

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF STAR ATHLETES' BRANDS ON DIGITAL CHANNELS: A COMPARISON OF THE GLOBAL AND CROATIAN HIGHEST-PAID SPORTSMEN AND WOMEN

ABSTRACT

Personal brands of athletes are built on the same principles as other brands - by combining unique and recognizable sets of associations and qualities that create a specific brand image. Emotional connection with the audience is particularly effectively built through communication on social networks, which are inseparable and one of the essential mechanisms in building a personal brand. According to the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), we distinguish the three most important dimensions of brand image: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. This paper focuses on these dimensions of brand image and uses the Content Analysis method to analyze three categories of athletes: the highest-paid male and female athletes at the global level and the highest-paid Croatian athletes. The main objective of the paper is to determine the common elements, characteristics, and patterns in the digital communication of athletes' brands on the Instagram and to determine the differences in the dominant image dimension of different analyzed groups. The most represented type of content was photography, while most often source was the athlete's own content. In the total sample, sports performance and marketable lifestyle are evenly distributed as the most prominent dimensions of the brand image. The most represented topic is sports performance, which accounts for a quarter of the content, while posts including private and family life are also represented in an approximately equal percentage. Croatian athletes most frequently post about family life and team spirit, while female athletes are significantly more focused on attractive appearance as a dimension of brand image. As much as a fifth of the content of female athletes is advertising content, which is significantly higher than the numbers of analyzed male athletes.

Keywords: sports brand; personal brand; brand image; social media; digital communication; top athletes.