Exploring The Model of Athlete's Branding Image of Football Players on Fans Perception

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ABSTRACT

Social media, according to Mudrick, Miller, and Atkin (2016), has revolutionized how fans engage with sports and with one another, bringing up new opportunities for involvement and expression. Scherer and Jackson (2007) examine sports advertising critically, emphasizing its role in developing and preserving cultural and national identities, as well as ethical concerns regarding corporate branding and cultural creation in the global sports sector. As a result, media culture has a significant influence on football promotion such games, teams, players, and fan participation. Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand the relationship between football players and their supporters as consumers, as well as how athletes' impact on fans might effect their perception. The literature review examines several key areas. Firstly, it contextualizes the profession of football players, highlighting their role as cultural icons and their ability to express and promote national identity through attire and personal style. Secondly, the study explores the Model of Athlete's Branding Image from Arai et al. (2013), which encompasses dimensions such as athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Finally, the literature review examines the influence of social media culture on football players, recognizing its significant impact on football promotion and fan involvement. To examine the research questions, the researcher conducted a survey to gather primary data. The questionnaire was developed based on the Model of Athlete's Brand Image theory. The sampling method employed a combination of criterion and convenience sampling, resulting in a total of 242 respondents. After initial descriptive analysis, 240 respondents were included in the subsequent analysis. The study conducted multiple regression analysis to test the correlation between independent variables and dependent variable of the Model of Athlete's Branding Image, and a hierarchical regression analysis to see the impact and contribution of an additional variable to the previously tested variable on fans perception variable. Finally, this study adds more understanding of the relationship between football players and their fans as consumers. The findings emphasize the influence of the Model of Athlete Branding Image and social media usage on fans' perceptions, underlining the importance of these elements in influencing football players' perceptions as brand images. This study gives significant insights for sports marketers, players, and brand managers to effectively interact with fans and establish a strong brand image in the dynamic environment of media culture by understanding the tremendous influence of football players on fans.

KEYWORDS: *Football Athletes, The Model of Athlete's Branding Image, Social Media, Fans Perception, Multiple Regression Analysis, Hierarchical Regression Analysis*

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1. Introduction

Football has established itself as the most popular and extensively watched sport on a worldwide scale. Dvorak's (2004) study underlined football's unparalleled reach and effect, establishing it as a worldwide sport. According to Gafà (2014), the interest in football is a validation of its standing as a global business. Furthermore, Batmunkh's (2021) study emphasized football's significant impact on the global economy, with the expansion of the football industry assisting in the development of numerous nations and regions. Pifer et al. (2018) conducted a study that gave more insights on the modern global football market, examining the evolution of the game as well as its economic and social impact. Football is a hugely popular sport across the world, having a significant impact on the global economy (Pifer et al.,2018). These studies highlight football's huge importance as a worldwide sport and industry, as well as its critical role in changing the global economy.

Football's popularity has risen worldwide, with a large number of people devoting time and effort to supporting and watching the sport. Satellite television, sports streaming, social media, and advertisements have all played important roles in promoting football and engaging supporters. According to Mudrick, Miller, and Atkin (2016), social media has changed how fans connect with sports and with one another, opening up new avenues for involvement and expression. The critical examination of sports advertising by Scherer and Jackson (2007) highlights its function in establishing and maintaining cultural and national identities, with ethical issues about corporate branding and cultural production in the global sports business. As a result, media culture has a huge impact on football promotion and fan involvement.

Athletes are frequently seen as prominent cultural icons in contemporary media culture, reflecting a variety of ideals and views. They are outspoken personalities who arouse identification and passion in their followers. Athletes also play an important role in expressing and promoting national identity by using attire and personal style to communicate a sense of belonging (Gledhill, 1991; Arai et al., 2013: 9). Considering the profound influence football athletes have on their fans, this study intends to explore the perception of football players as brand images by football enthusiasts. Through an analysis of this phenomenon, the research aims to gain insights into how football fans interpret and associate with their favorite players as representative symbols of a specific brand.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the relationship between football players and their supporters as consumers, as well as how athletes' impact on fans might effect their perception. Therefore, the research question for this study is *to what extent does the branding image of football athletes impact the football fans perception in today's media culture?*

To answer the research question, this research discussed the results in twofold: examining whether the Model of Athlete Branding Image is correlated with fans perception or not, and whether social media usage plays a role in shaping football fans perception towards the players' branding image. Hence, the aim of this study seeks to improve our understanding of the role that football players play in forming the perspectives of their followers by diving into the influence of brand image on football fans' perceptions. The study's findings are crucial because they can provide vital insights into how football players can create and preserve a favorable brand image that connects with their fan base. Such insights can help athletes establish more successful approaches for engaging and connecting with their fans, eventually leading to increased fan support and brand loyalty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Football Players as a Profession

Football, as a professional sport, has widespread appeal and global recognition. Footballers have received a lot of attention from numerous sources, including biographies, journalistic accounts, and personal tales supplied by the players themselves (Roderick, 2006). A limited handful of excellent athletes, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, David Beckham, and many more, may rightly argue to be some of the most internationally famous "sports stars" in the world. In this research, this section discussed the profession of football player in twofold.

2.1.1. Contextualizing Football Players

In Roderick (2006a), the author distinguished football player as an occupation. As Glaeser (2000) stressed that the actions involved in the work process, the outcomes achieved, the prestige associated with specific occupations, the prestige of the social environments in which work takes place, and the relative importance assigned to work in comparison to other recreational pursuits all contribute to how individuals find significance in their work. As in football, Roderick (2006a) emphasizes that professional football is a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates with multiple aspects such as the labor-intensive nature of the football business, providing light on the work and devotion required to sustain the sport at the professional level.

Football clubs adopt a variety of strategies to acquire players, including transfers, free agency signings, and developing young talent through apprenticeship programs (Roderick, 2006a). The major purpose of football apprenticeship objectives is to attract and develop fresh talent. Apprenticeship programs are frequently viewed as a method of maintaining skilled individuals; but, in professional football, talented young players may be sold to fund the recruitment of others (Monk, 2000). Within football clubs, there is a vertical hierarchy of playing levels that allows players to go from the junior level to the reserve team and, finally, to the first team (Roderick, 2006a). Hence in professional football, as McGovern (2002) argued, unlike typical professions in bureaucratic organizations, lacks a clear idea of career advancement and what it means for individual players.

2.1.2. Football Player Societal Status

Football's portrayal as labor has an inherent connection to societal notions of what constitutes 'real' job. In the eyes of the majority, work is commonly associated with earning a livelihood within the formal labor market (Roderick, 2006a). As cited in Roderick (2006b), the study from Stebbins and Giulianotti (2000) argued that footballers being considered competent professionals is mostly related to the natural attitudes and viewpoints that players-as-workers often hold about their employment. For these players, work is not only the primary objective but also an important component of their life, and they expect to derive more happiness and benefits from it than the general population. Thus, footballers consider their profession as a source of self-realization and an opportunity for essential social relationships, since it is not solely a means for making a livelihood (Roderick, 2006b).

Professional football players, however, have attained celebrity status due to their exceptional physical prowess displayed on the field and their behavior outside of it. They have garnered a significant fan base, consisting predominantly of individuals who perceive them as heroes and seek to establish their own distinct identity as aspiring amateur football players. In addition, Vergeer and Mulder (2019) argued traditional broadcasting media, for example radio and television, play an important role in elevating professional football players to the level of celebrities. These traditional mass media outlets operate on a broadcasting paradigm, reaching a large audience without particularly targeting individuals. And as in contrast, modern social media platforms, use a narrowcasting strategy, concentrating on folks who have shown prior interest by following the football star on social media (Vergeer & Mulder, 2019). Therefore, football players become brands through their great on-field achievements, substantial social media presence, and massive online followers (Samra & Wos, 2014). Consequently, their social media fame may be a great advertising tool, promoting the marketing of products and services (Vergeer & Mulder, 2019).

2.2. The Model of Athlete's Brand Image

According to the study of Arai et.al (2013), the Model of Athlete's Brand Image was constructed through a review of existing literature, mainly derived from Athlete as a Brand Image and Keller's brand association. In their study, they define Athlete Brand as a "human brand", where in sports it is defined as name, design, symbol, or an aggregate term that is

used by a sports organization to look featuring its brand in the marketplace (Shank, 1999; Arai et.al, 2013). In addition to Keller's brand associations, the dimensions of the athlete's brand image were identified, integrated, and reconstructed (Arai et.al, 2013). The frameworks that were developed by Keller (1993) from its classification of brand associations are product-related attributes –the framework necessary for performing the product function sought by consumers, and the external aspects of the product related to its purchase or its consumption as the nonproduct-related. Arai et.al (2013) regarded athletic performance as the product-related attribute (on-field attribute) when applying the latter brand knowledge conceptual model to the athlete brand context because athletes' role is to perform athletic performances and develop their brand image depending on their persistent athletic success. As for the nonproduct-related attribute, Arai et.al (2013) adapted the characteristics that are not directly related to on-field athletic performance: Attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. Hence, The Model of Athlete's Brand Image (MABI) was developed into three dimensions.

The first dimension was defined based on the specific athlete's performance regarding their athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry. The second dimension was defined by the athlete's physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness. And the third one was defined by the athlete's off-field marketable features such as their life stories, role model-ness, relationship effort with fans, spectators, sponsors and media (Arai et al., 2013: 101-102).

2.2.1. Athletic Performance

Athletic performance is regarded from their expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry. From the viewpoint of expertise, Arai et.al (2013) classified the athletes' individual achievements and their capabilities on their game. The study by Gladen et.al (1998) and Richelieu and Pons (2006) found that achievements play a crucial role in creating and maintaining brand image and brand equity over time. As for in relation to use athlete as a brand image for endorsement, expertise is discovered as important dimensions of endorser source credibility (Hovland et.al, 1953; Arai et.al, 2013). Thus, the aforementioned studies helped Arai et.al (2013) to develop expertise variable.

Competition style is referred as the athlete's performance characteristics. Fans' interactions with their favorite players are based on how they conduct on the field, and this might affect the fans' loyalty (Trail et al., 2003). According to the authors, identification with

the team or player is one of the major variables that affect fan loyalty. For instance, a player's actions on the field may cause a fan to identify with him or her, which may develop support (Trail et al., 2003).

Other than that, sportsmanship was defined by the athlete's virtuous behavior that people have determined is appropriate, such as fair play, respect for the game, and integrity. Sportsmanship may serve as a figurative gesture for the athlete brand, which is critical when attempting to gain consumer trust (Arai et al., 2013). While in the rivalry dimension, the developed theory referred it to the athlete's relationship with other athlete in a competitive way. Arai et.al (2013) suggested that individual athlete brands benefit from rivalry as well, because rivalry allows fans to develop a clear perception of what their identity is.

2.2.2. Attractive Appearance

Athlete's traits from physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness were referred to the attractive appearance framework from the MABI. Attractiveness can be defined as any ambiguous, unique, and non-descriptive characteristics of an athlete that the general public can identify. By referring to the study from Ohanian (1991) in perceived image of celebrity, consumers stimulate positive stereotypes about attractive people, as research has shown that physically attractive communicators are more successful than unattractive communicators in shaping perceptions. The term "perceived image of celebrity" refers to the overall impression and perception that consumers have of a celebrity who is used as a spokesperson in advertising campaigns (Ohanian, 1991). Therefore, Arai et.al (2013) included athlete's physical attractiveness as a variable in the framework.

A symbol in an athlete's trait is the attractive personal style, fashion sense, or any outwardly distinctive features (Arai et.al, 2013). Athletes frequently use their personal style to express their personality or character. Body fitness makes a reference to an athlete's physical fitness in the given sport. These people are athletes rather than fashion models, their attractiveness can be measured in terms of their physical fitness (Arai et.al, 2013).

2.2.3. Marketable Lifestyle

The term "marketable lifestyle dimension" refers to the off-field attributes and characteristics of an athlete that can be marketed and used to communicate their personal

worth and personality. The MABI recognized this element based on the athlete's life story, perceived role model, and relationship effort.

A lifestyle is a compelling off-field life story about an athlete that may include a message that represents the individual's values (Arai et.al, 2013). The authors believed that life story of an athlete can relate to their fans, and in terms of athlete branding, it could be crucial with consumers' association. The role model variable is defined as the athlete's ethical behavior that society has determined is worth emulating. As a mean that these behaviors may be related to the athlete's active role and involvement to society, adherence to societal norms, and virtuous behavior (Arai et.al, 2013).

The final element of marketable lifestyle dimension, relationship effort, is determined by the relationship of the athletes and their fans. This variable is adapted based on Thomson (2006) study, where the author suggested if fans and athletes can interact in a platform, it would help to develop fan attachment.

2.3. The Influence of Social Media Culture on Football Players

Sports athletes have become major personalities in modern media culture, strongly embedded in popular culture. Their persistent presence in the attention is driven by technological improvements and the extensive usage of social media. This extensive coverage often highlights their lifestyles and off-field activities, as they are widely regarded as symbols of achievement, wealth, and athleticism. As argued by Sanderson (2013), athletes make use of social media channels to develop and shape their identities. Athletes may use social media strategically to develop a personal brand, promote their beliefs and interests, and connect with fans and followers. Other than that, athletes can use social media for direct communication and fan engagement, as it could encourage fan commitment, exposure, and, eventually, the athlete's personal brand and marketability (Sanderson, 2013).

While athletes use social media to define their identities and communicate with fans, the media's representation of football clubs and players has a significant influence on football fans' opinions and judgements. Cleland's (2011) study illustrates the complex interaction between football players and media culture. The findings highlight the media's significant effect on how football fans view their favorite teams and players. The media's presentation of events and narratives has a huge influence on viewers' opinions and

judgements. The purpose of this research is to look into the intricacies of this interaction, namely how media portrayals impact fan viewpoints and contribute to the construction of attitudes about football players. Therefore, this study can shed light on the complicated interplay between media culture, football, and its enthusiastic audience by getting a better understanding of these processes.

3. Method (Max. 1200)

3.1. Data Collection

In this study, the researcher tests the model framework from Arai et.al (2013) and its influence on football fans' perceptions by doing a survey to retrieve a primary data source. The questionnaire is be developed based on The Model of Athlete's Brand Image theory. A questionnaire is the most common method of gathering primary data in a quantitative study as it allows for the collection of quantitative data in a systematic format, ensuring that the data is internally consistent and coherent for analysis (Roopa & Rani, 2012).

3.1.1. Sampling Method

To conduct the research, criterion sampling is the first step, which involves identifying cases that fulfill a specific predetermined relevance criteria. This process is commonly referred to as criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Hence, the criteria are as follows: a) male/female football athlete's followers and b) respondents aged 18-37 years old.

In Addition, the sampling method that is used to represent the population is non-probability sampling with a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling method is suitable when the targeted population is easily accessible (Etikan, 2016). To ensure sufficient representation in data analysis, the study aims to gather data from a minimum of 150 to 250 respondents, as recommended by Kline (1994).

3.1.2. Sample Description

A total of 242 respondents were recorded. After initial descriptive analysis was conducted, *N* = 240 were caried to further analysis. In the final sample the percentage of male is 74.6% (N = 179) and the female share is 24.2% (N = 58). The remaining 1.2% (N = 3) indicated “prefer not to say”. Most participants were in the age group of 33 - 37 years old accounting for 34.2%, while the least were in the age group of 28 - 32 years old accounting for 16.1%

from the total sample population. Additionally, most respondents answered that they have been following their favorite athlete for more than 10 years (N = 99, SD = .856).

3.1.3. Athletes' Selection Method

In this research, the respondents have to mention one of their favorite football athletes that they follow the most. This method is chosen as the researcher wants to have the respondents to have a free-thought to share their favorite football athletes, as football athletes are determined by their public persona. A public persona that already has their own symbolic meaning built in their name, visage, or other marketable characteristics is what is meant by an athletic brand (Arai et.al, 2013). Therefore, the respondents can think about the football athlete they follow the most freely.

3.1.4. Measurement

This study uses a Likert-scale survey questionnaire to measure attitudes, as it is a commonly used method to examine attitudes and opinions (Joshi et al., 2015). This method measures a person's degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement. However, Joshi et al. (2015) noted the challenge of accurately estimating such attitudes, emotions, and behavior in a valid and reliable manner. This study uses a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 5 = Somewhat Agree; 6 = Agree; 7 = Strongly Agree) to reduce ambiguity in response selection, as noted by Joshi et al. (2015). The use of a 7-point scale increases the likelihood of obtaining a more accurate representation of respondents' attitudes.

3.1.5. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire used in this study was designed in accordance with the MABI theory given by Arai et al. (2013). The questions included a wide range of dimensions and sub-dimensions generated from the MABI framework's variables. Furthermore, the author added questions for social media usage by adapting to the study from Green (2016) and Mudrik et.al (2016) study. Additionally, the respondents' demographic information was used as a control variable. Control variables are important in statistical modeling because they are kept constant or included to isolate the particular influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Lenz & Sahn, 2020). The control variables in this study were the respondents' age, gender, and period of following the athlete, which were gathered at the

start of the questionnaire. The study's design will be shown in the following table.

Table 1. Respondent's Background

Question	**Answers**
Gender	Male
	Female
	Prefer not to say
Age	18 - 22
	23 - 27
	28 - 32
	33 - 37
Please state one football athlete that you follow the most	Please state here
Years of following the athlete	0 - 4
	5 - 9
	≥ 10

Table 2. Questionnaire Design

Dimension	**Sub-dimension**	**Items**	
Athletic Performance (AP)	Athlete Expertise	AE1	The athlete is a dominating player in his/her sport
		AE2	The athlete seems very knowledgeable in his/her sport
		AE3	The athlete has prominent athletic skills in his/her sport
	Competition Style	CS1	The athlete’s competition style is distinctive from other players
		CS2	The athlete’s competition style is exciting to watch
		CS3	The athlete’s competition style is charismatic
	Sportsmanship	SS1	The athlete shows sportsmanship in competition
		SS2	The athlete shows respect for his/her opponents and other players
		SS3	The athlete shows fair play

	Rivalry	RV1	The rivalry match of this athlete is exciting
		RV2	The athlete does well against his/her major rival
		RV3	The rivalry match of this athlete is dramatic
Attractive Appearance (AA)	Physical Attractiveness	PA1	The athlete is physically attractive
		PA2	The athlete is beautiful looking
		PA3	The athlete stimulates body goals
	Symbol	SB1	The athlete's personal fashion is attractive
		SB2	The athlete is stylish
		SB3	The athlete's fashion is trendy
	Body Fitness	BF1	The athlete is in good shape
		BF2	The athlete's body fits to the sport
		BF3	The athlete's body is well conditioned
Marketable Lifestyle (ML)	Life Story	LS1	The athlete has dramatic episodes in his/her life
		LS2	The athlete has a dramatic personal life
		LS3	The athlete's private lifestyle is newsy
	Role Model	RM1	The athlete is socially responsible
		RM2	The athlete is good role model for others
		RM3	The athlete is a good leader in our community
	Relationship Effort	RE1	The athlete shows appreciation for fans and spectators
		RE2	The athlete is responsive to fans
		RE3	The athlete tries to interact with fans
Social Media Usage (SMU)		SMU1	Social media has increased my interest in following football matches and athletes
		SMU2	I often use social media to stay updated on my favorite football athlete's news and updates
		SMU3	I often react to or comment on my favorite athlete-related posts or discussions on social media
		SMU4	I follow or engage with my favorite football athletes or teams on social media
The Model of Athlete's Brand Image (MABI)		MABI1	Overall, I tend to look forward to my favorite athlete's performance
		MABI2	Overall, I tend to look forward to my favorite athlete's appearance
		MABI3	Overall, I tend to look forward to my favorite's athlete lifestyle

Fans Perception (FP)	Fans Attitude Toward Athlete's Brand Image	FA1	I am a real fan of my favorite athlete
		FA2	I often look at my favorite athlete's personality
		FA3	I try to follow my favorite athlete's positive persona
		FA4	Sometimes, I purchase the products that my favorite athlete use
		FA5	Overall, the brand image that my favorite athlete has influence my perception to them
		FA6	I believe that social media has a significant impact on the development of football athlete's branding image

The goal of the research questionnaire in this study was to thoroughly investigate and evaluate all of the variables and sub-variables mentioned in Arai et al. (2013)'s MABI (Model Athlete Branding Image) hypothesis. The questionnaire was thoughtfully developed to include a wide variety of factors generated from the MABI framework, allowing for a thorough examination of the interactions and influences from the tested variables. In addition to the questionnaire, the study includes questions about social media usage, developing on earlier research by Green (2016) and Mudrik et al. (2016). This inclusion aims to capture the relevance of social media related to the research subject and give insights into the possible influence of online platforms on football players' perception as brand images.

3.1.6. Pretesting The Questionnaire

To finalize the questionnaire, a pretest from the designed questionnaire was conducted and distributed to people that meet the research's criteria. The intentions to conduct this pretest are to observe whether the respondents understand the constructed questions, to identify issues related to questionnaire desigan, such as unclear or confusing questions, inappropriate response categories, or biased wording. Pretesting assists in identifying sources of statistical error in the questionnaire survey that can be corrected prior to the start of survey data collection, ensuring quality (Collins, 2003). Moreover, Reynolds et.al (1993) argue that pre-testing is a crucial step in questionnaire design to ensure that the final questionnaire is reliable and valid.

3.2. Data Analysis

In this research, the researcher uses a confirmatory data analysis. According to Meloun and Militký (2011), for a thorough comprehension of the data, the authors discovered that confirmatory analysis serves in testing hypotheses and drawing conclusions about the population. Afterwards, this study uses a multiple regression analysis method to answer the research question by constructing hypotheses.

3.2.1. Factor and Reliability Analysis

This research conducts a factor and reliability analysis. Factor analysis was used to identify the factors underlying the variables of a questionnaire. The test considered Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and proceed to reliability analysis.

The KMO test is a metric designed to assess the competency of factor analysis data. Previous studies argued that KMO value varies from 0 to 1, with an average value between 0.5 and 0.6 is acceptable for sample sizes between 100 and 200 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; Shrestha, 2021). As for the reliability analysis, the study by Streiner and Norman (1995) stressed that a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.6 or higher is considered the minimum acceptable level for determining the reliability of variables in a reliability analysis.

3.2.2. Validity Analysis

Arai et al. (2013) used validity analysis to test the modified and overall structural model, based on Salkind (2012). There are two types of validity testing: convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity analysis deals with data accuracy, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be at least ≥0.5 for strong convergent validity, according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). Standardized loading is also considered in testing validity. Discriminant validity assures that a construct differs from other components to the highest extent possible, and the researcher will look at the square-root of AVE in discriminant validity analysis. The researcher will compare each AVE square root with inter-construct correlation estimates based on Fornell and Larcker (1981)’s criterion analysis, where each AVE square root must be higher than its corresponding rows and columns.

3.2.3. Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between a dependent variable and multiple independent variables and to test the hypotheses. Uyanık and Güler (2013) showed that this analysis can effectively predict dependent variables and assess the

contribution of each independent variable to the prediction. The analysis utilized Pearson's r correlation test and r^2 to measure the correlation strength and explain the variation in dependent variables respectively (Levine et al., 2016; Schober et al., 2018). The study from Chin (1998) discussed a classification of r^2 test, where adjusted r^2 higher than 0.19 considered as low, higher than 0.33 considered as moderate and higher than 0.67 considered as strong. While to test the hypotheses, the author conducted a significant testing, if the alpha reached ≤.05, the test is significant, and the hypothesis is accepted. Otherwise, it is rejected.

3.2.4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

While multiple regression analysis examined the relationship between the predictors and the criterium, the intention to use hierarchical analysis was to explore the impact and contribution of an additional variable to the existing Model Athlete Branding Image (MABI) variable. Independent variables are added into the model of regression in a preset sequence in hierarchical regression analysis, with an emphasis on understanding the additional variation explained by each individual independent variable (de Jong, 1999). A further reason to do a hierarchical regression analysis is that the independent variables in this research could be connected. Thus, in this research, the incremental contribution and importance of introducing additional factors, particularly Social Media Usage (SMU), to the current Model Athlete Branding Image (MABI) variable were investigated using hierarchical regression analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to see if include SMU variable improves the prediction and comprehension of the whole model.

3.3. Hypothesis Development

3.3.1. Hypothesis 1

H0: Athletic Performance of Football Players has no influence on Athlete Brand Image

H1: Athletic Performance of Football Players has a significant influence on Athlete Brand Image

3.3.2. Hypothesis 2

H0: Attractive Appearance of Football Players has no influence on Athlete Brand Image

H1: Attractive Appearance of Football Players has a significant influence on Athlete Brand Image

3.3.3. Hypothesis 3

H0: Marketable Lifestyle of Football Players has no influence on Athlete Brand Image

H1: Marketable Lifestyle of Football Players has a significant influence on Athlete Brand Image

3.3.4. Hypothesis 4

H0: Overall, Athlete Brand Image of Football Players has no influence in shaping fans' perception

H1: Overall, Athlete Brand Image of Football Players has a significant influence in shaping fans' perception

3.3.5. Hypothesis 5

H0: Adding Social Media Usage to Athlete Brand Image of Football Players for Fans' Perception did not improve the predictive value of the model

H1: Adding Social Media Usage to Athlete Brand Image of Football Players for Fans' Perception improves the predictive value of the model

3.4. Operationalization

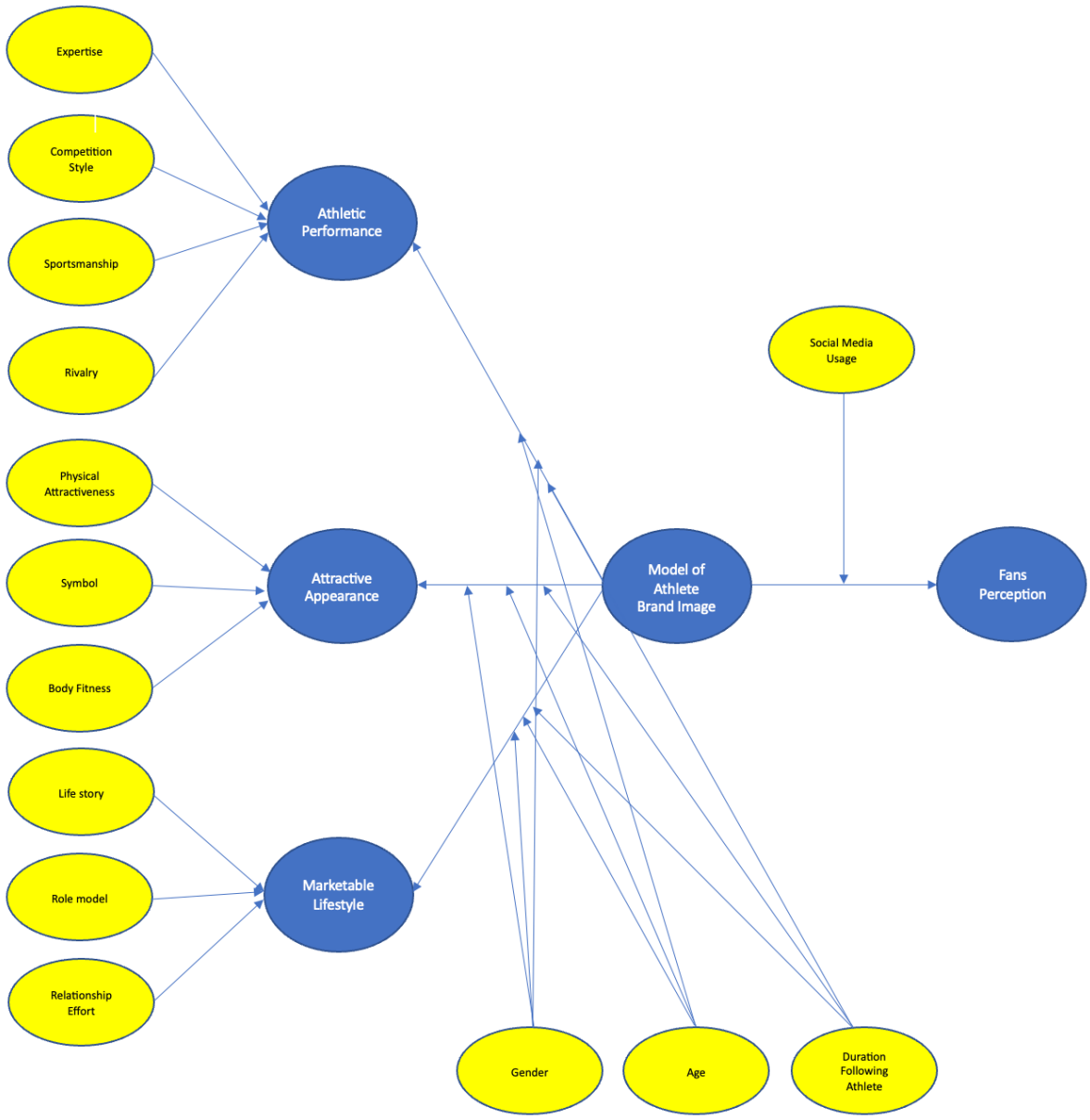

Figure 1. Research Framework

A multiple regression analysis was used in this study to analyze the relationship between the independent factors (Athletic Performance, Attractive Appearance, Marketable Lifestyle) and the dependent variable (Model Athlete Branding Image). The purpose of the study was to assess how much the generated independent factors influenced the dependent variable. Regression analysis was also used to investigate the significance of the association between the Model Athlete Branding Image variable and the Fans Perception variable.

Furthermore, the impact of Social Media Usage (SMU) was examined as a determining factor. To see if the introduction of the SMU variable improved the model, a

hierarchical regression analysis was performed, integrating the SMU variable with the Model Athlete Branding Image variable.

Item scales were utilized to obtain the necessary data for each variable, and the output was derived from the analysis of these scales. To conclude, if all of the hypotheses are accepted, indicating a significant correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable, it can be inferred that the tested independent variables have a meaningful association with the dependent variable.

4. Results

4.1. Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis

Table 3. Factor and Reliability Analysis

Items	Athletic Performance (AP)	Attractive Appearance (AA)	Marketable Lifestyle (ML)	Social Media Usage (SMU)	Model of Athlete's Branding Image (MABI)	Fans Perception (FP)
AE1	.807					
AE2	.799					
AE3	.764					
CS1	.775					
CS2	.85					
CS3	.757					
SS1	.767					
SS2	.832					
SS3	.82					
RV1	.82					
RV2	.847					
RV3	.688					
PA1		.834				
PA2		.806				
PA3		.81				
SB1		.836				
SB2		.871				
SB3		.818				
BF1		.741				
BF2		.782				
BF3		.728				
LS1			.505			
LS2			.448			

LS3			.454			
RM1			.853			
RM2			.821			
RM3			.723			
RE1			.857			
RE2			.855			
RE3			.841			
SMU1				.806		
SMU2				.835		
SMU3				.712		
SMU4				.862		
MABI1					.732	
MABI2					.898	
MABI3					.837	
FA1						.8
FA2						.822
FA3						.829
FA4						.785
FA5						.806
FA6						.615
Eigenvalue	.63213	.64652	.52861	.64918	.68087	.60751
Cronbach's Alpha	.945	.93	.855	.798	.76	.867

On the analysis, the author included the 12 items of variable Athletic Performance (AP) which were Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .916, $\chi 2$ (*N*= 240, 66) = 2442.08, *p* < .000. The resultant model explained 63.21% of the variance in Attractive Performance. As for Attractive Appearance (AA), the author included the 9 items of the variable which were Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .888, $\chi 2$ (*N*= 240, 36) = 1790.733, *p* < .000. The resultant model

explained 64.65% of the variance in Attractive Appearance. For the last variable of MABI, Marketable Lifestyle (ML), the author included the 9 items of the variable which were also Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .845, χ2 (*N*= 240, 36) = 1617.195, *p* < .000. The resultant model explained 52.86% of the variance in Marketable Lifestyle.

In Social Media Usage Variable (SMU), the author included the 4 items which were Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .767, χ2 (*N*= 240, 6) = 345.753, *p* < .001. The test resulted an extraction to only one component. The resultant model explained 64.91% of the variance in Social Media Usage (SMU). In the Model of Athlete's Branding Image variable (MABI), the author included the 3 items which were Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .622, χ2 (*N*= 240, 3) = 213.621, *p* < .001. The test resulted an extraction to only one component. The resultant model explained 68.09% of the variance. And for Fans Perception variable (FP), the author included the 6 items which were Likert-scale based and input into an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .823, χ2 (*N*= 240, 15) = 685.14, *p* < .001. The test resulted an extraction to only one component. The resultant model explained 60.75% of the variance.

For the reliability analysis, from the total of 242 respondents, 240 completed all questions which are included on the analysis, 2 respondents were excluded because the analysis indicated that they were missing. The result of the variable AP is that the *Cronbach's* α is .95 > cutoff value = .60, the AA variable had a result with *Cronbach's* α is .93 > cutoff value = .60, and the variable of ML had a result with *Cronbach's* α is .855 > cutoff value = .60. For variable SMU, the *Cronbach's* α is .80 > cutoff value = .60, MABI variable had a result of *Cronbach's* α is .76 > cutoff value = .60, and the FP variable had a result of *Cronbach's* α .87 > cutoff value = .60. Hence, the reliability for all variables is accepted.

4.2. Multiple Regression Analysis Result

The table below shows the model summary of the conducted multiple regression analysis, indicating *r*, r^2, adjusted r^2, and standard error of the estimate with variable AP, AA, and ML as the predictors.

Table 4. Model Summary

Model	*r*	r^2	Adjusted r^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.684	.468	.461	.79420

Adjusted r^2 indicated the correlation strength and explain the variation in dependent variables. It shows the result of Adjusted r^2 is .461, meaning that the model has a moderate correlation strength. As for r^2 shows how much variance of the Model of Athlete's Branding Image (MABI) variable explained by AP, AA, and ML (predictors), the model explains 46.8% of variance.

Table 5. F-test ANOVA Table

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	130.344	3	43.448	68.882	<.001
Residual	148.229	235	.631		
Total	278.573	238			

On table 5, it tells the model that shows a linear regression test result with the Model of Athlete's Branding Image as the criterium. Predictors were variable AP, AA, and ML. The ANOVA table illustrates that the model is significant, $F\ (3, 235) = 68.88$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .468$.

And on table 6, it shows the coefficient correlation, whether the tested individual variables namely AP, AA, and ML have significant influence on the dependent variable which is the Model of Athlete's Branding Image (criterium). The table shows the test result for the

hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, as the significant testing indicates if the alpha reached ≤.05, the test is significant, and the hypothesis is accepted. Otherwise, it is rejected.

Table 6. Coefficients Table

Model	Unstandardized Coeff. ß	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff. ß	t	Sig.
(constant)	.597	.372		1.605	.110
AthleticPerformance	.178	.070	.104	2.540	.012
AttractiveAppearance	.321	.071	.306	4.512	<.001
MarketableLifestyle	.373	.079	.324	4.732	<.001

4.2.1. Hypothesis 1 Result

From the coefficients table, we can see the standardized coefficient (ß) if the influence from each Independent Variables is positive or negative. A linear regression test was conducted with Athletic Performance (AP), Attractive Appearance (AA), and Marketable Lifestyle (ML) as the predictors. The first hypothesis is to test whether Athletic Performance (AP) of football players has a significant influence on Athlete Brand Image or not. The AP variable was found to have a positive significant influence (ß = .104, p = .012). As a result, H1 is accepted.

4.2.2. Hypothesis 2 Result

The second hypothesis was constructed in order to test the relationship between Attractive Appearance (AA) variable as the predictor and Athlete Brand Image variable as the criterium. The hypothesis is accepted if Attractive Appearance (AA) of Football Players has a significant influence on Athlete Brand Image. The AA variable was found to have a positive significant influence (ß = .31, p = <.001). As a result, H2 is accepted.

4.2.3. Hypothesis 3 Result

For the third hypothesis, it was constructed to test the relationship between Marketable Lifestyle (ML) variable as the predictor and Athlete Brand Image variable as the criterium. The hypothesis is accepted if Marketable Lifestyle (ML) of Football Players has a significant

influence on Athlete Brand Image. The rest result showed that ML variable has a positive significant influence (ß = .32, *p* = <.001). As a result, H3 is accepted.

4.2.4. Hypothesis 4 Result

To test the fourth hypothesis, the author redone the regression analysis test for the variable Model of Athlete's Brand Image as the predictor and Fans Perception as the criterium. The table below shows the model summary of the conducted regression analysis, indicating *r*, *r*2, adjusted *r*2, and standard error of the estimate with variable MABI as the predictors.

Table 7. Model Summary of MABI variable test

Model	*r*	r^2	Adjusted r^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.679	.461	.459	.73695

As a result, it shows that the Adjusted r^2 is .46, meaning that the model has a moderate correlation strength. As for r^2 shows how much variance of Fans Perception (FP) variable explained by MABI (predictors), the model explains 46.1% of variance.

Table 8. F-test ANOVA Table for MABI variable test

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	110.235	1	110.235	202.975	<.001
Residual	128.714	237	.543		
Total	238.949	238			

As the above ANOVA table illustrates, the result shows that the model is significant, $F\ (1, 237) = 202.975$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .46$.

Table 9. Coefficients Table for MABI variable test

Model	Unstandardized Coeff. ß	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff. ß	t	Sig.

(constant)	2.012	.253		7.937	<.001
BrandingImage	.629	.044	.679	14.247	<.001

And on the table above, the coefficient correlation shows the tested individual variable namely MABI of it has a positive or negative significant influence on the dependent variable which is the Fans Perception. The table shows the test result for the hypothesis 4, if the significant testing indicates if the alpha reached ≤.05, the test is significant, and the hypothesis is accepted. Otherwise, it is rejected. As a result, The MABI variable was found to have a positive significant influence (ß = .68, p = <.001). Therefore, H4 is accepted.

4.3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Result

In this test, the researcher conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to test whether the relationship between variable MABI and FP can be improved if the variable of Social Media Usage (SMU) is added. Hierarchical regression tells how much better the model if MABI and SMU are used as independent variables. Thus, the table below shows the model summary of the conducted hierarchical regression analysis, indicating r, r^2, adjusted r^2, r^2change, adjusted r^2 and the estimate F-value change with variable MABI and SMU as the predictors.

Table 10. Model Summary of Hierarchical Regression Test

Model	r	r^2	Adjusted r^2	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics			
					r^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.679	.461	.459	.73695	.461	202.975	1	237	<.001
2	.753	.567	.563	.66238	.105	57.368	1	236	<.001

From the table above, the first model illustrates the explained variance if MABI is used as single independent variable for FP variable. The first model reached significant r^2 = .46, F (1, 237) = 202.975, p = <.001. The second model gives the explained variance if variable MABI and SMU are used as the predictors. It shows that there was a slight change from the first model with Δr^2 = .11, F (1, 236) = 57.368, p = <.001. And as for the r^2, it shows how much variance of Fans Perception (FP) variable explained by MABI and SMU

(predictors), the second model explains 56.7% of variance, which can be argued that the second model explains better than the first model.

Table 11. F-test ANOVA table for Hierarchical Regression Test

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	110.235	1	110.235	202.975	<.001
	Residual	128.714	237	.543		
	Total	238.949	238			
2	Regression	135.405	2	67.703	154.309	<.001
	Residual	103.544	236	.439		
	Total	238.949	238			

As for the F-test ANOVA table checks if the model is significant or not, the results show that the second model reach significant with p = <.001. Although, it is arguable whether the second model is improved than the first model by looking at the F-value whereas the first model showed $F\ (1, 237)$ = 202.975, whilst the second model showed $F\ (2, 236)$ = 154.309.

Table 12. Coefficients Table for Hierarchical Regression Test

Model		Unstandardized Coeff. ß	Std. Error	Standardized Coeff. ß	t	Sig.
1	(constant)	2.012	.253		7.937	<.001
	BrandingImage	.629	.044	.679	14.247	<.001
2	(constant)	1.175	.253		4.642	<.001
	BrandingImage	.413	.049	.446	8.445	<.001
	SocialMedia	.361	.048	.400	7.574	<.001

And from the table above, the coefficients table shows the hierarchical regression test results that was conducted with fans perception (FP) as criterion. The Model of Athlete Branding Image (MABI) variable was included in the first model and Social Media Usage

(SMU) was added in the second model. When MABI (β = .68, p = <.001) was used as single predictor, the model reached significance, r^2 = .46, F (1, 237) = 202.975, p = <.001. Additionally, by adding SMU (β = .4, p < .001), it was arguably improved the predictive value of the model with Δr^2 = .11, F (1, 236) = 57.368, p = <.001. Thus, H5 is accepted.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Relationship Between Athletic Performance and Athlete Branding Image

The first hypothesis under examination was whether football players' athletic performance has a significant impact on their athlete brand image. The variable of athletic performance was described from the football athletes' expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry as the sub-variables, where each variable carried 3 items. The tested variable was adapted from Arai et.al (2013) study, where the author argued that athletic performance is one of the important variables to develop the Model of Athlete Branding Image. This research findings correspond this theory, suggesting that athletic performance has a favorable and significant effect on athlete brand image. The athletic performance variable's coefficient (ß) was determined to be 0.104, with a p-value of 0.012 indicating a statistically significant association. As a result of these findings, H1 is accepted.

Previous research by Gladen et.al (1998) and Richelieu and Pons (2006) emphasized the significance of achievements in developing and maintaining brand image and equity over time. According to these research, athletes' performances are crucial aspects that affect the image of their personal brand. The positive association between athletic performance and athlete brand image is consistent with earlier findings, demonstrating that strong performances add to football players' overall brand image. Arai et al. (2013) did a study to investigate the correlation between athletes' performance and their personal branding image. The researchers indicated that athletes' performances are critical characteristics of endorser source credibility, emphasizing the importance of athletic accomplishments in molding athletes' brand image. Therefore, the findings support the notion that athletic performance has a significant impact on the perception of an athlete's brand.

5.2. The Relationship Between Attractive Appearance and Athlete Branding Image

The second hypothesis examined the significant effect of football players' attractive appears on their athlete brand image. The hypothesis indicates that the hypothesis will be accepted if the Attractive Appearance (AA) variable has a substantial effect on athlete brand image. The AA variable had a positive and significant impact on the analysis, with a coefficient (ß) of 0.31 and a p-value less than 0.001. As a result of these findings, H2 is approved.

Ohanian (1991) conducted research on the perceived image of celebrities, which provided more support for the impact of attractive appearance on brand image. The study found that the general public had favorable opinions about attractive people. It has been demonstrated that attractive physically communicators shape perceptions more successfully than physically unappealing communicators. In Mahmoudian et.al (2020), the author discussed the strong relation of attractive appearance on athlete's branding image of Arai et.al (2013). The findings in Mahmoudian et.al (2020) also shed light on the significance of attractive appearance in evaluating the brand image association of an athlete. In addition to the aspect of symbol in attractive appearance, it goes beyond the physical attractiveness as it encompasses athlete's distinction, allowing the distinguish between other athletes (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Additionally, in Lau et.al (2008) argumentation, athletes that display outstanding physical fitness are generally admired by fans, because it demonstrates their devotion, talent, and athleticism. This component contributes to athletes' overall brand image by increasing their attractiveness.

These findings support the assumption that overall, a football athlete's attractive appearance helps to establish a positive brand image. Conclusively, the findings of this study give evidence to support the considerable association between football players' attractive looks and their athlete brand image. The ideal impact of attractive appearance is consistent with prior studies highlighting the relevance of physical attractiveness and its impact on shaping viewer views. Therefore, the result shows the importance of considering physical appearance as a component in controlling and growing football players' brand image by demonstrating the association between attractive appearance and athlete brand image.

5.3. The Relationship Between Marketable Lifestyle and Athlete Branding Image

The third hypothesis aims to examine the significant influence of the marketable lifestyle of football players on their athlete brand image. The sub-variable of athlete's life story, role-modelness, and the athlete's relationship effort to the fans explained the marketable lifestyle variable. The analysis revealed a positive and significant influence of the marketable lifestyle variable, with a coefficient (ß) of 0.32 and a p-value of less than 0.001. Therefore, based on these results, H3 is accepted.

According to Arai et al. (2013), an athlete's lifestyle is seen to have a relevance aspect with their supporters. The marketable lifestyle may be critical in building consumers

connections and views of the athlete in terms of athlete branding. Consumers frequently identify with athletes not just based on their on-field results, but also on their off-field lifestyle choices and characteristics. The athlete's life story, which includes engaging narratives that may transmit messages expressing their own beliefs, is one aspect of the marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2013). These stories not only attract fans, but also deliver insights into an athlete's journey, challenges, and accomplishments. Athletes may develop emotional ties with fans by sharing fascinating stories about themselves. As for the role model aspect of the marketable lifestyle, it emphasizes the actions of athletes as an example worth portraying in society (Arai et al., 2013). Athletes that constantly demonstrate these attributes become excellent role models, inspiring their followers to emulate them and creating adoration and respect. Furthermore, the relationship effort dimension stresses the formation of strong relationships between athletes and fans or the broader public (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012). Athletes can actively participate in social and cultural off-field events, as well as media outreach and interaction with fans via various platforms. As a result, athletes may establish a committed and supportive fan base by engaging in developing relationships, which increases their brand image and equity.

Therefore, by reflecting to these findings, in overall it supported the relationship between the athlete's marketable lifestyle and the athlete's brand image corresponds with the analysis's results.

5.4. The Relationship Between the Model of Athlete Branding Image, Social Media Usage, and Fans Perception

The fourth hypothesis aims to examine the significant influence of the overall athlete brand image of football players on shaping fans' perception. The analysis revealed a positive and significant influence of the MABI variable, with a coefficient (ß) of 0.68 and a p-value of less than 0.001. Therefore, based on these results, H4 is accepted. Additionally, the fifth hypothesis explores whether adding the variable of social media usage (SMU) to the athlete brand image of football players for fans' perception improves the predictive value of the model. The results indicated that by including SMU ($\beta = 0.4$, $p < 0.001$), the predictive value of the model was improved, with an increase in R-squared of 0.11 and a significant F-value, F (1, 236) = 57.368, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, H5 is accepted.

These outcomes align with the findings of Cleland (2011), who indicated the complex relationship between football players and media culture. The analysis conducted in this research shows that the model of athlete branding image and social media usage have a significant influence in influencing football fans' perceptions. The addition of social media usage to the model enhances its predictive value, demonstrating that fans' perceptions are influenced not only by the overall brand image but also by football players' occurrence and involvement on social media platforms.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the purpose of this study was to investigate football fans' perceptions of football players as brand images and to grasp the relationship between athletes and their followers as consumers in today's media culture. The research question focused on "to what extent does the branding image of football athletes impact the football fans perception in today's media culture?" As a guide, the literature of Football Players, the Model of Athlete's Branding Image, and the influence of social media culture on football players were used for the foundation of this research. Therefore, the hypotheses constructed on this research were based on the theories used. The results of the hypothesis analysis show that all of the hypotheses are accepted, offering useful insights into the role of football players as brand icons and the effect of the model of athlete branding image and social media usage on fans' perceptions.

Football players are often regarded as cultural icons in today's media. They embody multiple opinions and viewpoints, captivating their followers' attention and passion. Athletes communicate a sense of belonging and contribute to the expression and promotion of self-identity through their appearances, personal style, and on-field performances. These characteristics, as stated by Arai et al. (2013), show the important role that football players have in society.

The examination of the hypotheses presented in this study generated noteworthy results. First, the study proved that football players' athletic performance had a significant influence on their athlete brand image. This emphasizes the significance of on-field accomplishments in influencing the impression of an athlete's brand. Second, the study found that football players' attractive appearance has a significant effect on their athlete brand image. The entire image that supporters identify with the athlete's personal brand is influenced by physical appeal, symbolism, and body fitness. Furthermore, the study discovered that football players' marketable lifestyles play a significant role in building their athlete brand image. Off-field features and attributes that may be encouraged add to fans' perceptions of the athlete. Additionally, the study found that included social media usage improves the model's predictive value, implying that athletes' activity on social media platforms impacts fans' perceptions.

Multiple regression analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were the methods used in order to test the hypotheses, which then used to answer the research question itself. As the aim of this research is to test whether the Model of Athlete Branding Image is correlated with fans perception or not, and whether social media usage plays a role in shaping football fans perception towards the players' branding image, multiple regression and hierarchical regression analysis were the appropriate methods due to the intention to examine the relationship between a dependent variable and multiple independent variables, as well as to explore the impact and contribution of an additional variable to the tested dependent variable. Hence, these methods were helpful for the purpose of this research.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

The current study, however, includes several limitations. The first limitation is related to potential additional variables or factors that can affect fans perception towards athlete's branding image. In Shakina et.al (2020) study, the author examined the factor that can affect the attention to football teams and star players, which is fans' emotions. Shakina et.al (2020) acknowledge that football itself is an industry driven by emotions of what fans can feel to the team that they supported, as it leads to the effect of matches attendance. This variable can also be exposed to this research's model, which it examines fans' emotions toward branding image. Whilst Foroughi et.al (2016) stressed the element of positive and negative emotions of football players which correlated with player's performance. This can also be tested, if the players' internal emotions which affect the athletic performance can lead to the correlation between athlete's branding image and fans perceptions.

As for future research, this model can be enhanced by using additional control variables as mentioned. It can address the limitations of this research as mentioned in Shakina et.al (2020) study, one potential approach is to test the effect of fans' emotions. Emotions have a big influence on fans' attention and general involvement with clubs and star players in the football industry. By adding fans' emotions, it might give valuable insights into how emotions influence fan perceptions of athlete branding image. And building on this, the future research could explore if players' emotions, such as their degree of confidence, motivation, or emotional state, influence their athletic performance, which in turn influences fans' perceptions of their brand image. This might lead to a better

understanding of the mechanisms involving players' emotions, performance, and fan perceptions.

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