

ATHLETE BRANDING: THE PERCIEVED IMPACT OF ESTABLISHMENT AND
COMMUNICATION OF COLLEGIATE ATHLETE'S BRAND IMAGE THROUGH
SOCIAL MEDIA

By

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ABSTRACT

Athlete branding is defined as a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market (Arai, 2014). A brand image is defined as the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brands (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990), and involves the perceptions of a particular brand as reflected by the brand associations held in a consumer's memory (Keller, 1993). It is not only what athletes produce in terms of winning or losing, but how they package this winning or losing as a complete brand that matters (Arai, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to examine the under researched topic of the perceived impact of the establishment and communication of collegiate athlete's brand image through social media. This study will attempt to discover the impact that branding and the communication of brand image through social media outlets has on collegiate athletes.

Evaluating the level of establishment of a collegiate athlete's brand image on social media and how it is relayed through social media channels will determine whether or not it is effective in increasing the collegiate athlete's popularity and following. This is important because if there is a correlation between a collegiate athlete's popularity and following and their use of social media to communicate brand image, then more collegiate athletes may begin using social media outlets to increase their popularity and following which could lead to other benefits such as career opportunities or sponsorships.

It is hypothesized that the more established a collegiate athlete's brand image is on social media sites, the better understanding the athlete has of the importance of

communicating his/her brand image. Furthermore, as the level of engagement of the collegiate athlete on social media sites increases, the athlete's popularity and following will increase respectively.

In this study, participants will be collegiate athletes at East Carolina University. A sample of 75 to 100 athletes from a variety of different sports teams will be chosen and asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey anonymously. Conclusions will be drawn based upon participant responses.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the publicity and endorsements that professional athletes are receiving are steadily increasing, as sports continue to be one of the leading forms of entertainment worldwide. As a result of the ever-growing popularity of sports, most professional athletes in today's society are associated with their own brand (Arai, 2014). This brand is established over time and is closely monitored by agencies in order for athletes to maintain a favorable brand image. This is increasingly important, as the athlete's brand influences the behavior of fans.

Research suggests that professional athletes are often compared to small businesses (Thomson, 2006). The power of investment lies in the hands of the consumer who ultimately makes the choice of whether or not to invest in the athlete based on the consumer's perception of the athlete, the athlete's brand (Craft 2008). While it is crucial for professional athletes to build a well-established brand, for collegiate athletes this practice is not as common.

In colleges and universities across the country, athletes are commonly recognized as an entity of the school that they play for, and not as individual agents. Collegiate athletes are characterized by the branding of the school that they play for, and lack a well-established brand of their own. This is a disadvantage for collegiate athletes because they can be subject to any negative connotations associated with the brand of the school and do not have a unique and individually tailored brand associated with their desired image to distinguish themselves from other collegiate athletes whom are competing for similar resources such as future professional status in the sport, scholarships, sponsorships, job offers, and other opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, many athletes have begun expanding their reach beyond their sport by becoming involved in social media activities, such as Tweeting, Blogging, Snap chatting, and posting to Facebook and Instagram (Arai 2014). In light of the modern media culture, the athletes are considered “a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which express the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style” (Arai, 2014).

The brand management for athletes has grown in importance because the concept of branding is well suited for athletes as products. Previous branding studies have documented positive consequences of successful branding such as: influencing the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay premium price, marketing communication effectiveness, and promotion of positive word-of-mouth (Arai, 2014). These benefits are also highly applicable to individual athletes, with well-branded athletes attaining price premiums on their salary, transfer fees, contract monies, and the ability to maintain fan support even when their performance has declined (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Well-branded athletes who carry symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers. Furthermore, the established brand value of the athlete will help his/her post-athletic career because well-branded athletes can leverage their brand value through their post-athletic career (Rein et al., 2006).

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PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the under researched topic of the perceived impact of the establishment and communication of collegiate athlete's brand image through social media. This study will attempt to discover the impact that branding and the communication of brand image through social media outlets has on collegiate athletes. Evaluating the level of establishment of a collegiate athlete's brand image on social media and how it is relayed through social media channels will determine whether or not it is effective in increasing the collegiate athlete's popularity and following. This is important because if there is a correlation between a collegiate athlete's popularity and following and their use of social media to communicate brand image, then more collegiate athletes may begin using social media outlets to increase their popularity and following which could lead to other benefits such as career opportunities or sponsorships.

HYPOTHESES

It is hypothesized that the more established a collegiate athlete's brand image is on social media sites, the better understanding the athlete has of the importance of communicating his/her brand image. Furthermore, as the level of engagement of the collegiate athlete on social media sites increases, the athlete's popularity and following

will increase respectively. I will be measuring the perceived importance of brand image establishment and communication for collegiate athletes. In addition, I will determine whether or not there is a correlation between social media activity and level of popularity/following of collegiate athletes.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, participants will be collegiate athletes at East Carolina University. A sample of 100 to 150 athletes from a variety of different sports teams will be chosen and asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey anonymously. This survey will be composed of questions aimed at determining whether or not the athlete has a social media presence, which social media outlet the athlete uses the most such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or Tumblr, the number of friends or followers that the athlete has, what the content of their posts is most commonly about, what the athlete's attitude toward social media is, and whether or not the athlete feels that their social media presence effects their popularity or could benefit them in the future. The questions will be a combination of Likert scale questions and free response. Results from the survey will be analyzed, and conclusions will be drawn based on the results.

RESULTS

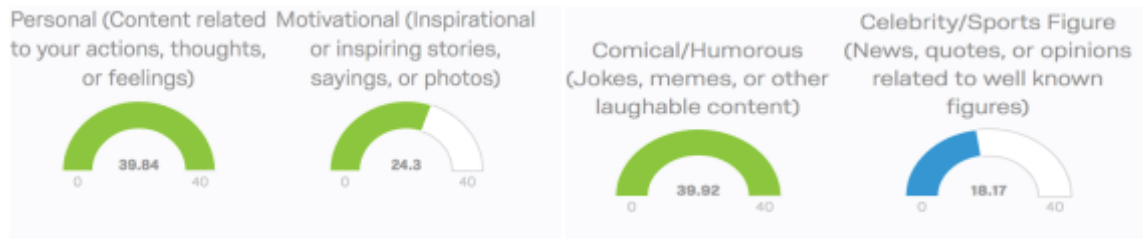
This survey was completed by a sample size of 104 collegiate athletes at East Carolina University from a variety of sports teams including baseball, basketball, cross country, football, golf, swimming/diving, soccer, softball, spirit, tennis, track and field, and volleyball. Of the respondents, 23% were first year students, 32% were second year

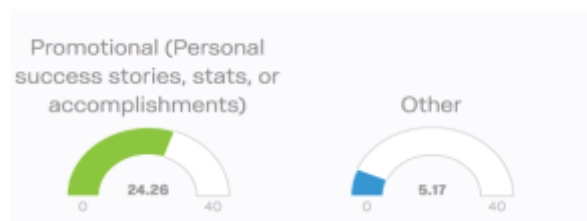
students, 20% were third year, 21% were fourth year, and 4% were fifth year. Of the respondents, 77.91% were females and 22.09% were males. The age dispersion of participants was the following: 47.67% were 18-19 years old, 43.02% were 20-21, and 9.3% were 22-23 years old.

When asked to select all of the social media accounts they had an account with, 81.63% of participants confirmed that they had a Twitter account, 94.9% had a Facebook account, 95.92% had an Instagram account, 24.49% had a LinkedIn account, 97.96% had a Snapchat account, 5,10% had a Tumblr account, and 4% indicated the use of other sites such as Pinterest and WhatsApp.

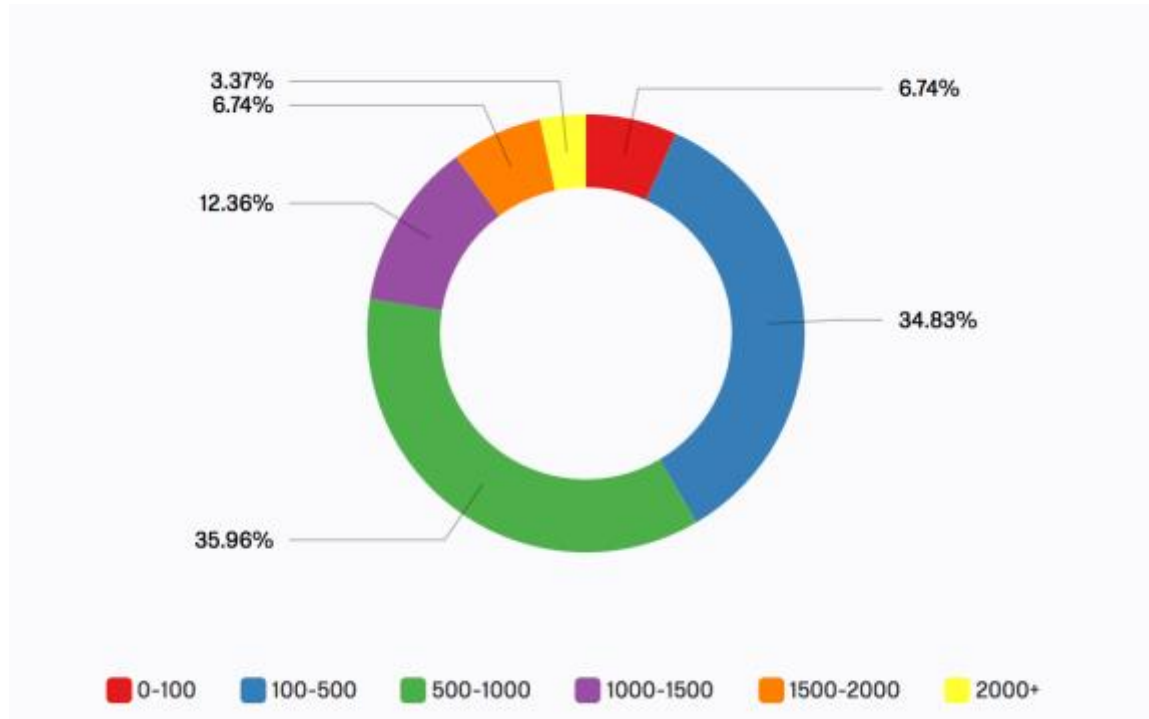
Furthermore, when asked to indicate which social media site they use most frequently, 17.35% of respondents chose Twitter, 11.22% chose Facebook, 33.67% chose Instagram, 35.71% chose Snapchat, and 2.04% selected other in regards to WhatsApp.

The following table indicates the percentage of content of the respondents' social media posts from their most frequently used account that fall into each category. Based on the table, the majority of respondents use their social media accounts to post comical/humorous content or personal content followed by motivational and promotional content.

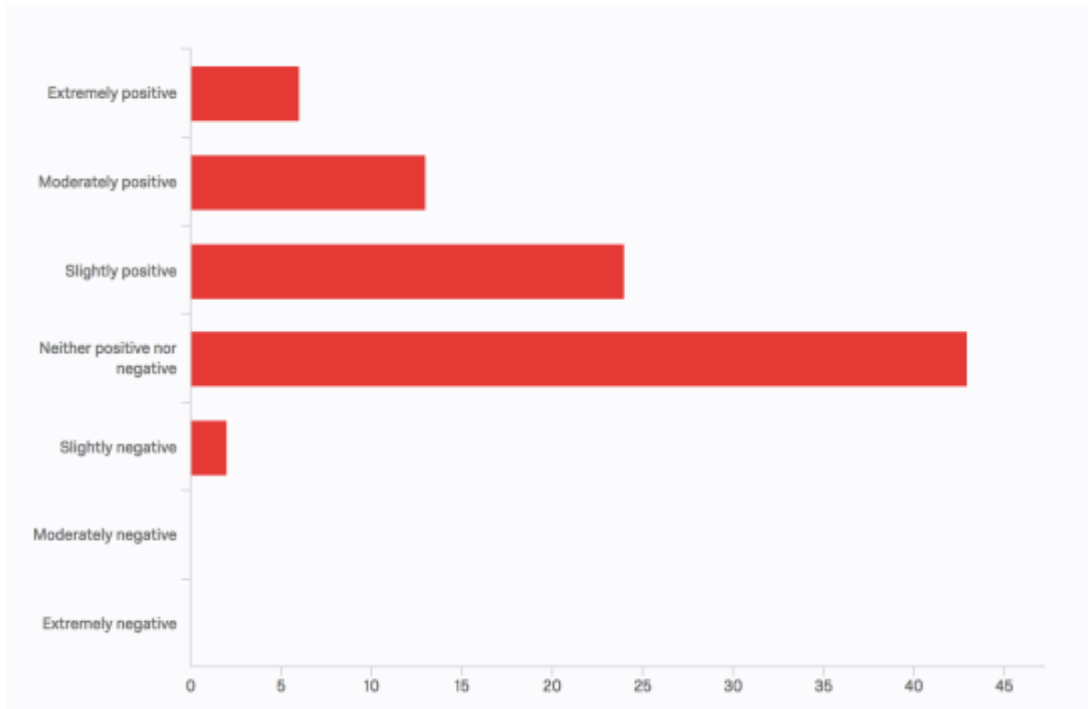




The following chart indicates how many followers respondents reported to have on their most frequently used social media account. As shown, 35.96% had between 500 and 1,000 followers, 34.83% had between 100 and 500 followers, and 12.36% had between 1,000 and 1,500 followers.



Participants were asked to rate the effect, if any, that they felt their number of friends/followers had on their popularity as a collegiate athlete. The following illustration indicates that 6.82% of respondents felt that there was an extremely positive correlation, 14.77% felt that there was a moderately positive correlation, 27.27% felt that there was a slightly positive correlation, 48.86% reported neither positive nor negative correlation.



Additionally, participants were asked whether or not they viewed social media as a tool to promote themselves as collegiate athletes. The following breakdown indicates their responses.

1	Definitely yes	12.64%
2	Probably yes	25.29%
3	Might or might not	29.89%
4	Probably not	19.54%
5	Definitely not	12.64%

Of the 12.64% of respondents that indicated definitely yes, the following comments were made.

Definitely yes

I can post pictures of when our games are and action shots to intrigue fellow followers to coming to games.

More people know who you are

That's how most know who is who other than ESPN

I post pics

Great way!

Social media is the platform to advertise ourselves

I love my sport and take pride in representing ECU athletics

If you are good it gets reflected in social media a lot, the number of followers go up as well as other aspects. In general social media is the best way to tell the success of that person in whatever he/she does.

We can promote our games and outings that we go to

Of the 19.54% that indicated probably not, the following comments were made.

Probably not

I just don't use social media to promote myself, would only use it to say when a game is

People don't really just follow me because I'm an athlete I just allow people to follow me that are my friends

it's more to show people who I am as a person, not necessarily as a college athlete

I don't think I've ever tweeted about the team

I don't post about being an athlete a lot just every once in a while.

I think my posts on social media platforms do not differ ver much from those of non athletes

I do not post very often.

If I share something about my sport it's to promote a game time for the team (but this is rare)

Next, participants were asked whether or not they felt that using social media sites to promote themselves could lead to future career opportunities. Of the respondents,

16.09% indicated definitely yes, 31.03% probably yes, 37.93% might or might not, 13.79% probably not, and 1.15% definitely not. Of those that indicated definitely yes or probably yes, a few notable comments were made:

If you portray yourself the correct way

Depending on how I portray myself on social media, could definitely have an effect on potential employment opportunities

Prospective workers can see work ethic and know I work hard

Everyone is turning to social media these days and having positive content on social media such as volunteer work or accomplishments could make an impression on future employers

Most companies are on social media

Employers may be more inclined to hire me if they see I am an athlete on social media

Of those that indicated probably not or definitely not, a few notable comments were made:

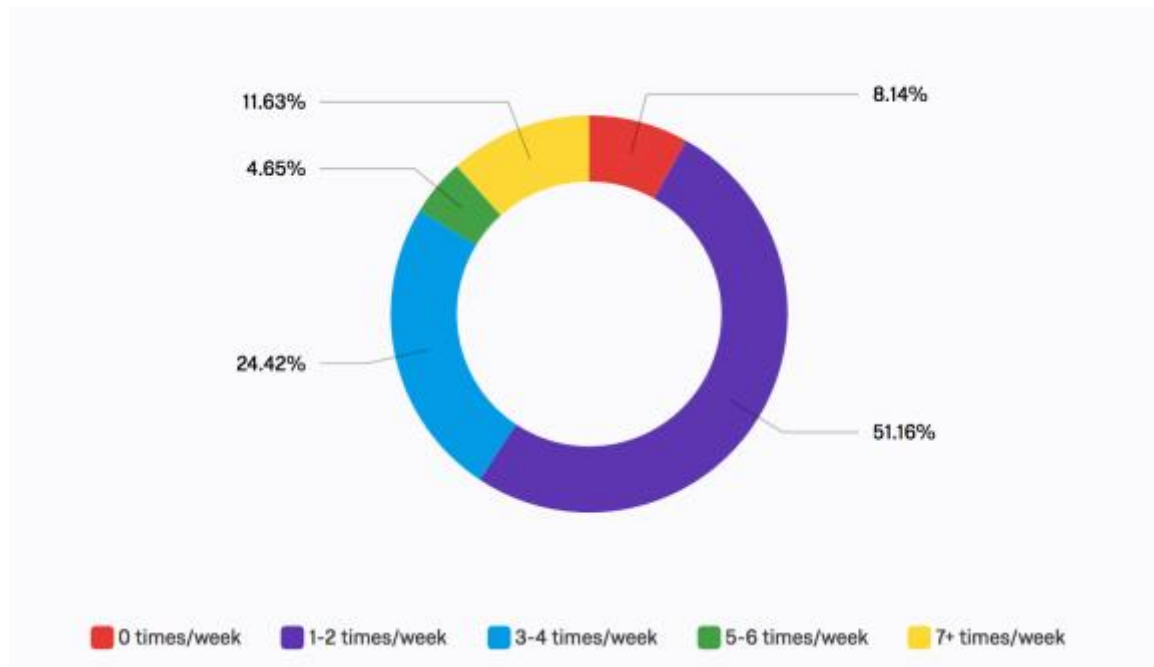
I've never really thought about using social media for that

I think it might be important that our future employers see that we are college athletes, it gives us an extra advantage over others, but I don't think it is super important.

I dont think me being on a college team will promote myself when getting a job

When asked whether they viewed their friends/followers on social media as “fans”, 50.57% of respondents reported definitely not, 26.44% reported probably not, 18.39% reported might or might not, 3.45% reported probably yes, and 1.15% reported definitely yes.

Participants were asked how many times per week on average that they post on social media sites. The following pie chart depicts the results:



Lastly, participants were asked if they were aware of any rules/policies that may prevent them from promoting themselves as collegiate athletes on social media. 18.6% of respondents indicated definitely yes, 31.4% indicated probably yes, 26.74% indicated might or might not, 12.79% indicated probably not, and 10.47% indicated definitely not.

1	Definitely yes	18.60%
2	Probably yes	31.40%
3	Might or might not	26.74%
4	Probably not	12.79%
5	Definitely not	10.47%

Of those that indicated definitely yes or probably yes, the following noteworthy comments were made:

I know we have to represent ECU and our sport in a positive way.. No cursing, no inappropriate posts; etc

I cannot post anything that will ruin my image.

Gotta be cautious of what you post

Cannot accept payments or gifts

Not putting any controversial or cussing on social media, presenting yourself well.

just rules/policies that protect us, so I doesn't really affect me

Don't say anything bad about university or team

I know there are many NCAA rules regarding social media posts

We went over them in compliance

You can not speak negatively of other teams or players

Not sure what they are specifically but I'm sure there are some

I'm sure the NCAA has rules against promoting yourself to professional careers

I am just aware that I am representing our school and can not post anything negative toward it

Of the respondents that indicated probably not or definitely not, the following comments were made:

I know I can't promote a certain product but other than that I don't know

I haven't heard of any.

I am not aware of any such rules.

I don't think we are restricted from many beneficial things on social media, only bad things.

Not that I know of

I don't know of any

I know there are some rules or I know that whatever I post can have consequences but I am never thinking that i should not posed that because I'm gonna get caught

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the survey results, a few notable findings were discovered. Based on the responses, it was made evident that each of the participants had at least one social media account. The most popular social media sites used by the collegiate athletes surveyed at East Carolina University were Snapchat and Instagram. The majority of the surveyed athletes posted either personal or humorous content and had between 100 and 1,000 followers.

Delving deeper, the vast majority of respondents felt that there was a positive correlation between the number of friends/followers they had and their popularity as a collegiate athlete. However, when asked if they viewed social media as a tool to promote themselves as collegiate athletes, they responded in the following breakdown:

1	Definitely yes	12.64%
2	Probably yes	25.29%
3	Might or might not	29.89%
4	Probably not	19.54%
5	Definitely not	12.64%

Even so, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they felt as if promoting themselves via social media could lead to future career opportunities. This shows that there may be a gap between the collegiate athletes' perceptions of social media as a tool for personal versus athletic promotion.

In following, when the participants were asked if they were aware of any rules/policies that may prevent them from promoting themselves as collegiate athletes on social media, they indicated the following:

1	Definitely yes	18.60%
2	Probably yes	31.40%
3	Might or might not	26.74%
4	Probably not	12.79%
5	Definitely not	10.47%

This shows that there is much variance between the collegiate athletes awareness of the rules/policies in place regarding their social media use that may need to be addressed.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer an important question in the field of sports marketing. If collegiate athletes felt that the establishment of a personal brand that is then relayed through social media channels improved the athlete's popularity or following, then it would be beneficial for athletes to begin creating their brand image during their college years in order to increase their following and build their reputation. By establishing a brand image and communicating it through social networks, collegiate athletes can gain

more exposure that could ultimately lead to an increase in interest in that player for a variety of purposes including but not limited to playing as a professional, endorsements, sponsorships, or job offers. My personal interest in this study stemmed from my experiences as a collegiate equestrian athlete and my involvement in marketing.

LIMITATIONS

This study is specific to undergraduate collegiate athletes at East Carolina University and their opinions and perceptions. As a result, this study may not be an accurate representation of a wider collegiate athlete population.

The results of this survey may be limited as a result of the demographic statistics of the survey respondents. Of the respondents, 77.91% were females. The percentage of participants over the age of 18 but under the age of 21 was 90.69%.

The results of this survey may be limited based on the participation and lack of participation of collegiate athletes from various sports teams. The following graphic illustrates the percentage of participants from each of the listed sports teams.

Baseball	3.00%
Basketball	2.00%
Cross Country	14.00%
Football	2.00%
Golf	9.00%
Swimming/Diving	12.00%
Soccer	15.00%
Softball	14.00%
Spirit	7.00%
Tennis	8.00%
Track & Field	17.00%
Volleyball	6.00%
Other	4.00%

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