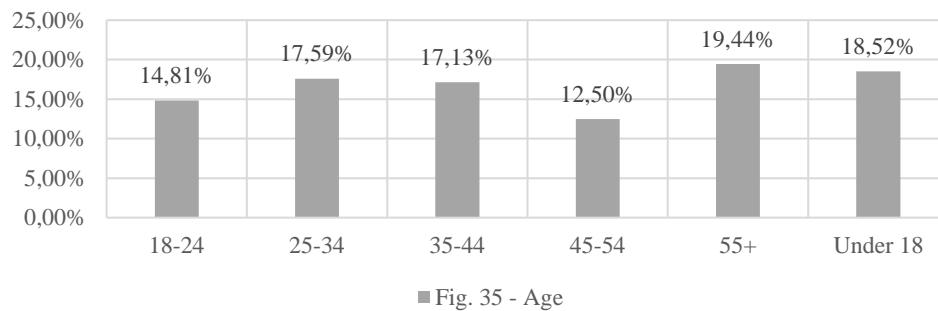
rural fans. For brands, this near-equal distribution underscores the necessity for marketing campaigns that are important to both segments. In urban areas, the focus can be on digital availability and innovation, with the heavy utilization of social media and online platforms. In rural areas, campaigns should concentrate on community involvement, local events and classical values. The balanced distribution between rural and urban areas provides a solid foundation for understanding how perceptions and behaviours relevant to sport and personal branding can alter depending on the living environment. Athletes and brands that adapt their messaging and approaches to address these cultural and social differences will be able to maximize their impact and generate stronger and more authentic interactions with their diverse audiences.



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The graphic in Figure 34 shows the gender distribution among the respondents: 54.63% identified themselves as male, 36.57% as female and 8.8% as the other gender. This diversity highlights the importance of an integrative and sensitive approach to personal branding and marketing strategies. Athletes must create messages and campaigns that resonate with all genders and promote values such as equality and inclusion. Brands that work with athletes should develop campaigns that reflect this diversity, thereby attracting a broader audience and building loyalty by recognizing and celebrating gender diversity.

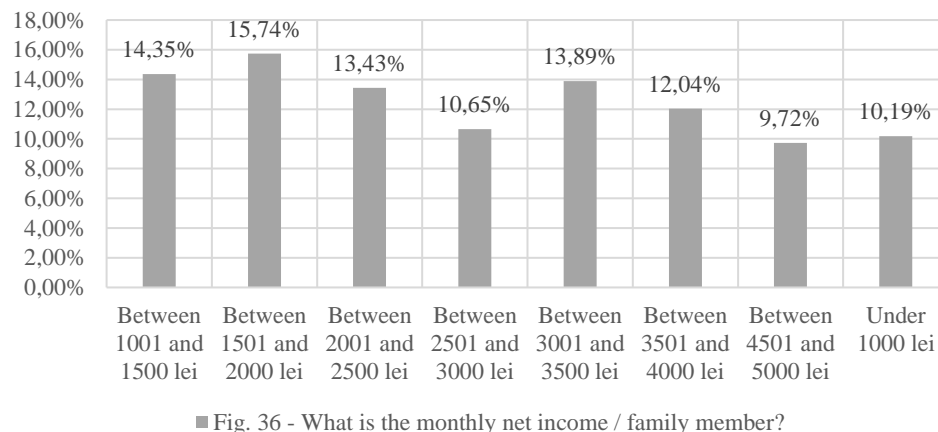
Fig. 35 - Age



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The data also exhibits a tradeoff between the different age groups, with the more well-developed age groups (55+ and under 18 years) marginally predominating. This suggests that the opinions collected reflect different perspectives, from young population as well as adults and older people. For athletes, this age diversity underscores the significance of tailoring messages and content to resonate with a broad audience.

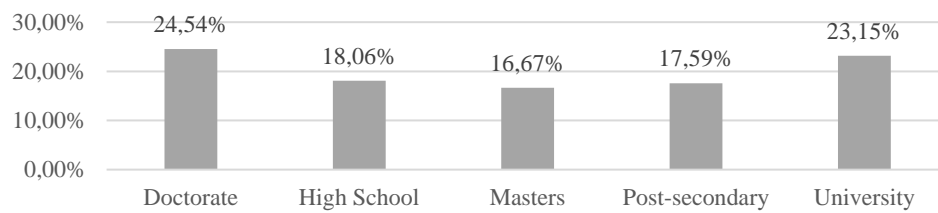
Fig. 36 - What is the monthly net income / family member?



Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

The income ranges show a wide spread, with clear concentrations in certain segments. The highest percentage of respondents (15%) earn between 1501 and 2000 lei, followed by another 15% who earn between 3001 and 3500 lei. Other notable ranges include 14% for those earning between 1,001 and 1,500 lei and 13% for the 2,001 to 2,500 lei range. The segment of those with incomes below 1000 lei and those with incomes between 4501 and 5000 lei each make up 10% of respondents. For athletes, this data highlights the need to adapt their brand strategy to achieve different levels of sales.

Fig. 37 - What is your level of education?



■ Fig. 37 - What is your level of education?

Source: Author's Own data processing based on the questionnaire

4.3. Summary of results

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the practical aspects of personal branding in sports. Ana Maria Brânză emphasized the importance of authenticity and consistency in her branding efforts. She highlighted that maintaining a genuine connection with fans through social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook has been crucial in building a loyal fan base. Her approach focuses on sharing personal stories, training routines, and behind-the-scenes glimpses, which resonate well with her audience. Brânză also discussed the challenges of balancing her training schedule with the demands of personal branding, stressing the importance of effective time management and prioritization. The PR agency's perspective complemented Brânză's insights by emphasizing the need for a well-defined brand strategy. This includes identifying the athlete's unique attributes, target audience, and key messages. The agency highlighted the importance of high-quality visual content and consistent messaging across all platforms.

The results from the questionnaire found that a significant portion of respondents (36.75%) showed moderate interest in sports, while 35.54% showed low interest, and only 27.71% were very interested. This distribution suggests that while there is a core audience interested in sports, athletes must craft their content to engage both avid sports fans and those with only moderate interest.

YouTube (21.59%) and TikTok (19.32%) emerged as the most popular platforms among respondents, with LinkedIn (16.48%) and Instagram (14.20%) also being significant but less dominant. This indicates that athletes aiming to maximize their visibility should prioritize these platforms. Furthermore, while the majority of respondents use social media daily, only 21% use it specifically to follow athletes, highlighting the need for athletes to diversify their content to appeal to broader interests.

Respondents expressed a clear preference for visual content, with live streams and photos/images being the most popular (22% each), followed by text posts/articles (19%) and videos (17%). This suggests that athletes should focus on creating engaging visual content to capture and retain their audience's attention. Despite the preference for visual content, 68% of respondents do not follow athletes on social media, which presents a significant opportunity for athletes to grow their following by producing more appealing and diverse content.

The interaction between athletes and their fans was deemed important by 35% of respondents, emphasizing the value of direct engagement. Instagram (19%) and YouTube (17%) were the most preferred platforms for following athletes, underscoring where athletes should focus their efforts to enhance fan interaction.

4.4. Discussion

The results from both the questionnaire and interviews underline the critical role of social media in the personal branding of athletes. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are essential for engaging with fans and building a strong online presence. The preference for visual content, especially live streams and photos, indicates that athletes should focus on producing high-quality, visually appealing posts. The low percentage of respondents who follow athletes on social media highlights a significant opportunity for growth. Athletes need to diversify their content to attract a broader audience, beyond just sports enthusiasts. This could include behind-the-scenes looks, personal stories, and interactive content, which can help build a more engaged and loyal fan base. Both Brânză and the PR agency emphasized the importance of authenticity and consistency in maintaining a strong personal brand. Athletes must stay true to their values and ensure their content reflects their personal brand consistently across all platforms.

Brands that collaborate with athletes must recognize the diversity of their audience's education level and generate campaigns that resonate with all segments. For example, campaigns could encompass educational or informational aspects that appeal to population with higher education, as well as obvious and available messaging that is attractive to those with secondary education. Such a technique can guarantee that brands' messages are well received and understood by a wide audience. For athletes, this evidence suggests that their audience encompasses people with a broad spectrum of education levels. Thus, athletes should adapt their messages and content to effectively address all these groups. The content can span, run

from educational and analytical data for those with evolved education to more available and interactive materials for those with a lower extent of education. This could also involve collaborations with scholarly institutions or educational platforms. The varied portrayal of education levels among respondents underscores the necessity for a flexible and inclusive method in branding and marketing strategies. Athletes and brands desire to adjust their messaging and campaigns to attract and maintain the interest of an educationally diverse audience.

Chapter 5 – Recommendations and conclusion

Recommendations and Action Plan

The action plan presented in this section is designed to operationalize the key recommendations derived from the findings of this study, which explored effective personal branding strategies for athletes. The study, through a combination of qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis, identified critical elements necessary for building and maintaining a strong personal brand in the sports industry, particularly in the context of Romanian athletes.

The following action plan directly addresses these insights by providing a structured approach for athletes to enhance their personal branding efforts. It outlines specific actions, assigns responsibilities, and sets timelines to ensure that the recommended strategies are implemented effectively. By adhering to this plan, athletes can achieve greater visibility, deepen their connection with fans, and unlock new opportunities for sponsorship and career advancement. This action plan serves as a practical guide for athletes and their teams, translating the theoretical findings of this study into actionable steps. It ensures that the core principles of authenticity, engagement, and strategic content creation are systematically applied, leading to sustained success in personal branding.

Recommendation	Action	Responsible Party	Timeline	Resources Needed	Success Metrics
<i>Emphasize Authenticity and Consistency</i>	Develop a brand guideline document outlining core values and messaging.	Athlete & PR Team	1 month	Branding experts, document template	Consistent messaging across all platforms
<i>Utilize Key Social Media Platforms</i>	Focus content creation efforts on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.	Athlete & Social Media Manager	Ongoing	Content creation tools, platform analytics	Increased engagement on targeted platforms
<i>Create High-Quality Visual Content</i>	Hire professional photographers/videographers for content production.	Athlete & Content Team	2-3 months	Budget for professional services	Improved visual content quality, higher engagement rates
<i>Diversify Content</i>	Plan and create a content calendar with a variety of content types (stories, behind-the-scenes, etc.).	Athlete & Content Team	Monthly	Content planning tools, creativity workshops	Increased follower growth, content variety
<i>Engage Actively with Fans</i>	Schedule regular live Q&A sessions, respond to comments daily.	Athlete & Social Media Manager	Weekly	Social media management tools	Higher interaction rates, loyal fan base
<i>Effective Time Management</i>	Create a weekly schedule allocating specific time slots for content creation and fan engagement.	Athlete	Ongoing	Time management tools, calendar apps	Consistent content posting, balanced workload
<i>Financial Investment in Branding</i>	Budget for hiring a PR agency or additional staff for branding support.	Athlete & Financial Advisor	6 months	Financial planning resources	ROI through sponsorships and partnerships

Table 3: Recommendations and Action Plan.

This action plan provides a clear pathway for athletes to implement the recommended strategies effectively. By following these steps, athletes can enhance their personal brands, increase their visibility, and strengthen their engagement with fans, ultimately leading to greater opportunities for sponsorship and career growth.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to identify and analyze the key elements that contribute to the development of a strong personal brand for athletes, particularly within the Romanian context. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative interviews with a prominent athlete and a PR agency, alongside a quantitative questionnaire distributed to students, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of effective personal branding strategies. The findings reveal that **authenticity** and **consistency** are crucial in the personal branding of athletes. Maintaining a genuine connection with fans and presenting a consistent brand image across all platforms are vital for building trust and loyalty among followers. The study also highlighted the significant role of **social media** platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok in enhancing visibility and fan engagement. The preference for high-quality visual content, especially live streams and photos, was particularly noted, indicating that athletes need to focus on producing visually appealing and engaging content to capture and maintain audience interest. Moreover, the research identified the importance of **diversifying content** to appeal not only to avid sports fans but also to a broader audience. By sharing personal stories, behind-the-scenes insights, and interactive content, athletes can attract and retain a wider following. The study also underscored the need for athletes to actively engage with their fans, as direct interaction is highly valued and contributes significantly to building a loyal fan base. One of the challenges highlighted by the study is the **balance** between training and **personal branding** activities. Athletes need to manage their time effectively to ensure that they can maintain a strong online presence without compromising their athletic performance. Additionally, the research emphasized the importance of **financial investment** in branding, noting that while it requires resources, the potential returns in terms of sponsorships and fan engagement are substantial. Finally, the study stressed the necessity of **continuous adaptation**. Athletes must be responsive to audience feedback and market trends, regularly updating their strategies to stay relevant in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

In conclusion, the study offers valuable insights into the personal branding strategies that athletes, particularly those in Romania, can adopt to enhance their visibility, engage with fans, and attract sponsorship opportunities. By focusing on authenticity, quality content, and active engagement, athletes can build and maintain strong, sustainable personal brands that will support their careers both on and off the field.

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Appendices 1 – QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How interested are you in sports?
 - Very interested
 - Moderately interested
 - Slightly interested
 - Not interested
2. Which social media platforms do you actively use?
 - Facebook
 - Twitter/X
 - Instagram
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
 - YouTube
 - Snapchat
 - Others (please specify)
3. How often do you typically use social media platforms?
 - Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - A few times a week
 - Once a week
 - Rarely
 - Never
4. What do you primarily use social media for? (Select all that apply)
 - Keeping up with news and current events
 - Connecting with friends and family
 - Following sports and athletes
 - Entertainment (e.g., watching videos, memes)
 - Networking and professional purposes
 - Other (please specify): _____
5. What type of content do you prefer consuming on social media? (Select all that apply)
 - Text posts/articles
 - Photos/images
 - Videos
 - Live streams
 - Memes/GIFs
 - Other (please specify)
6. Do you follow any athletes on social media?
 - Yes
 - No

7. How interested are you in athletes-related content on social media?
- Very interested
 - Somewhat interested
 - Neutral
 - Not very interested
 - Not interested at all
8. How often do you engage with athletes content on social media? (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing)
- Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - A few times a week
 - Once a week
 - Rarely
 - Never
9. How important is it for you that athletes interact with their fans on social media?
- Very important
 - Somewhat important
 - Neutral
 - Not very important
 - Not important at all
10. On which social media platforms do you follow athletes? (Select all that apply)
- Facebook
 - Twitter/X
 - Instagram
 - YouTube
 - TikTok
 - Snapchat
 - Other (please specify): _____
11. Which social media platforms do you prefer to engage with athletes? (Check all that applies in order of preference, 1 being highest preference)
- Facebook
- Twitter or X
 - Instagram
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
 - YouTube
12. What motivates you to follow athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)?
- Interest in their sports performance and career
 - Inspiration from their lifestyle or achievements
 - Entertainment value of their posts
 - Opportunity to engage and interact with them
 - Recommendations from friends or family

- Other (please specify)

13. Personal insights into their What types of content from the athlete's social media would you prefer to engage with?

- Training and preparation
- Behind-the-scenes looks at competitions and events
- Match/game highlights
- Lifestyle and personal updates
- Interactive content (e.g., Q&A sessions, live chats)
- Interviews
- Inspirational messages
- Products endorsement and sponsorship
- Other (please specify)

14. How would you like athletes to engage with you on social media? (Check all that apply)

- Responding to comments and questions
- Hosting live Q&A sessions
- Sharing fan-created content
- Offering behind-the-scenes access
- Creating interactive polls and quizzes
- Other (please specify)

15. Has following athletes on social media influenced your opinions or behaviors? (e.g., lifestyle changes, product purchases)

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please explain how:

16. How much do athlete endorsements affect your purchasing decisions?

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Very little
- Not at all

17. What types of content or behavior would lead you to unfollow an athlete on social media? (Check all that apply)

- Offensive language or behavior
- Controversial or divisive statements
- Inappropriate content
- Excessive self-promotion or advertising
- Lack of interaction with fans
- Other (please specify)

18. How often should athletes post on social media to effectively engage with fans?

- Multiple times a day
- Once a day
- A few times a week
- Once a week

- Less than once a week
- Only when there are major events or news

19. What strategies do you think are more suitable for the promotion of athletes on social media? (Check all that apply)

- Consistent posting of high-quality content
- Engagement with fans through comments and questions
- Collaborations with other athletes and influencers
- Live streaming events and behind-the-scenes content
- Contests and giveaways for fans
- Other (please specify)

20. Have you ever seen an athlete with a strong image make a mistake on social media that negatively impacted their image?

- Yes
- No

21. If yes, what was the nature of the event/mistake?

- Legal issues
- Ethical issues
- Controversial statements or actions
- Performance enhancing drugs, doping allegations
- Personal scandals or conflicts
- Others (please specify)

22. How much importance do you place on athletes to give back to their communities or causes they care about? (Check all that apply)

- Very important
- Important
- Somewhat important
- Not important
- Not important at all

23. In what ways do you think athletes can give back to their communities or causes they care about? (Check all that apply)

Donating money to charities or causes

- Volunteering their time for community service
- Using their platform to raise awareness
- Mentoring young athletes
- Supporting local events and programs
- Other (please specify)

24. What makes you identify with an athlete? (Select up to 3 options)

- Their performance in sports
- Their personality and values
- Their community involvement or charity work
- Their nationality or cultural background
- Their appearance or style

- Their lifestyle choices
- Other (please specify): _____

25. What were your reasons for starting to participate in sports? (Check all that apply)

- Interest in staying healthy and fit
- Enjoyment of the sport
- Social interaction and making new friends
- Inspiration from watching athletes compete
- Encouragement from family or friends
- Challenge of learning new skills and improving performance
- Other (please specify)

26. What factors make you identify with a brand? (Select up to 3 options)

- The quality of their products
- Their values and ethics
- Their involvement in social or environmental causes
- Their support of athletes or sports teams
- Their customer service and support
- Their marketing and advertising strategies
- Their innovation and creativity
- Other (please specify): _____

27. How likely are you to start playing a sport because of a particular athlete's influence?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all probably					Extremely probably					

28. How often do you notice advertisements with athletes (ex. clothes, cars and other items)?
(Choose a digit based on broadcast frequency)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all					Very frequently					

29. Please answer each of the following questions on a scale of one (1) to five (5) with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

I talk to friends about the evolutions of my favorite athletes.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	

30. Please answer each of the following questions on a scale of one (1) to five (5) with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

I ask for the opinion of friends on certain news of athletes

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree

31. Please answer each of the following questions on a scale of one (1) to five (5) with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

I change my mind about an athlete based on conversations I have with my friends

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree

32. What sports do you prefer to watch?

- Individual
- Team
- Seasonal

33. What environment do you live in?

- Urban
- Rural

34. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Othe

35. Age

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54

55+

36. What is the monthly net income / family member?

- Under 1000 lei
- Between 1001 and 1500 lei
- Between 1501 and 2000 lei
- Between 2001 and 2500 lei
- Between 2501 and 3000 lei
- Between 3001 and 3500 lei
- Between 3501 and 4000 lei
- Between 4501 and 5000 lei

37. What is your level of education?

- High School
- Post-secondary
- University
- Masters
- Doctorate

Appendices 2 - Ana Maria Branza's interview

1. Can we start telling us a short introduction about you: name, sport, performance?
2. What motivated you to start focusing on developing your personal brand as an athlete?
3. How do you believe your personal brand aligns with your athletic career and accomplishments?
4. Can you share any key moments that influenced the direction of your personal brand development?
5. What strategies do you employ to stand out in a crowded field of athletes and build a unique personal brand?
6. How do you leverage storytelling to connect with your audience and enhance your personal brand?
7. What role does authenticity play in shaping your personal brand, and how do you maintain it?
8. Have you encountered any setbacks or challenges while building your personal brand, and how did you overcome them?
9. How do you balance the demands of your athletic career with the time and effort required to develop your personal brand?
10. Can you discuss any specific partnerships or collaborations that have contributed to the growth of your personal brand?
11. How do you utilize social media platforms to engage with your fans and cultivate your personal brand?
12. In what ways do you incorporate feedback and insights from your audience to refine and evolve your personal brand?
13. What values or principles do you prioritize when making decisions about your personal brand as an athlete?
14. How do you ensure consistency in your personal brand across various media channels and platforms?
15. Have you had to adapt or pivot your personal brand strategy in response to changes in your career or the industry?
16. What advice would you give to aspiring athletes who are looking to develop their own personal brands?
17. Can you share any memorable experiences or milestones from your journey of personal brand development as an athlete?
18. How do you handle negative feedback or criticism related to your personal brand, both online and offline?
19. Looking ahead, what are your goals and aspirations for the continued growth and evolution of your personal brand as an athlete?

Appendices 3 - PR Company's interview

1. How do you tailor personal branding strategies to suit the unique characteristics and career trajectories of individual athletes?
2. Can you discuss the importance of authenticity in crafting and maintaining an athlete's personal brand image?
3. What strategies do you employ to ensure that an athlete's personal brand resonates with their target audience?
4. How do you leverage storytelling techniques to create a compelling narrative for an athlete's personal brand?
5. Can you share examples of successful collaborations or partnerships that have helped enhance an athlete's personal brand?
6. What metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs) do you use to measure the effectiveness of personal branding efforts for athletes?
7. How do you navigate potential conflicts between an athlete's personal brand and their existing endorsements or sponsorships?
8. What steps do you take to manage and mitigate risks associated with personal branding for athletes, such as reputation management?
9. How do you stay abreast of emerging trends and technologies in the field of personal branding to ensure that athletes remain competitive?
10. Can you provide insights into the legal and ethical considerations involved in developing and managing an athlete's personal brand?