

A Work Project presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in
Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

ARE ATHLETES A MORE EFFECTIVE BRAND-BUILDING MEDIUM THAN
TRADITIONAL INFLUENCERS? A COMPARATIVE STUDY

MARIA NEVES FILIPE

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Pedro Brinca

22-01-2024

Abstract

Are athletes a more effective brand-building medium than traditional influencers? A comparative study is a work project that measures and explores the benefits of using both athletes and traditional influencers as brand endorsers, conducted during an internship at the company B-Engaged.

Employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, along with conceptual frameworks derived from existing literature, this study seeks to evaluate the distinctive impact each segment has on various brands. By leveraging insights gained from both numerical data and in-depth qualitative analysis, the project aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of athletes and traditional influencers in shaping brand perception.

Keywords: athlete endorsement, influencer marketing, brand-building, brand-ambassadors, consumer perception

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Professor Pedro Brinca for all the guidance and support, as well as to all B-Engaged team members, especially my internship coordinator and Brand & Communications Director Jordan Foster and Senior Marketing Executive Harvey Lewis for the opportunity and faultless availability to provide the best conditions possible for the success of this project.

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of contemporary marketing, the emergence of influences on brand perception has undergone a transformative shift. Brands are allocating substantial budgets to influencer marketing as they understand the significant benefits that arise from it. According to *The State of Marketing 2023* (HubSpot, 2023), most marketers allocate 30 per cent to 50 per cent of their budget to content for social media. In a recent study by Goldman Sachs (2023), influencer marketing is worth \$250 billion and by 2027 could reach \$480 billion.

As per the latest report by Statista (2023), the total number of social media users worldwide has reached 4.9 billion, and 87% of firms have engaged in influencer marketing (Mintel, 2022), supporting the idea that influencer marketing has become the most relevant form of promoting brands in today's world.

As marketers understand the importance of having personalities promoting their brand on social media, they are faced with a high level of competition to grab consumers' brand attention, interest, preference and engagement (Udo & Nwulu, 2015). However, the struggle arises when deciding which personality to use for campaigns.

It's interesting to note how the definition of celebrity has evolved with the rise of social media. According to Santos, Barros and Azevedo (2019), a celebrity is someone who is widely recognized and possesses certain qualities such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, credibility, likability, and similarity to the public. This has traditionally included, among other, sports heroes. However, with the advent of social media, a new category of celebrities has emerged - social media influencers. These individuals have gained public recognition through their online presence and have become powerful influencers in their own right. Glucksman (2017) highlights the significance of this trend and how it has impacted the marketing industry.

According to a recent report by Statista (2021), finding the right influencers is a major challenge for 58% of businesses in Europe when it comes to influencer marketing. On the other hand, 85% of businesses partner with influencers in order to raise brand awareness (Statista, 2021), making it the leading goal of influencer marketing. These findings align with the challenges faced during my internship, highlighting the importance of carefully selecting influencers who align with a brand's values and target audience in order to achieve successful results.

Belonging to this industry, during my time at B-Engaged, we often debated whether to use athletes or traditional influencers in marketing initiatives. Being a sports marketing agency, conventional expectations would define a preference for capitalising on athletes within our talent roster for brand deals. However, due to the expansive reach and diverse scope of B-Engaged's business portfolio, a pragmatic approach was needed when considering various influencer archetypes tailored to specific activations and collaborations with brands. The central challenge revolved around understanding the optimal circumstances where the inclusion of athletes or traditional influencers would yield maximal benefits for different brand deals. Partnering this with the infrequency of campaigns, budget restrictions and traditional organisational views on marketing, ensuring this conversation is analysed at length is imperative to the success of athlete and influencer activations.

A comparative analysis must be included between athletes and traditional influencers as brand ambassadors in literature and industry practices. Marketers understand the effectiveness of using these individuals to promote their brand; however, they need help understanding which pathway they should pursue. Even if the academic exploration of this topic encounters the challenge of limited access to influencers' cost data, this research embarks on the examination of the effectiveness of athletes and traditional influencers in brand-building.

The focus on “athletes” in this dissertation will specifically address football players, encompassing those within B-Engaged’s talent roster and comparable figures. The geographical scope of this investigation is concentrated on the UK and Europe, emphasising a contextualised analysis of this region’s dynamic marketing landscape. This narrowing ensures a targeted examination of the unique factors influencing the effectiveness of football players as brand ambassadors in these markets. Henceforth, in all instances wherein the term “athletes” is articulated within this dissertation, it refers to football players with the above characteristics. This targeting is explained by the nature of the clients at B-Engaged – football players. This study holds paramount significance within the realm of marketing research, bridging a crucial gap in existing knowledge. No relevant studies assemble a direct comparison between football players and traditional influencers. As relevant brands such as Gucci, Dior and Louis Vuitton are shifting to working with the first group as brand ambassadors (SportsUnited, 2023), it is crucial to analyse and study if brands should take this example and invest in the segment.

2. Literature review

This segment delves into an examination of relevant literature, illustrating the alignment of the current study with the existing scholarly outlook. Since this study aims to compare the effectiveness of athletes and traditional influencers as brand ambassadors, it is essential to analyze each group separately to identify their unique characteristics. This section also includes what should be considered for effective brand-building, navigating through topics such as engagement, mediums and areas of promotion. A succinct overview of the present study concludes the section and explains frameworks guiding the methodology and discussion.

Over the years, brands have increasingly adopted celebrity endorsement, utilizing professional athletes as key figures in their marketing strategies. Studies have shown that this approach is prevalent in a significant proportion of advertisements across various regions, with

approximately 25% in the US, around 65% in Asia (Sharma et al., 2021), and 25% in European countries (Gomez et al., 2021).

Top athletes have been regarded as popular cultural products (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008) who can also be considered brands (Thomson, 2006) by establishing their “own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (Arai et al., 2014). The present literature shows that athletes (O’Riley & Braedley, 2008; Parmentier et al., 2013) have been acknowledged for their marketability, as well as they are viewed as products (Kotler & Levi, 1969; Hirschman, 1987; Gilchrist, 2005).

As sports celebrities already have a respected reputation in their specific field in the world of sports (Shouman, 2020), brands are targeting new, wider and fanatic audiences by using athletes as brand endorsers.

Moreover, credibility is intertwined with expertise and trustworthiness within the sporting context. Expertise, encompassing knowledge, skills, and trustworthiness, are crucial aspects linked to the effectiveness of athlete endorsements (Shank, 1999). This credibility extends beyond the confines of sporting scope, influencing areas such as fashion, lifestyle and others – which we will further analyse in this study.

A Rising Ballers Study (2023) reveals that authenticity is also essential in connecting fans and athletes on social media platforms. Premier League footballers like Jack Grealish have transcended the sports realm, become admirable personalities and attracted collaborations with esteemed brands like Gucci and Bose (Sponsor United, 2023). The phenomenon of Jack Grealish, a Manchester City player, is worth an entire study. Among fans, there is considerable appreciation regarding his humour, relatability and honesty about enjoying his time off-pitch. Due to his profile and based on the same Rising Ballers (2023) study that stated 83% of football consumers believe authenticity is essential when following a football player on social media, brands are shifting their mindset and starting to analyse football players’ large and fanatic

audiences. The study (Rising Ballers, 2023) further highlights that fans follow football players for on-pitch performance and off-pitch content regarding their personal lives. As 92% of football fans believe football players should post content non-related to sports, which includes branded content, brands started to strategically capitalise on athletes, such as the partnership between Burberry and Son Heung-min, a Tottenham Hotspur FC player, to explore and capitalise on markets in both the UK and Southeast Asia. Keen to build on its reputation as an impactful and relevant brand, Burberry connected with the player to consolidate its position in these markets (SoccerBible, 2023). Like many others, the brand saw the opportunity to use an audience of 13M followers on Instagram, combined with the consensual and robust profile of the player (Rising Ballers, 2023). Quoting Clive Reeves (2023), PwC's UK sports leader, "This generation of athletes are huge businesses in and of themselves. They have huge media companies and image rights and now lead the way in dictating cultural moments and partnerships."

The symbiotic relationship between athletes and the fashion industry signifies a shift from the traditional use of film stars and musicians as brand ambassadors. The growing global reach of modern football players positions them as influential figures in the celebrity sphere, and brands are using these figures to stay relevant (Soccer Bible, 2023). Football players collaborating with multiple fashion brands (SportsUnited, 2023) have been able to generate substantial engagement on social media platforms, unlocking new brand audiences (The Industry Fashion, 2023).

The profound societal impact of athletes is captured by the influence of iconic slogans such as "Be like Mike" on a television advertisement for Gatorade starring American professional basketball player Michael Jordan, illustrating that athletes are more than just points per game (Darlow, 2018; Feezell, 2005). The desire to imitate sports icons extends into individuals' non-sporting lives, shaping perceptions and aspirations (Feezell, 2005). Notably, research suggests

that even athletes outside tier 1 and 2 in their respective sports, including college athletes, are considered role models by their followers (Krane et al., 2011). Sports fans perceive celebrity athletes as cultural icons and aspire to be like them ((Darlow, 2018; Feezell, 2005).

Three specific dimensions related to an athlete's image - athletic performance, attractive appearance, and a marketable lifestyle - have been identified, contributing to the holistic portrayal of athletes as brands (Arai et al., 2014). Athletes serve as influential marketing tools for organisations, distinct from other celebrities who only rely on media representation (Low & Lim, 2012). Organisations like Nike consistently leverage famous athletes, including the football player Cristiano Ronaldo, in their endorsements, contributing to positive brand attitudes and influencing product preference (Low & Lim, 2012; Bush et al., 2004; Jolly, 2014; Till, Stanley & Priluck, 2008).

Numerous studies underscore the influence of sports celebrities, particularly football players, on the shopping preferences of various age groups, especially among the younger generations (Sassenberg, 2015; Sassenberg et al., 2018; Düsenberg, de Almeida, de Amorim, 2016; Hameed, Madhavan, 2017; Liu et al., 2016; Dugalić, Lazarević, 2017). Further research emphasises the potential for athletes to improve a company's image through strategic marketing support (Bush, Martin, Bush, 2004; Dix, Phau Pougnet, 2010; Shuart, 2007; Koernig, Boyd, 2009; Simmers, Damron-Martinez, Haytko, 2009; Baig, Siddiqui, 2012; Smith, 2008). Importantly, unlike other celebrities, athletes rely not only on media representation but also on their sports results and performance, further solidifying their market appeal (Stevens, Lathrop, Bradish, 2003).

In summary, this literature review delves into the multifaceted dimensions of athletes as brand-building mediums, as athletes emerge not only as endorsers of products but as influential figures shaping societal norms and consumer behaviours on a global scale.

2.2 Traditional Influencers

Ki and Kim (2019) define a social media influencer as an individual who possesses the ability to influence others through social media platforms. As a result of their influence, many more brands are approaching them to create branded content, such as product placements or brand recommendations. This practice is known as influencer marketing, as Audrezet et al. (2020) stated. Unlike traditional endorsers, who are usually celebrities or public figures who gained their fame through traditional media channels, social media influencers are grassroots individuals who have developed a likeable online persona and have garnered high visibility among their followers by creating viral content on social media, according to Garcia (2017).

The strategic evolution of social influencers has become a powerful tool for generating online conversations and enhancing brand visibility (Forbes, 2016). This involves influencers posting messages, images, or videos on their social media profiles, employing sponsored content as a means to integrate commercial messages into traditionally non-commercial contexts (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016).

Google's findings have brought to light the potential of social influencers surpassing traditional celebrities in terms of influence (Blumenstein & O'Neil-Hart, 2016). A key example of this is that on platforms like YouTube, 60% of users express a greater inclination to follow product recommendations from their favourite influencers rather than traditional TV or movie stars (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Blumenstein & O'Neil-Hart, 2016).

Marketing and social media agencies have compared celebrities and traditional influencers and found that the latter generally have stronger engagement on social media (Gallegos, 2018; Mediakix Team, 2017). This has led to an increased focus on using influencers as part of a comprehensive strategy to promote brands and drive sales, leveraging their impact on their followers (Baker, 2017).

Parallel to Celebrity Endorsement, Influencer Marketing relies on an individual's fame and influence over their fans (Kapitan, Silvera, 2016). Forbes has labelled influencers as the

modern celebrity endorsement, recognising their role in personal brand-building (Weinswig, 2016; Voracek, 2019).

Influencer Marketing relies on the trust between the influencer and the consumer, positioning influencers as friends in the eyes of their followers (Sammis et al., 2016). Collaborating with mega-influencers secures advertising and bestows prestige, offering the potential for significant sales growth (Davis, 2019). This unique and modern marketing tool is increasingly recognised for its efficacy in achieving diverse goals, including brand building, enhancing product awareness, and expanding follower bases on social networks (Torres, Augusto, Matos, 2019). Sammis, Lincoln, and Pomponi (2016) assumed that the personal attitude of influencers promotes a sense of friendship among followers. Partnering with a mega-influencer guarantees advertising and adds prestige and credibility, with the potential for a substantial increase in sales (Davis, 2019).

Influencer Marketing has established itself as the fastest-growing tool for acquiring new customers online and is justified by statistics revealing consumer participation rates up to 16 times higher than traditional forms of paid media (Odell, Wiley, Talamantez, 2016).

Further supporting the trajectory of influencer marketing, the amount of sponsored posts on Instagram has surged from 1.26 million in 2016 to 6.12 million in 2020 (Statistica, 2020).

Echoing past research, collaborations with influencers with large following cohorts have been highlighted for their potential to achieve broader and swifter reach (Cha, Hadaddi, Benevenuto, Gummadi, 2010; De Veirman et al., 2017). This is rooted in the perception that consumers consider influencers with larger followings as more credible and trustworthy (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014; Martensen, Brockenhuus, and Zahid, 2018).

2.3 Effective Brand Building

This section examines the dynamics of effective brand building through influencer and celebrity (for the purpose of this study, football players) marketing. As mentioned before, a

study on Leading Goals of B2C influencer marketing in Europe stated that 85% of marketers assumed raising brand awareness is their primary goal, surpassing driving sales (Statista, 2021).

When a celebrity or influencer is designated as the spokesperson for a brand, it is referred to as brand endorsement or brand-building, and this is a way of conveying the necessary information to project the brand (Patra & Datta, 2010). Furthermore, this endorsement has a significant impact on the effectiveness of advertising, including brand recognition, recall, purchase intent, and even customer purchasing behaviour (Hollensen & Schimmelpfennig, 2013; Spry et al., 2011). This suggests that when consumers see products or service advertisements featuring celebrities and influencers, they quickly identify them, which helps them remember the message and influences their short or long-term purchase decisions.

The impact of social proof, or informational social influence, promoted by individuals in social media, boosts the credibility of brands (van Dongen, 2018). To fortify social proof, companies actively seek reviews, testimonials, likes, shares on social media, and endorsements from celebrities or influencers (van Dongen, 2018). Research indicates a higher reliance on information from personal and informal sources over commercial ones (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Smith, 2012).

Influencer marketing operates on theories like the halo effect, source credibility, and match-up hypothesis (Breves et al., 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), where the stronger the match between both a celebrity and a product, the more effective an endorsement will be.

In the realm of social media, engagement seems to be an important factor, reflecting the interactions content achieves (Dolan et al., 2015). Despite debates, influencer marketing remains a successful strategy, leveraging influencers on social media platforms to foster positive attitudes, behaviours, and emotions toward brands (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). It underlines the importance of understanding how influencers affect and

contribute Towards brand building, emphasising the need for strategic planning to avoid deceptive collaborations that could harm brand perception.

2.3.1 Engagement metrics

Whilst certain perspectives support choosing influencers based on engagement rates and the trade-off with the number of followers, research produces inconsistent results. According to some, micro-influencers provide relatability, in-depth product expertise, and an emphasis on particular subject matter, thereby rendering them more engaging than macro- and mega-influencers (Karagür et al., 2022; Kay et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Micro-influencers are deemed to be more relatable and have extensive product category expertise (Maheshwari, 2018; Starnage, 2019; Wissman, 2018). On the other hand, research suggests that macro-influencers are more interactive (De Veirman et al., 2017; Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono, 2019), which contradicts industry guidelines.

Reactions, likes, comments, and shares are all included in what is known as "engagements". The literature on influencer marketing emphasises the importance of match-up (Forkan, 1980; Törn, 2012), user identification (Gräve, 2017; Xu and Pratt, 2018), authenticity (Lee and Watkins, 2016), credibility (Erdogan, 1999; Hovland and Weiss, 1951), and trustworthiness (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Spry et al., 2011) for the success of brand partnerships. In line with conventional research on celebrity endorsement, earlier studies highlight social and physical attractiveness as critical factors that influence productive teamwork (Audrezet et al., 2018; Kapitan and Silvera, 2015; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

The influencer landscape debates the impact of follower count: whilst some argue for mega-influencers, others endorse the potency of micro-influencers (Mangan, 2020; Chen, 2016; Dhanik, 2016; Indahash, 2020). However, consensus prevails on the crucial role of influencer selection in campaign planning (Enke and Borchers, 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al.,

2022). On the table below, we can analyse reference market numbers for both influencers (Impact, 2023) and football players (internal case studies), divided by size and engagement. As there is no relevant study on average engagement for football players, I designed similar tables (table 1 and 2) with a sample of players in B-Engaged’s talent roster to compare to traditional influencers.

Type	Size (following)	Engagement (%)	Compensation (USD)
Micro-influencers	10,000 - 150,000	25-50%	\$2,000-\$20,000
Macro-influencers	150,000 - 500,000	5-25%	\$20,000-\$45,000
Mega influencers	500,000 +	2-5%	\$45,000+

Player	Size (following)	Engagement (%)
Jota	459,000	19.58%
Nicholas Jackson	925,000	21.48%
Reiss Nelson	963,000	13.94%
William Saliba	1,300,000	16.45%
Serge Gnabry	3,000,000	2.62%
Reece	3,200,000	10.96%
Hector Bellerín	4,000,000	7.3%
Kai Havertz	6,100,000	4.21%
Mason Mount	6,300,000	6.74%

Table 1 and 2 – Size (following) and Engagement on Instagram

2.4 Mediums

Social media has emerged as a promising avenue for advertisers to promote their products or brands and interact with potential customers. Marketers also leverage social media platforms to create brand awareness and foster consumer loyalty (Zhou et al. 2012). They tap into the power of peer recommendations on social media to reinforce marketing messages and nudge people toward making purchases (Evans, 2010). As a result of the vast array of social media advertising options, businesses have started reallocating their budgets, reducing traditional marketing expenses, and increasing investments in social media advertising (Gangadharbatla, 2008; Pate & Adams, 2013).

According to Hashoff (2017), 92.9% of social media influencers consider Instagram their primary platform, which is a crucial channel for them. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) found that Instagram influencers' recommendations have a significant yet modest impact on users'

purchase decisions. Interestingly, Instagram users do not consider influencers to be significant decision-makers while buying, and they do not view these endorsements as marketing (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018).

This study aims to investigate the impact of endorsers, particularly on Instagram, given the above factors.

2.5 Framework guiding the study

Aaker (1991) explains how to build a strong brand that will lead consumers to prefer a strong brand over a competitor and according to the author, a strong brand is based on brand equity, creating a long-term sustainable brand that then generates positive results in competitiveness and driving sales. It thus creates long-term sustainable cooperation between the brand and customers (Aaker, 1991; Kotler, 2014). Further on the study, we understand that consumers show a preference for building long-term relationships with brands that they can trust (Kotler et al., 2017; Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2004). For this study, Aaker (1991) proposed brand equity as being compounded by four dimensions – awareness, loyalty, perceived quality and brand association. However, researchers found that these dimensions may not have interrelation with each other, necessitating a new framework specific to brand building. Studies also found that e-WOM is now more important than ever, bringing several consumer and marketing implications (Erkan and Elwalda, 2018). However, further research stated that e-WOM has limited effectiveness. To enhance this effectiveness, we should add attributes such as likability and popularity to the transmitters of e-WOM (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). Hence, researchers added different attributes that influencers should have in order to increase engagement. Hovland, Janis and Kelly's (1953) source credibility model and McGuire's (1985) source attractiveness model provide more attributes accountable for endorsers' communication effectiveness. Hovland's model (1953) on credibility brings attention to the importance of expertise and trustworthiness whilst communicating a brand. McGuire's (1985) attractiveness

model suggests that familiarity, similarity and likability are the important advertising endorser’s attributes. Ohanian (1990) added physical attractiveness to McGuire’s model in order to bring more attention to the brand and maximize the impact of communicating a brand. These studies were not tested on social media by the authors. Thus, Seiler and Kucza (2017) tested Ohanian’s (1990) integrated model in a social media context, however, they did not test dimensions such as similarity, familiarity and likability.

Gathering all this information, I created a framework divided into two sections (see figure 1). I combined the Brand Equity model (Aaker, 1991) with Hovland (1953), McGuire (1985) and Ohanian (1990) and built my research based on the multiple proposed dimensions by the authors, bringing them to the social media context.

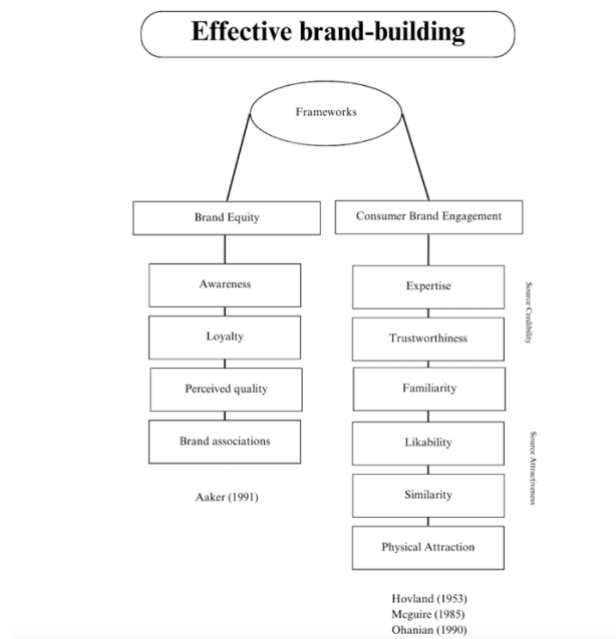


Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework (Aaker 1991; Hovland 1953, McGuire 1985, Ohanian 1990)

3. The organisation

B-Engaged, founded in 2016 by Ehsen Shah and Héctor Bellerín, is a sports marketing agency based in London. The vision of both founders was to reform the sports marketing industry through revolutionary partnership activation campaigns. Their commitment to “talent

development, humanising athletes, forward-thinking, innovation and excellence, protecting the community and environment and promoting cultural interests” made them a highly relevant agency in the sports marketing industry.

B-Engaged has achieved significant success, currently boasting a total of 15 brand clients and 12 athlete clients. Their services are comprised of an impressive 10,000+ assets featured across over 350 campaigns, resulting in revenues exceeding £20,000,000.

The company is divided into different departments such as Partnerships, Brand and Communications, Production and Business Development. All the departments work very closely in order to generate marketing success both for brands and players in the talent roster.

4. Research model

As this project is intrinsically connected with my internship at B-Engaged and by trying to bring a solution to the company, I used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, in which the analysis is used to decide the approach to solve the challenge (Adams et al., 2014)

4.1 Data Collection

Prior to conducting a data collection, it is imperative to carefully select a group of potential studies and assess the applicability of the material (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Given the context provided by the company and the problem that needed to be overcome, I employed several research methods and testing. The debate between athletes and traditional influencers is multifaceted and involves multiple stakeholders. Therefore, I decided to carry out a data collection among both industry experts and consumers. The industry experts at B-Engaged and external sources proved to be the most reliable resource for practical queries, given their years of experience in the field. I sought to benefit from their insights and learnings from previous projects and their role as intermediates in brand partnerships between influencers and football players. While working full-time at B-Engaged's offices in London, I conducted in-person

interviews that were recorded with participants' consent for further transcript analysis. Although all the interviewees were asked the same questions from a prepared script, I also requested additional insights or comments on the subject matter. The interviewees were carefully selected from four different departments across the company, namely Brand & Communications, Partnerships, Business Development, and Production. While insights from industry experts are valuable, they alone are insufficient in evaluating the effectiveness of brand-building. Consumers, being the ultimate decision-makers, have a significant impact on brand perception. As a result, I conducted a survey and focus group to gather their feedback. The survey data was collected through Pollfish, which I accessed via B-Engaged. Our target audience was 700 respondents in the UK, with no specific preference for football fandom.

In addition, I made use of internal documents like case studies and carried out tests by posting on behalf of B-Engaged clients. As a full-time marketing intern, I was also involved in brainstorming meetings that were aimed at achieving several objectives. At first, we were assigned the task of planning a rebranding campaign for one of B-Engaged's clients, Lyle & Scott. After the initial meetings, we had weekly meetings to discuss new projects and track the progress of existing ones, to ensure that Lyle & Scott's brand-building efforts were effective. Additionally, my department was responsible for creating new marketing strategies and posting for the brand Soccer Supplement, which gave me the opportunity to put into practice the models of Hovland (1953), Mcguire (1985), and Ohanian (1990).

Data Collection Sources		
Source	Stakeholder	Frequency
Interviews	Internal employees	4
	External stakeholder	1
Focus Group	Consumers	15
Survey	General Public	700
Documentation	Internal case studies	n.a.
Brainstorming meeting	Internal Participants	4

Table 3 – Data Collection Sources

4.2 Data Analysis

Seidel (1998) suggested that qualitative data analysis has three characteristics – iterative, recursive and holographic. The process of noticing things, thinking about things and collecting things should be an ongoing process to maximise our research findings (1998), as the process is not linear. *Doctoring Together* (Freidson, 1975) details an extensive process of noticing and collecting various parts of a process. During my four months at B-Engaged, I received daily information and insights, which required me to apply the constant noticing-collecting method to create a comprehensive database for my analysis. As I was gathering daily information from multiple sources, working closely with employees and managers, and analyzing audiences regularly, I had to assemble and reconstruct all the data in a meaningful and comprehensive fashion, as noted by Jorgensen (1989, p. 107). By examining my data as pieces of a puzzle, I started to compare internal and external information and identify any gaps in the data, as suggested by Agar (1991).

By revisiting the collected data, I became familiar with all my data from different sources (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Especially when conducting interviews with workers in the industry and informal day-to-day conversations, the themes matched with the present literature where brands: athletes, perceived as celebrities, have large engagement rates; however, there are more significant risks associated when using a football player as a brand ambassador compared to traditional influencers. However, the humility of admitting that football players- B-Engaged clients - may not always be the best fit for brands made me further investigate why.

A structured model was built (figure x) with inputs from opposite directions – consumers and industry experts. My goal was to have a combination of both distinct worlds to understand better and formulate findings regarding brand-building effectiveness.

Hence, two sections can be identified: brand perspective and consumer perspective. From a brand perspective, as this is a Direct Research Internship, it made sense to use as much internal information as possible to overcome the challenge. On the other side, it was crucial to analyse this from a consumer perspective and their perceptions of brands being endorsed by athletes and traditional influencers.

Below (figure 2), I designed a map with a summary of my findings in each of the data collection methods.

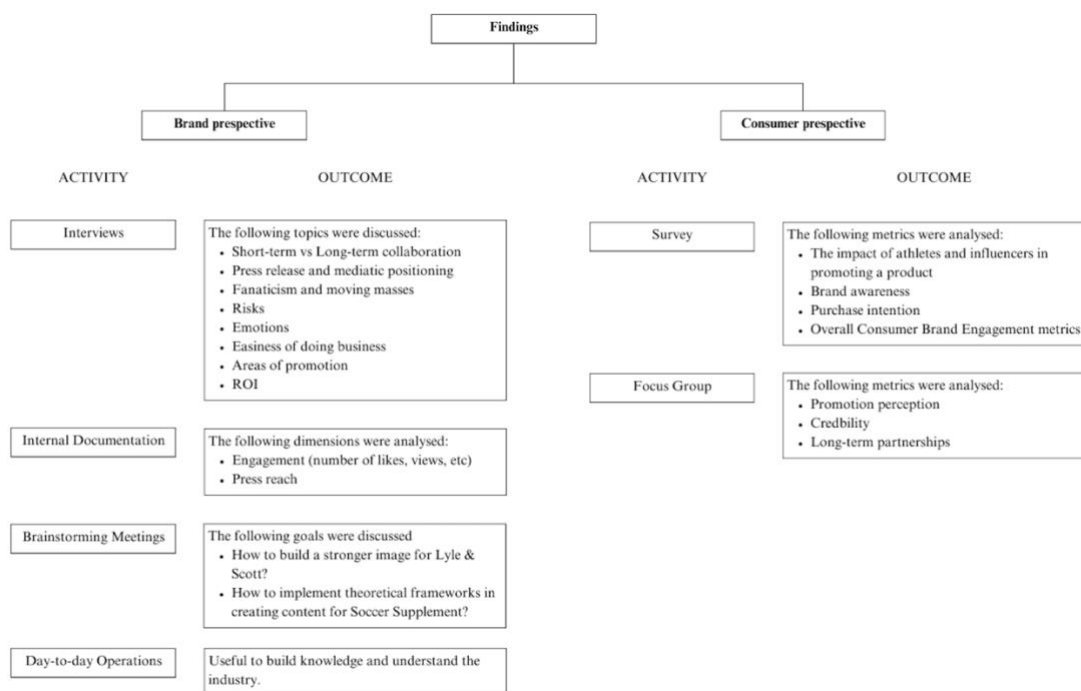


Figure 2 – General structure of findings

4.3 Comparative Analysis

When analysing the pros and cons of using athletes and traditional influencers as brand ambassadors for brand-building, it is crucial to address critical aspects of both. Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis collected with different methods, we will further analyse both benefits.

4.3.1 Athletes as brand-building medium

Evaluating athletes with significant audiences or content to be perceived as influential, they are positioned as idols and role models for their fans and the general public. Upon analysing the collected data from interviews, all participants brought attention to the fact that athletes are perceived as premium personalities and influencers. Furthermore, this is the most crucial dimension of athletes as brand ambassadors. In our interview, Arsenal FC's Partnerships Executive stated, "The profile, idolisation, engagement and media attention of elite athletes is almost unmatched." They have a stable and high source of income, and generally, they advertise and promote only products or brands they are interested in. Consumers do not see it as "doing it for the money". All footballer players that B-Engaged has worked with only accepted relevant brand deals where they felt connected with the brand. When they believe in the product or brand, it is much easier to promote it organically. Athletes prefer aligning with brands in a long-term perspective rather than being paid for just one social media asset. They want to find a way of relating themselves to the content being produced and advertised. As highlighted by the Senior Marketing Executive at B-Engaged, Crocs attempted to appeal to the urban demographic in London earlier this year (2023). The brand collaborated with Reece James, a London-born-and-raised athlete who plays for Chelsea FC, to achieve this goal. This collaboration resulted in much discussion on social media and achieved reasonable engagement rates for the brand. Reece's large following on Instagram (3.2 million followers) was utilised to create meaningful content that celebrated his London and urban roots, making the content feel genuine and bringing awareness to the brand on multiple channels, including press releases. To demonstrate how effective this collaboration was, the brand later employed B-Engaged and Arsenal FC's William Saliba (1.3 million followers on Instagram) as a brand ambassador too.

Interestingly, during the interviews conducted for this study, none of the participants could provide a straightforward answer regarding the Return on Investment (ROI). The concept of ROI was deemed complex and non-linear. In the case of B-Engaged's talent roster, an entry point of £20,000 is considered for football players. However, the company aims to secure deals that amount to nearly six figures. It is worth mentioning that the highest-paid football athlete in the world, Cristiano Ronaldo, earns an average of \$3.23 million per Instagram post (Hopper HQ, 2023). As there is no accurate metric for the ROI for athletes due to their varied followings and negotiated deals, the Business Development Director at B-Engaged pointed out that there may not be a breakeven point. However, the collaboration still increases brand trust and desirability, making it a worthwhile investment.

When considering a football player as a brand ambassador, it is important to weigh the risks involved. While fans often idolise players, their performance and results ultimately determine their success. This is where the halo effect comes into play (Breves et al., 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), as our overall impression of a player's performance and results can affect our thoughts and feelings about them. This, in turn, can impact the brands associated with that player. If a player does not perform well or meet expectations, it can create a negative perception around them, which can also reflect poorly on the brands linked to them. Considering extreme scenarios, if a player is involved in scandals of multiple natures such as drugs or alcohol, their public image will deteriorate, directly affecting the brand. As studied by Fetscherin (2014), a negative feeling towards a brand generates either avoidance or divorce. If it is an athlete, as fans do not accept this transgressive behaviour, it would have high expression and would (Farrelly, 2010; Roberts and Burton, 2018; van Rijn et al., 2019) create harm to the brand.

4.3.2 Traditional influencers as brand-building medium

The most vital advantage of using influencers as a brand-building medium is the ease of doing business. As it is most likely their primary job and source of income, they have an unmatched availability and desire to work with brands. For the same reason, traditional influencers have a myriad of brand collaborations, often on a short-term basis.

Consumers consider influencers as "friends" due to similarities and rely on them for product reviews and to stay updated with brand campaigns.

As they are experts in advertising, traditional influencers have a more natural ability to create enthusiasm in content that can feel more authentic. However, as consumers see it through the paid influencer route, brands must carefully select traditional influencers through a loyal micro following, for instance.

A survey was conducted through the Pollfish platform, with 700 participants residing in the United Kingdom. The results showed that 34.29 per cent of participants found traditional influencers to be "very influential," and 33.29 per cent of participants stated that they trusted the recommendations of traditional influencers "moderately." A relevant finding in this study is that 86% of respondents follow traditional influencers on social media, compared to 75 per cent who follow athletes.

4.3.3 Brand-building for B-Engaged Client Soccer Supplement

This section is focused on the brainstorming meetings and day-to-day operations where I was involved in discussions about brand visions and activations for the brand Soccer Supplement, where we tested the Consumer Brand Engagement model (Hovland, 1953, McGuire, 1985 and Ohanian, 1990).

Soccer Supplement

Soccer Supplement is a new brand trying to establish a foothold in the highly competitive supplements industry. B-Engaged is the marketing agency responsible for most of its marketing operations and social media posting. We conducted some tests on social media, using the Consumer Brand Engagement framework (Hovland et al., 1990) as a reference, to gain insight into how consumers react to different content on Soccer Supplement. In a quick overview of the brand's strategy on social media, traditional influencers and football players are used to promote the brand. Names like Harry Kane and Paulo Dybala are Soccer Supplement's brand ambassadors, conceiving attributes such as perceived quality (Aaker, 1991) and trustworthiness (Hovland, 1953). When in contact with familiar personalities, such as these two football players, the audience will most likely engage with the post and create a better perception of the brand. Intercalating with ambassadors and educational content, we tested on a different approach. In addition to using ambassadors, Soccer Supplement has also experimented with adapting its content to its audience in specific UK regions such as Glasgow, Dublin, and Edinburgh. By working with a Scottish affiliate who is a performance coach, creating assets that feature amateur players in lower leagues, and conducting interviews at Yoker Athletic FC stadium, the brand was able to leverage the dimensions of expertise, similarity, and familiarity to create engaging content that resonated with their audience. This approach aligns with Hovland's (1953), McGuire's (1985), and Ohanian's (1990) framework for consumer brand engagement and the results of the engagement with the post were highly impressive.

By merging credibility (in terms of expertise and trustworthiness) with attractiveness (such as familiarity, likability, similarity, and physical attraction), Soccer Supplement managed to generate impressive engagement outcomes. This approach was more effective than previous posts that lacked a clear connection to the brand, and it helped to enhance the brand image of Soccer Supplement.

4.4 Consumer perception

It is important to note that consumers play a crucial role in driving sales. As a result, they provide valuable insights into how they respond to brands that are endorsed by football players or traditional influencers. To gather this information, we partnered with B-Engaged to develop a survey aimed at 700 UK-based respondents, as previously mentioned. Additionally, we conducted a survey group with 15 participants to further understand consumer behaviour and preferences.

The survey revealed that a significant majority of respondents, about 62 per cent, placed more trust in brands endorsed by athletes than by traditional influencers. Additionally, 50 per cent of respondents were more responsive to products promoted by athletes, while 24 per cent showed no preference. Furthermore, about 70 per cent of the participants believed that athletes could capture attention and build lasting relationships with brands more effectively than traditional influencers. Finally, the majority of respondents felt that athletes outperformed traditional influencers when it came to brand-building.

In a recent focus group, 15 participants interested in athletes and traditional influencers were shown multiple Instagram posts of both groups endorsing brands and were asked to share their thoughts. The group discussion revealed that 67 per cent of the participants were more interested in posts endorsed by football players than traditional influencers. An interesting topic of discussion was credibility, as it was noted that football players generally prefer long-term brand deals, which can increase the credibility and perceived quality of the brand by featuring the same personality multiple times. One participant shared that they were more likely to recall and have interest in a product if they saw it being promoted by the same influencer multiple times, rather than just once.

5. Recommendation and implications

By combining all the data collected on the research and the market with internal documentation and case studies and applying the proposed frameworks, recommendations can be deduced on the subject.

According to the research, it is highly recommended for agencies such as B-Engaged, who are looking to improve brands' image and drive sales, to consider using football players as brand ambassadors. The study revealed that athletes are perceived as trustworthy and more effective in generating awareness and drawing attention to the brand. After comparing engagement rates of influencers and athletes with the same number of followers on Instagram, it was found that football players have higher engagement rates compared to the average engagement rate of influencers.

It's no secret that influencers work with multiple brands across various industries, which can cause some consumers to question their authenticity and loyalty. However, when it comes to football players, they tend to only partner with brands that align with their personal interests and beliefs, rather than simply for financial gain. This helps to ensure that their endorsements are genuine and trustworthy, which can ultimately benefit both the player and the brand.

It's important to consider the long-term benefits of brand deals, as players often prefer to form lasting partnerships rather than participate in a "pay-to-play" scheme. However, it's worth noting that football players tend to have higher associated costs, which can make it difficult for brands to justify using them as endorsers. That being said, my recommendation is to adopt a mixed approach to influencer marketing. If feasible and cost-effective, brands should consider using football players as brand ambassadors in impactful campaigns that create a narrative around them and foster brand association. On the other hand, for day-to-day campaigns with smaller target audiences, traditional influencers have proven to be highly effective in promoting products and can be a more sustainable option for brands.

6. Limitations

After analysing the literature and data on this work project, there are a few limitations worth mentioning.

- In order to enhance their profitability, businesses constantly strive to increase their sales. This emphasizes the importance of cost-effectiveness when establishing a brand with athletes or influencers. To ensure maximum return on investment, it is crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of the expenses that come along with such brand collaborations. Regrettably, I encountered difficulties when attempting to compare costs between athletes and influencers, as I had access to information solely pertaining to the expenses of brand deals with athletes and not those with influencers.
- It is plausible that the outcomes and interpretations obtained while working at a sports marketing agency, utilizing internal data and conducting interviews with industry experts, may have been biased by the fact that as employees in the industry, we tend to exhibit a predisposition towards athletes for brand endorsements - a category in which I also include myself.

Ultimately, it would be intriguing to initiate a comparable study that allocates an equal weighting to the information and expertise of both athletes and traditional influencers. This could potentially provide valuable insights into how results and conclusions differ between the two studies.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to provide new insights into a critical issue faced by marketers worldwide. Prior research has shown that athletes have become equally, if not more, influential than traditional celebrity and musician brand ambassadors. Endorsements from these personalities can significantly impact brand recall, trust, and purchase intent. Given the importance of social

media in promoting brands, marketers face intense competition to capture consumers' attention, interest, preference, and engagement. However, choosing the right personality for campaigns can be a challenging task.

The literature review led to a final conceptual framework on effective brand building combining four different theories into one model that was then tested. The article discusses the importance of building a strong brand that creates long-term sustainable cooperation between the brand and customers. Aaker's (1991) proposed brand equity as being compounded by four dimensions - awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and brand association. However, researchers found that these dimensions may not have interrelation with each other, necessitating a new framework specific to brand building. The study suggests that consumers prefer building long-term relationships with brands that they can trust, and e-WOM has become increasingly important in this regard. Additionally, researchers added several attributes that influencers should have to increase engagement, such as likability and popularity. Hovland, Janis, and Kelly's (1953) source credibility model and McGuire's (1985) source attractiveness model provide more attributes accountable for endorsers' communication effectiveness. Ohanian (1990) added physical attractiveness to McGuire's model to maximize the impact of communicating a brand.

Using different quantitative and qualitative methods, such interviews, surveys, focus group and internal case studies, we were able to take conclusions to answer the initial problem between using both athletes and influencers to endorse a brand. Although influencers will always remain a key and accessible option for brand marketers, given the trajectory of athletes in profile, credibility and structure, it seems this will increasingly become the method of choice for the largest brands globally.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Skeleton of interview questions

- a. In your experience, how do you perceive the effectiveness of athletes as brand ambassadors compared to traditional influencers? Please provide specific examples or instances that support your perspective.
- b. In your opinion, how do consumers respond differently to brands endorsed by athletes versus those endorsed by traditional influencers? Are there specific demographics or market segments that seem to prefer one over the other?
- c. In your experience, how do the financial aspects of partnering with athletes compare to collaborating with traditional influencers? Are there notable differences in costs, return on investment (ROI), or negotiation dynamics between the two?
- d. Any additional comments/insights?

Appendix 2 – Survey

1. Do you consider yourself a sports enthusiast?
2. How often do you follow traditional influencers on social media?

3. How often do you follow athletes on social media?
4. In your opinion, how influential are traditional influencers in promoting products/services?
5. In your opinion, how influential are athletes in promoting products/services?
6. Can you recall the last product or brand promoted by a traditional influencer?
7. What was the product?
8. Can you recall the last product or brand promoted by an athlete?
9. What was the product?
10. How much do you trust recommendations from traditional influencers?
11. How much do you trust recommendations from athletes?
12. Are you more likely to purchase a product endorsed by a traditional influencer?
13. Are you more likely to purchase a product endorsed by an athlete?
14. To what extent do you believe traditional influencers are transparent about their brand partnerships?
15. To what extent do you believe athletes are transparent about their brand partnerships?
16. How authentic do you perceive content from traditional influencers to be?
17. How authentic do you perceive content from athletes to be?
18. If applicable, do you trust more a product being promoted by an athlete or a traditional influencer?
19. Are you likely to be more responsive to product recommendations made by athletes or traditional influencers?
20. Do you think athletes are able to capture attention and create lasting relationships with a given brand more effectively than traditional influencers?
21. In your opinion, do athletes outperform traditional influencers in terms of brand-building?