

**Personal Branding on Instagram: An Examination of Iranian Professional Athletes**

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**25-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)**

Lebron James, Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Serena Williams are undoubtedly some of the most recognizable athletes in the world. This is due to their ability to not only build but to manage themselves and their careers as a brand. Research supports that branded individuals can obtain added value, expand their employability, and increase their income through endorsements (Arruda & Dixon, 2007; Montoya & Vandehey, 2002; Peters, 1997). Social media, in particular, allows athletes to extend the reach of their personal brands and to communicate with a global audience (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). For example, soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo has over 340 million followers through Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and can generate nearly \$1 billion in annual value for his sponsors on social media (Badenhausen, 2017). However, not all athletes have the type of access to social media as Ronaldo. Iranian athletes can only use Instagram, due to a governmental decision on the filtering of social media in Iran. Given the importance of personal branding to an athlete's career and overall success, the purpose of this study is to investigate the branding strategies of Iranian athletes who have limited access to social media.

Personal branding is the process of turning an individual's distinctive skills, values, and characteristics into a powerful identity (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002). Lair and colleagues (2005) noted that personal branding differed from branding in that success was "not determined individuals' internal set of skills, motivations, and interests, but, rather, how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled" (p. 308). Extant literature shows that multiple studies examine how athletes can take advantage of the internet to build their brands (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010; Copes, 2011; Green, 2016; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Much of this literature relies on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, which states that individuals embrace various identities regarding the situation, setting or audiences. These different identities lead them to different performances depending on whether they are front stage or back stage. Expanding on Goffman's (1959) work, Marshall (2010) highlighted the importance of these performances for celebrities and public figures, emphasizing that public interest "makes their often everyday activities a kind of performance to be read further" (p. 39). He also noted that new media means that athletes, celebrities, and other public figures must "perform" in online settings through various displays of "self" (p.6).

Studies regarding online consumption suggest that social media is playing a significant role in branding people (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Madden, Fox, Smith & Vitak, 2007). Although Facebook continues to be among the top social media platforms, Instagram is recommended as the best platform for athletes to connect with fans (Graves, 2018). Due to its photo and video sharing capabilities, through Instagram athletes can provide fans with unprecedented access to their lives and can engage with followers on a more personal level. For instance, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) examined the self-presentation strategies in the utilization of Instagram by Olympic athletes. The authors found the athletes predominantly posted photos that were more personal in nature resulting in more engagement with their followers. Smith and Sanderson (2014) investigated the Instagram feeds of multiple professional athletes to determine the self-presentation styles of the athletes. Their results revealed that a majority of the photos were not related to sport, and the photos consisted of six prominent themes: humanitarian, family driven, personality traits and interests, dedicated athlete, endorser, and socialite. Few studies, however, have examined the use of social media from the athletes' perspective. The most notable was conducted by Geurin (2017). The researcher interviewed elite female athletes regarding the use of social media for self-presentation and impression management. The study revealed that athletes possessed goals for "developing connections" and "self-promotion," but they did not utilize specific strategies to meet those goals (p. 345). Thus, it is likely that other athletes may exhibit similar behaviors and characteristics. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What strategies do Iranian athletes use, explicitly or implicitly, to brand themselves?

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RQ2: What are the challenges that Iranian athletes face in attempting to create a personal brand?

To address the research questions, researchers will conduct semi-structured interviews with a maximum of 20 Iranian professional athletes. Purposive, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2012) will be implemented to identify the professional athletes. The interview guide will be created based upon existing personal branding literature. Athletes will be asked about how and why they use Instagram as well as the goals and limitations in developing a personal brand. Interviews will be conducted until data saturation. Data will then be transcribed and coded to identify any emerging themes. Data also will be triangulated with secondary sources such as the athletes' personal websites, social media platforms, weblogs, etc. To ensure trustworthiness, transcripts and initial thematic coding will be provided to participants to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data.

Theoretically, the results will join the growing body of literature on sport media and marketing and will contribute to the literature for athlete personal branding with a new context in Iran. Practically, the results will provide a pattern for Iranian athletes to discern the significance of personal branding. Additionally, the results may help sport marketers to understand how social media is being used by international athletes to build their personal brands, and how the athletes are communicating with fans, teams, and corporations seeking endorsers.

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