The Brand of an Athlete - Reconsidering Its Dimensions

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Abstract
In a world of multiple and diverse sports products (equipment, events, teams, athletes, merchandising, training and coaching services, broadcasting, etc.), the branding process requires a very dedicated approach in terms of product's characteristics, customer profile and market particularities. This article presents the branding process of an athlete, considering a transition from the classical model to a more sophisticated one, in which the brand dimensions are adapted to the nowadays importance of social media and social interactions. Most of the specialized literature is focused on the core dimensions of the athlete's brand (athletic performance, outside the court lifestyle and physical appearance). However, we can see that athletes with the same theoretical core dimensions have very different images, thus leading to the idea that there's more to building the athlete's brand than previously shown. Before presenting the results of a qualitative research on Romanian athletes' image, the article will highlight the usefulness of measuring athlete brand image both for the athlete and the sponsor/endorser.

Keywords: Brand, athlete, sports marketing.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

In a world of multiple and diverse sports products (equipment, events, teams, athletes, merchandising, training and coaching services, broadcasting, etc.), the branding process requires a very dedicated approach in terms of product's characteristics, customer profile and market particularities. Thus, branding an athlete is different than branding a sports team or an event. This article will focus on the branding process of the athlete, starting from the specialized literature on this subject and then showing how we can develop the existing models of athlete's brand image in order to include more aspects, that are more and more relevant when building and managing this brand.

Most of the specialized literature is focused on the three core dimensions of the athlete's brand (athletic performance, outside the court lifestyle and physical appearance). However, we can see that athletes with the same theoretical core dimensions have very different images, thus leading to the idea that there's more to building the athlete's brand than previously shown.

It can be argued that the athlete needs also a permanent and coherent marketing activity (athlete's media engagement, existing sponsorships and endorsements and the use of symbol/stage name), separated by the core dimensions, as in not sufficient to be a good athlete or a good person or just good looking, you must know how to use these features to your advantages. Important here is the athlete's engagement in media, considering that fans want to know about their favorite player and, moreover, interact with him/her (here social media plays a very important role). We build the athlete's brand to attract sponsorships and endorsements, but we do not think about the fact that there is also a reverse relationship here. The associations with different organizations can influence the brand of an athlete in a positive or a negative way, thus we must look and these associations as part of the athlete's brand. The use of a symbol/stage name can help better explain or even impose the brand on the market. For example, the NBA player Dwight Howard uses the symbol of Superman, which sends a message of power and invincibility.

Beside marketing actions, a second addition to the athlete's brand model that this article

proposes refers to the external factors, considering that the brand of an athlete depends on the good or bad image that his/her club has (you can think how easy is to build up a brand for an athlete playing for Real Madrid, for example, compare to building the brand of a player from an unknown football club). An important external factor is also the values of the sport he/she is playing (elegance for gymnastics, toughness for box or resistance for marathon runner, all these contributing to the image that one makes of a player without knowing anything about him as a person). Going even wider, we must take into consideration that the brand of an athlete is influenced by the national perspective on sports. For example, there are countries where athletes are not seen very good, since from the beginning people had to choose between sports or school, thus those who have chosen sports are seen as not very bright. In an opposite manner, in the US, being an athlete is something that is worth praising, knowing that such a person had made sacrifices in his life balancing sports and school.

All the above-mentioned factors will be integrated in a new model for branding the athlete, showing how they can influence this process and setting the premises for a statistical viable testing in order to make the transition from a conceptual model to an operational one.

2. Literature review on Branding in Sports

Defining the brand concept is not an easy process, as we can find a "plethora of definitions" (Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998) in the marketing literature, but the concept doesn't have yet a universally accepted one, not to mention building a brand model. Maurya and Mishra (2012), leading from an earlier classification of Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998), present 12 themes that we can find in the existing definitions of the brand concept: brand as a logo, brand as a legal instrument, brand as a company, brand as a shorthand, brand as a risk reducer, brand as an identity system, brand as an image in consumer's mind, brand as value system, brand as a personality, brand as relationship, brand as adding value and brand as an evolving entity.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines the brand as a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (AMA, 2007) Considering that this definition is rather outdated, the association comes with an added definition: "A brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary." (AMA, 2009).

One of the most known branding experts, David Aaker, discusses the brand from a value point of view – brand equity. He defines this concept as the set of brand assets and liabilities linked to the brand – its name and symbols – that add value to, or subtract value from, a product or service. These assets include brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality and associations (Aaker, 2009). In the marketing literature, the equity represents the basis of building brand models, one on the most valued being Keller's Customer-based Brand Equity (CBBE). According to this model, building a strong brand involves four steps: (1) establishing the proper brand identity, that is, establishing breadth and depth of brand awareness, (2) creating the appropriate brand meaning through strong, favorable, and unique brand associations, (3) eliciting positive, accessible brand responses, and (4) forging brand relationships with customers that are characterized by intensive, active loyalty (Keller, 2001).

In the sport industry, Keller's model represents a blueprint for specialists that define sports brands and build models for this industry (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel, Funk & King, 2009; Parmentier & Fisher, 2012; Arai, Ko & Kaplanidou, 2013).

The literature for sports branding can be classified upon the sport element that is discussed:

team, event, league, athlete. Considering the multiple differences between these sports elements, a singular model for brand building will be impossible.

There are authors that focused on branding for sports teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Braunstein & Ross, 2010), trying to identify ways of building the brand starting from the existing literature and adding layers according to the special characteristics of sports. One of the most known model for sports team brand model is the one developed by Gladden and Funk (2002), called Team Association Model (TAM), which consists of 16 dimensions divided into 3 categories: attribute (success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product delivery, and tradition), benefit (identification, nostalgia, pride in place, escape, and peer group acceptance), and attitude (importance, knowledge, and affect). Braunstein and Ross (2010) have a different approach on team brand, starting from the existing literature on personal brand. They have tested the brand personality in sport, the dimensions incorporated into the instrument being derived from Aaker's original Brand Personality Scale. The resulting structure of the instrument included 40 items assessing the following six identified factors: Competence (14 items), Sophistication (10 items), Sincerity (7 items), Ruggedness (3 items), Community-driven (3 items), and Classic (3 items).

On an even bigger level, there are authors that analyzed the brand of a sport league, such as Kunkel, Funk & King (2009), who developed a League Brand Associations Model (LBAM). Their study started from the need to see if team brand dimensions are also applying to sports leagues. Using the dimensions identified by previous mentioned authors in sports team brand, Kunkel et al. results suggest that 12 team-based brand associations can serve as league-based brand associations: commitment, tradition, excitement, star player, rivalry, nostalgia, community pride, socialisation, diversion, logo design, league management, organizational attributes.

In most sports marketing literature, the brand of an athlete is approached either from the perspective of personal brand or Keller's Customer-based Brand Equity. Using existing literature on professional image, celebrity, as well as personal brand studies, Parmentier and Fisher (2012) present the brand of an athlete as a result of linking professional image (specializing and seeking high-status playing opportunities) and mainstream media persona (providing publicity visible persona cues and creating opportunities to enhance end-consumer awareness).

However, there are more authors that addresses athlete brand image starting from Keller's model. We can mention here the work of Arai, Ko and Kaplanidou (2013) who developed a Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) based on three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. In order to test the model, they have also developed a Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI), determining the importance of each factor and the relationship between them, as seen in Figure 1. The MABI consists of three dimensions (i.e., athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) and 10 sub-dimensions. The first overarching dimension, athletic performance, consists of four sub-dimensions (i.e., athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship and rivalry). The second overarching dimension, attractive appearance, consists of three sub-dimensions (i.e., physical attractiveness, symbol and body fitness). The third overarching dimension, marketable lifestyle, consists of three subdimensions (i.e., life story, role model, and relationship effort) (Arai, Ko & Ross, 2013).
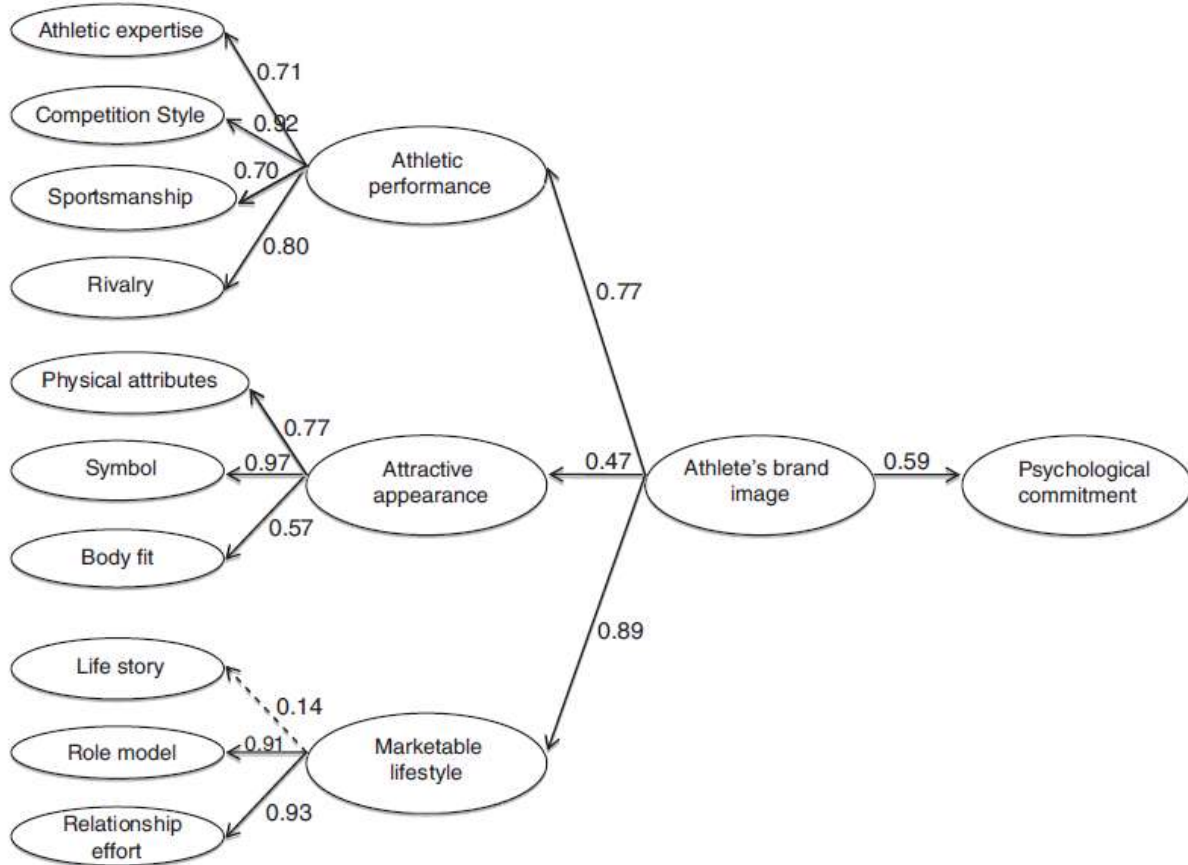
Figure 1. Model of Athlete Brand Image
Source: Arai, Ko and Kaplanidou (2013), p. 397

3. Researching the Image of Romanian Athletes
3.1. Research Methodology
In order to test how the above-mentioned literature on athlete's brand is matching the specific characteristics on a national market, a qualitative research was conducted, with the main objective of evaluating the brand image of Romanian athletes.

For this research, a qualitative method was used, considering that the focus was on mental associations and motives that led to such associations. Five focus groups were organized, two with young people that play sports, two with young people not involved in sports activities and one mixed. The participants were aged between 18 and 30, residents in Bucharest.

The focus group was structured on 4 main topics:
- Young people attitude towards sports;
- Brand awareness for Romanian sports personalities;
- Athletes that young people like and the reasons that led to this positive image; the same thing for international athletes;
- Athletes that young people dislike and the reasons that led to this negative image.

3.2. Research results
3.2.1. *Young people attitude towards sports*
Generally, young people tends to have a negative attitude towards sports, most of the time linked to its compulsory status in school.
> *"I don't like it very much because it was forced on me in school"*
> *"I don't do more than it's already imposed by the educational system"*

However, there is a segment of young people that describe themselves as being active, thus sports represent an important part of their life.

"My relaxation comes from jogging"

"When I'm at the gym, I can defuse after a day's work"

At a declarative level, Romanian young people see the benefits of practicing sport activities, however most of the time they postpone this activity in favour of other entertainment options.

"I will like to do more sport, but I don't have the time"

"Once I get home, there are other things to do…and sports comes last"

3.2.2. Brand awareness for Romanian sports personalities

When asked at a spontaneous level, sport active young people can mention more easily sport personalities, most of the time having as top of mind athletes from their favorite sport.

Adi Popa (football), Simona Halep (tennis), Cristina Neagu (handball), Virgil Stanescu (basketball)

Those people rather inactive in terms of sports are divided in two categories:

- Those that are mentioning former glories of Romanian sport

    Gheorghe Hagi (football), Nadia Comaneci (gymnastics), Ion Tiriac (tennis), Cristi Chivu (football), Adi Mutu (football), Gabriela Szabó (running)
- Those that are mentioning athletes with high media coverage nowadays

    Simona Halep (tennis), Ana Maria Branza (fancing), Lucian Bute (boxing), Catalina Ponor (gymnastics).

3.2.3. Athletes that young people like and the reasons that led to this positive image

The Romanian athletes with the best image within the young generation are:

Simona Halep, Gheorghe Hagi, Cristi Chivu, Cristina Neagu, Catalina Ponor.

Among the reasons that led to this positive image the participants mentioned:

"Because she's winning a lot these days" – Simona Halep

"Because he's the best football player Romania had" – Gheorghe Hagi

"He's a family man"- Cristi Chivu

"She's a team player" – Cristina Neagu

"She is beautiful and delicate" – Catalina Ponor

Talking about international athletes with a positive image, the ones mentioned the most were:

Michael Jordan, Novak Djokovic, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Usain Bolt, David Backham, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Lebron James.

The reasons behind such a positive image are:

"He's funny"

"Because he's communicating a lot with his fans, especially on Facebook and Twitter"

"He has a very attractive line of clothes"

"He looks very good"

"He's cool"

"Because he's the king of basketball".

As it can be easily observed, the participants were better at mentioning and discussing foreign athletes, as the Romanian ones are not so publicized and used in promotional campaigns.

3.2.4. Identifying the athletes that young people dislike and the reasons that led to this negative image

When talking about athlete with a bad image, the first name that came up was the one of Adrian Mutu, a football player that, even if appreciated for his athletic performances, he will be remembered for his drug problems. As it turned out, in this category of athletes with a bad

image participants mentioned *"football players in general"*.
Some of the reasons that led to this bad image perceived by the public are:
"Because of his drug problems"
"Because they don't act like athletes, they party and drink"
"Because all I know about them is linked to a scandal"
"They don't know how to speak correctly"

Correlating the information obtained from this qualitative research with the athlete's brand image model presented in the second section of this paper, we can conclude that there are more factors to be considered in the nowadays sports environment, as will be presented in the following section.

4. Reconsidering the Dimensions of the Athlete's Brand Image

The model presented in this section will take into considerations the literature review results, considering the factors identified there as core dimensions, to which will be added two new categories: marketing actions and external factors, as seen in Figure 2.
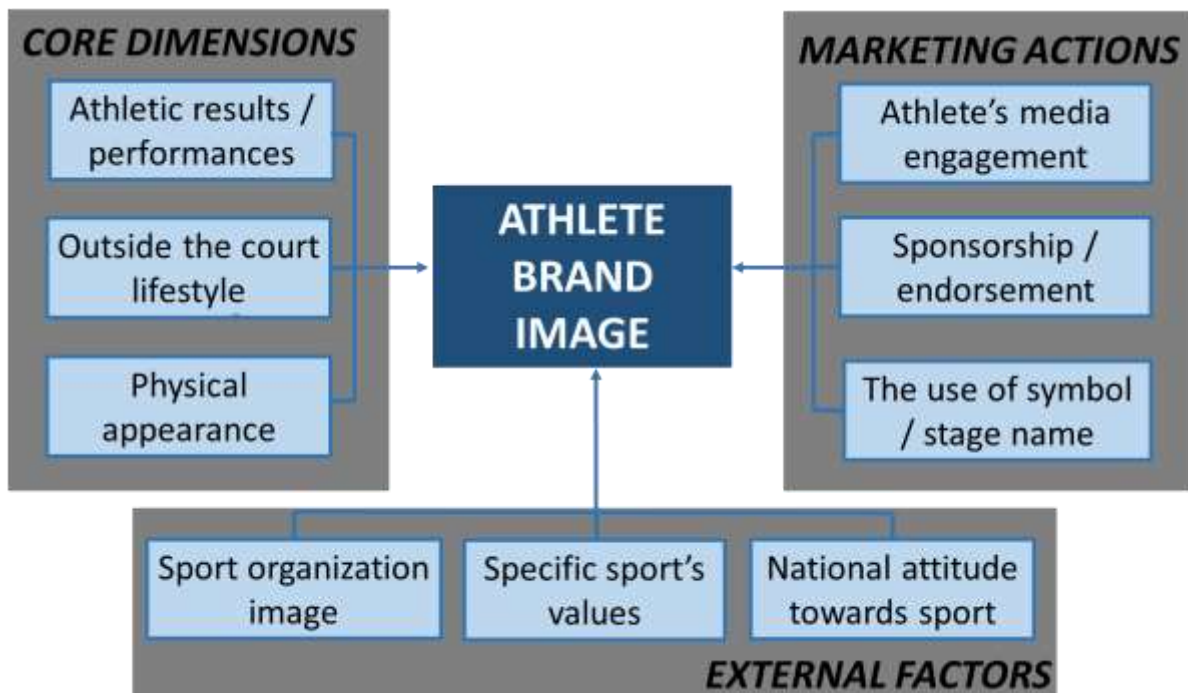

Figure 2. Athlete's brand image model
Source: realized by the author

4.1. Core dimensions
The first category of factors that build up the athlete's brand image – core dimensions – refers to the athletic results / performances, outside the court lifestyle and physical appearance.
Athletic results / performances
When considering the image of an athlete, the first natural thing to mention will be his/her performances on the court, this being the most mentioned dimension in sports brand literature. For celebrity athletes is extremely important to remain competitive in order to provide the most marketing benefit (Chadwick & Arthur, 2010).
Outside the court lifestyle

Considering the social role that an athlete must have, his/her image is now extending beyond the game, into the public life and even personal one. Outside the court lifestyle is nowadays maybe even more marketed than the actual sports results, considering the fact that people can better relate with the everyday actions rather than the extraordinary on court performances. If managed correctly, this dimension can transform the athlete into a role model, leading to a very respected image both among the sports fans and regular people, as well as potential sponsors and endorsers.

Physical appearance

The third core dimension puts emphasis on the physical appearance of the athlete, considering that the attractiveness of a fit body always sells. When we think about sports we think about fit people, about a healthy body and mind and this is the reason for which the image of an athlete can be built on this dimension. Sometimes this is the only dimensions used in order to build the brand of an athlete and we have here some examples of sportspeople that everyone knows, but few can mention a sport-related fact about them (titles, championships or other career performances).

4.2. Marketing actions

The above-mentioned model takes the core dimensions and builds up from that, using marketing actions. The main reason for which this model extracts the marketing actions and puts them all together in a specific category is related to the fact that marketing makes the athlete visible for the public and, if this connection element is not considered, then it is most likely for the athlete to remain anonymous.

Athlete's media engagement

In early athlete's brand image models, we can find a sub-indicator that relates to this one – relationship efforts (included in the marketable lifestyle), referring to the athlete's positive interactions with fans. However, considering, for example, just the expansion of social media, it's imperative to treat this dimension with the due importance.

With so many of social media outlets now available, an athlete's overall reach is nearly unlimited. He/she can target specific audiences – whether it's the fans, supporters, and/or business opportunities. The athlete should engage with their audience on a daily basis by posting updates, responding to comments, and providing fresh content (Burgunder, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, people search for someone to relate to, thus the athlete must have the same characteristics and values, and, moreover, have the willingness to engage with his/her fans. We could see this also in the qualitative research presented in section 3, when young people explained their likes also in term of engagement (*"because he's communicating a lot with his fans, especially on Facebook and Twitter"*).

Sponsorships and endorsements

Sponsorships and endorsements are most of the times used only to monetize the athlete's brand. As it is difficult to put a number besides this concept, most organizations use the amount of money earned by the athlete through these deals as an indicator of the athlete's value. However, we must see these associations also in terms of input factor in athlete's brand.

We build the athlete's brand to attract sponsorships and endorsements, but we do not think about the fact that there is also a reverse relationship here. The associations with different organizations can influence the brand of an athlete in a positive or a negative way, thus we must look at these associations as part of the athlete's brand (a good example here is Cristiano Ronaldo that had for a long time an endorsement with Herbalife, leading to an image of a complete athlete that is taking care of his health; however, in 2014 Ronaldo made a quite strange turn in this matter when associating with the fast-food chain KFC).

The use of a symbol / stage name

If build correctly, this dimension can better explain or even impose the brand on the market. For example, the NBA player Dwight Howard uses the symbol of Superman, which sends a message of power and invincibility. LeBron James is seen as the king of basketball, which equals with being number one, but without the need of also stating it. In Romania, Gheorghe Hagi is mentioned in media as the king (having more than 250,000 results on search engines with this association), Adrian Mutu is referred as the brilliant (for his remarkable moves and actions on the football field).

Having a stage name or a symbol that is well-known and accepted by the people can represent the foundation on which the brand is build. Continuing the example of LeBron James, we can see the symbol of a crown also in his logo.

In order to be used for brand building, the symbol/stage name must be in the control of the team that manages the athlete, in other words, must be a positive association, that favors the athlete.

4.3. External factors

Sport organization image

The brand of an athlete depends on the good or bad image of his/her club. Building up a brand for an athlete playing for Real Madrid is more effortless compared to building the brand of a player from an unknown football club.

The popularity of a team and/or sport commonly acts as a trigger to increase awareness and athlete associations. For instance, many supporters applaud athletes while they are playing just because they are members of their favorite team (Hasaan et al., 2016).

Specific sport's values

Besides the generic sport values, such as discipline, hard work, sacrifice, teamwork or fair play, an important external factor is also the values of the sport the athlete is playing (elegance for gymnastics, toughness for box or resistance for marathon running), all these contributing to the image that one makes of a player without knowing anything about him/her as a person. The convergence between specific values of the athlete practiced sport and athlete's own values can enhance also the brand. This dimension is also important when a company decides to sponsor or endorse an athlete, as the sport's values must align with the ones of the company.

National attitude towards sports

To expand further, we must take into consideration that the brand of an athlete is influenced also by the national perspective on sport. For example, in Romania we do not see athletes in a very good light, since from the beginning people had to choose between sports or school, thus those who have chosen sports are seen as not very bright, a wrong association in most cases. In contrast, in the USA, being an athlete is something that is worth praising, knowing that such a person had made sacrifices in his life balancing sports and school.

In Romania, this relatively negative perception of athletes is a consequence of several factors, among which media plays an important role. As seen in the previous section that presents the results of the qualitative research, when explaining the bad image, people say all the information that they have on athletes is linked to a scandal. It's a very well-known fact that media most of the times uses sports for profit and in very few occasions for public education. Taking the profit objective into consideration, the reasonable thing to do is build a positive image for the factors that can bring you money – such as sports. Thus, is incomprehensible how Romanian mass media tends to focus on the scandals and afterwards wonders why people are not watching sports on TV.

5. Managerial implications and future researches

The need to build a model for athlete's brand image stands in the fact that this offers opportunities both for the athlete and his/her partners (sponsors, endorsers, sports teams and leagues):

- For the athlete:
  - Obtaining financial resources through sponsorship and endorsement;
  - Getting good contracts;
  - Potential extension of the brand after retirement from sports;
- For sponsors/endorsers:
  - Identifying the most appropriated associations;
  - Sports Assets Portfolio Management (Pinto, 2013);
- For sports teams/leagues:
  - Building own brand through the synergies of the club's athletes individual brands;
  - Obtaining financial resources and sponsorship/endorsement contract by using the athletes as competitive advantages.

And this model it's not just about building the brand, is also about maintaining it, which can be equally difficult, considering that sports are very dynamic and most athlete carriers are so fluctuant in terms of performance.

The present state of the research showed that for each factor mentioned in Figure 2, there are a lot of sub-factors that need to be tested in order to see the relevance of their influence. These will be the next phase of the study: identifying these sub-factors and building up a research methodology in order to determine which factors and sub-factors are relevant and to what extent.

6. Conclusions

In a world in which winning represents the main objective, having a coherent process for brand building is the key of success. The world of sports it's a complex and heterogenic one, in which athletes, even good ones, can be lost easily. This is the reason for which the athlete must have a brand build upon specific characteristics, both related and unrelated to his performances, characteristics that will be presented to the public through a continuous marketing activity, taking into consideration the external factors that can affect the athlete's brand, such as his/her team image or the national context related to sports.

As we can see, we need a holistic approach to building the athlete brand, as no factor can stand alone and lead to a better image than their synergy. And all these factors are subject to change upon the sum of all his/her experiences within the sports field and beyond.

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