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"You are Amazing! That's Why I Follow You": Athlete Brand Image through the Fan's Point of View

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ABSTRACT

Social media has shifted the way sports fans look at athletes and sports teams. The attachment between sports fans and athletes or sports teams involves the brand image built by athletes and sports teams in the media. The number of followers on an athlete's Instagram account indicates a certain brand image value that can be an asset for an athlete, team and sponsor. This study determines the features of Instagram as a social media and the form of athlete brand image associated with fans' intention to follow athletes' Instagram accounts, and conducted a cross-sectional online survey of 1477 respondents by distributing a Google Form link on several sports community WhatsApp groups. Evaluation of the structural and measurement models was carried out using PLS-SEM to answer several hypotheses proposed in this study. The result shows athlete's brand image (ABI) directly influences and can mediate the influence of Instagram social media characteristics on the fans' intention to follow favourite athlete accounts. This study presents a theoretical contribution to the under-researched literature on ABI and strengthens the findings of several previous studies by highlighting the important role of athletic performance factors in creating ABI through Instagram.

Keywords: *Sports branding, athlete brand image, Instagram account characteristics, intention to follow, social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Cristiano Ronaldo not only has a big name on the green field, but he also has a big name in the world of social media, especially on Instagram. In March 2021, Cristiano Ronaldo set a new record on Instagram. He became the first individual with a total of 300 million followers, surpassing a series of world-renowned artists, such as The Rock (246 million) and Ariana Grande (244 million) (Bramasta & Wedhaswary, 2021). After one year, in mid-May 2022, Cristiano Ronaldo still occupies the top position as a footballer, with the most followers (442 million), surpassing the acquisition of Lionel Messi (327 million) and Neymar Jr (174 million). The name Cristiano Ronaldo is popular in the real and virtual worlds. One of his posts in May 2022 gained 13 million likes. In addition, the number of posts with the hashtag #cr7 reached 12.6 million, and #cristianoronaldo reached 12.4 million. It shows that this Portuguese footballer is not only good at playing football but also at attracting the attention of many

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people to follow the activities he shares through his social media accounts, as well as provoking others to post content related to him.

Contemporary communication styles have influenced the relationship between athletes and their favourite sports teams and fans through social media, where fans can engage with athletes and sports teams (Li et al., 2019). Social media has reshaped the way people receive information about their favourite athletes and teams. The interaction between fans and their favourite athletes can be liking and commenting on posts. Thus, the action of an athlete posting can increase engagement with followers (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). An action can potentially increase an athlete's popularity negatively and positively (Hasaan et al., 2018a).

Sports communications professionals have recognized the potential of social media as a popular platform (Gibbs et al., 2014). Social media is referred to as a facility for communication and social interaction among digital media users by providing opportunities for information sharing (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Rejeb, Rejeb, Abdollahi, & Treiblmaier, 2022). Social media is a digital-based platform. It can disseminate content, make opportunities for the promotion of more affordable goods and services, facilitate interaction and correspondence systems, and encourage the creation of business opportunities. Concepts that emerge and develop from social media include application usage and social media user satisfaction as a technology medium (Abbas et al., 2019). A person's popularity, including an athlete, can position him or her as a celebrity and influencer who has a certain influence. Instagram is among the social media platforms used to gain popularity among athletes (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Recently, we have seen athletes expand their influence beyond sport by engaging in various social and business activities (Arai et al., 2014). Managing an athlete's popularity through brand management increases business opportunities to become an advertising star and own and sell brand products under his name. It increases the salary value and more excellent contract value with sponsors (Su et al., 2020) to transfer value to his club.

We cannot separate the opportunity to increase business potential through brand management from the factor of managing social media and maintaining followers. It is because social media can be a means of self-promotion and an effective medium for forming personal branding for an athlete or sports team. Several previous studies link athletes branding with social media, branding strategies of professional athletes, and social media (Hodge & Walker, 2015). Previous research also discusses images on the Twitter platform, such as image repair strategies through Twitter (Hambrick et al., 2015) and professional sports teams that use Twitter to gratify fans (Gibbs et al., 2014). Meanwhile, through the Facebook platform, there is a study on the personal branding of an athlete and his followers on Facebook (Hasaan et al., 2018a).

The interaction between social media and sports has attracted notable recognition from scholars. One of the limitations of research in this area is that most of the research linking media and sport currently concentrates on two platforms: Facebook and Twitter/X (Abeza et al., 2015). However, there are also studies on the motivation and behaviour of Weibo users in following sports team accounts (Li et al., 2019). Therefore, this study investigates the sports aspect of Instagram. So far, the researcher has observed that previous studies highlight branding in sports, specifically through Instagram. These studies include professional team sports branding through Instagram (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018) and athletes' brands through photo posts on Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). We should note that, specifically, for Instagram, there is a verified account status associated with

many followers. The number of followers can indicate an athlete's popularity and is related to athlete branding (Su et al., 2020). It shows that Instagram has unique characteristics as a social media platform in building an athlete's brand. Based on that background, this study measures the characteristics of Instagram social media, the form of ABI, and its influence on fans' intentions to follow athletes' Instagram accounts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instagram as Social Media

Today, social media has evolved into an essential channel for sports teams or athletes and their fans to build engagement (Gruettner et al., 2020). Fans tend to look for information about the athletes or teams they idolize. An athlete can use the fans' curiosity to introduce a brand. One study provides empirical evidence on how SMI's persona and content influence followers to perceive it as a human brand (Ki et al., 2020). Therefore, there is an opportunity that provides space for athletes to become endorsers and influencers for their fans. Instagram is a social media platform that can be used to reach and gather fans as account followers.

Each social media platform has a certain character that is different from other social media platforms. So is Instagram. The results of previous research state that measuring Instagram account characteristics through several dimensions, including perceived uniqueness, perceived originality, perceived fit with personal values or interests, and perceived creativity (Casaló et al., 2020b, 2020a). The four initial hypotheses proposed by the researcher are:

H1: Perceived uniqueness contributes positively in representing the measure of Instagram characteristics.

H2: Perceived originality contributes positively in representing the measure of Instagram characteristics.

H3: Perceived fit with personal interests contributes positively in representing the measure of Instagram characteristics.

H4: Perceived creativity contributes positively in representing the measure of Instagram characteristics.

Athlete Brand Image (ABI)

The concept of athlete branding may be considered a new one. However, the placement of professional athletes as brand assets has been practised for a long time (Kunkel et al., 2019). Most professional athletes engage in using social networks. Some athletes show their daily life activities, both professionally and personally. They also endorse products (Deliautaitė et al., 2021). Greater access to digital information promoted athletes as having a particular brand. This perspective implies that athletes as endorsers are interested in the endorsement process, as there is a link between their image and the advertisements they appear in (Kunkel et al., 2019). An athlete brand is a set of related elements, both physical, emotional, functional and aesthetic, that allow fans to see the uniqueness and differentiate the athlete's brand from others. The goal is to create, enhance and optimize various benefits (Deliautaitė et al., 2021). The rising value of ABI for a professional athlete from the point of view of stakeholders, such as fans and sponsors, also stimulates the development of the sports industry and scientific studies (Linsner et al., 2021) in understanding ABI.

A study developed on athlete branding, a solid professional image, and media persona can generate considerable brand equity for an athlete (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Athletes'

attractiveness and achievements can increase fans' identification with an athlete, and something that happens to an athlete will affect the athlete's brand; athlete brand awareness can be used to build an athlete's brand (Hasaan et al., 2018a). Several models have been offered and established to measure Athlete brand image (ABI). One of them is developing the athlete brand image model (MABI), which elaborates several dimensions for forming athlete branding. The first dimension of MABI is athletic performance; the second dimension is attractive appearance; and the last is the athlete's marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014). Some researchers have also attempted to use it in their research. A related study has revealed that aspects of athlete performance can create and develop a professional athlete brand. A similar study also showed a strong relationship between performance factors and lifestyle (Deliautaitė et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a different study also examined the ABI dimension with psychological commitment, which was proven to have a positive relationship (Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2019). Along with the development, there are efforts to develop the concept of athlete brands that are associated with identity (Athlete Brand Identity Scale/ABIdS). The study shows several dimensions, such as integrity and athletic success, then fan engagement, and the last dimension is character traits (Linsner et al., 2020). The new finding offered by ABIdS is to integrate the athlete perspective as an aspect into brand management. Thus, in order to enrich the literature in this field, this study proposes several hypotheses, which begin by measuring the formation of ABI. The subsequent hypotheses proposed by the researcher are as follows:

H5: Athletic performance contributes positively in representing the measure of ABI.
H6: Attractive appearance contributes positively in representing the measure of ABI.
H7: Marketable lifestyle contributes positively in representing the measure of ABI.

Several findings of researchers that have been previously presented provide an overview that the media has a crucial role in shaping a brand, including constructing an athlete's brand through social media such as Instagram. A brand's attractiveness will be one of the stimulants for individuals to feel attached to a brand, thus endeavouring to be "up-date" about the brand, including the athlete brand. Now, up-to-date information about athletes can be reached out through Instagram. When an athlete has been able to achieve popularity on Instagram as a brand, then that popularity can become capital to gain more support from fans who become their followers.

This tantalizing condition motivates athletes to optimize their Instagram accounts to gain followers. However, some of them have not fully strategized in utilizing Instagram's characteristics. For example, when producing and estimating the impact of the messages they convey on their ABI and fan support (Kunkel et al., 2020). This study estimates that Instagram characteristic factors have the potential to be a driving element in the formation of ABI and also a driver for fans to “follow” athletes’ Instagram accounts. This idea places ABI as a mediating factor in this study. Next, this study also intends to respond to calls from previous studies that suggest research to explore more deeply the impact of social media on athlete brands (Kunkel et al., 2020). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H8: Instagram characteristics positively influence the fans' intention.
H9: Instagram characteristics positively influence ABI.
H10: ABI positively influence the fans' intention.
H11: There is an influence of Instagram characteristics mediated by ABI on the fans' intention.

In previous research, the dimensions of athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle of star athletes are considered to be able to shape ABI and encourage individuals to have a particular psychological commitment (Arai et al., 2014). We predict that the digital generation and domicile area factors influence the weakness of life story items in supporting the formation of marketable lifestyle dimensions.

On Instagram social media, there are various posts containing information about an athlete, including their daily life (Hasaan et al., 2018a). The athlete, management, or outside parties can produce and share a post. Posts containing information about an athlete are one of the information sought and consumed by their fans, especially fans from the digital generations Y and Z.

Regarding the digital generation, there are several research results in internet sociology that document the use of the internet related to information search and use (Rosenberg et al., 2020). Several studies show the limitations associated with digital generations Y and Z while also showing significant differences in using new technological innovations such as social media (Hafiar et al., 2024; Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017) between generations. The younger generation is more engaged with the internet than other media when searching for information (Sheldon et al., 2021).

The differences in using innovative technologies, literature, and knowledge lead to gaps (Hindman, 2000), among them the social gap. The social divide is the basis of the digital divide (Hadi, 2018). Several studies show that there is a digital divide between people in rural and urban areas (Philip et al., 2017). A study supports the argument that age group and region of residence are differentiating indicators of innovation diffusion (Hindman, 2000), including innovative technologies such as Instagram social media.

One theme of the literature on urban and territorial studies is identifying the character of urban and rural communities (Roca & Arellano, 2017). This statement became the researcher's argument for not including the suburban group and a reference for group restrictions when conducting the different tests in this study. The fundamental concept of this research is athlete branding image. Therefore, this study attempts to prove the existence of differences in the influence of ABI on the intentions of young generation fans to follow Instagram accounts (generations Y and Z) in two areas that have different characteristics. This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H13: There is a difference between the influence of ABI on fans' intention among Generation Y in rural vs urban areas

H14: There is a difference between the influence of ABI on fans' intention among Generation Z in rural vs urban areas

METHODOLOGY

This study used a survey research design. The target population consisted of members of the sports community and Instagram users in Indonesia, with a minimum age of 17 years. We conducted a cross-sectional online survey by distributing a Google Form link on several sports' community WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp is the most widely used SNS in Indonesia. We included an informed consent at the beginning of the questionnaire, which had obtained ethical approval from Universitas Padjadjaran. To determine the minimum sample size, we used G*power. This study has seven predictors, so to expect an effect size of .15 (medium), an alpha error of .05, and statistical power of .80, the recommended minimum sample size is around 103. Distributing and collecting of questionnaires was carried out over four months,

a total of 1477 respondents filled out the questionnaire. With a sample size of 1477, this study has a statistical power of > 80%. This means that statistically, the results of this study are in the convincing category (Hair et al., 2019; Hair & Sarstedt, 2019).

This research measured Instagram account characteristics through perceived uniqueness, originality, fit with personal interests, and perceived creativity. Some items asked in the questionnaire, such as: this Instagram account has special features, uniqueness and is different from others; posts on this Instagram account have a value of novelty, originality, and unusualness; posts on this Instagram account fit with my values, interests, and personality; posts on this Instagram account are revolutionary, innovative, sophisticated, etc. (Casaló et al., 2020b, 2020a). The measurement items of the four variables are also second-order in measuring the Instagram account characteristics variable because this research uses a repeated indicator approach.

The measurement of the athlete's brand image variable referred to several aspects of its formation (Arai et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the questions asked in the questionnaire adopted the same indicators from similar research (Arai et al., 2013). Some examples of the questions are: I like an athlete because of his athletic skills, charismatic style, the fair play he shows when competing; I like an athlete because of his physical attractiveness, stylish appearance, and ideal posture; I like an athlete because of his inspiring life story, exemplary behavior, and friendly attitude towards fans. The items measuring the three variables also become the second order in measuring the ABI variable.

The next variable is the intention to follow their favourite athletes through Instagram. The variable intention to follow their favourite athletes through Instagram is raised as a derivative of the psychological commitment variable used in previous research (Arai et al., 2014). The intention is often assumed to be a component of a conative attitude; intention involves four elements, namely: behavior, the target object that is the direction of behavior, the situation in which the context of behavior will be carried out, and the time in which the context of behavior will be carried out (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The question items in this study used to measure the variable intention to follow a favourite athlete's Instagram account were adapted from question items from similar research measuring intention to follow the Instagram account of a particular brand (Casaló et al., 2017). All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree" and vice versa for negative questions. The researcher conducted a pre-test to identify potential issues that may have been missed. Academic discussions with peers were conducted to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the pilot study involved 30 respondents. We also asked the 30 respondents to respond to the questionnaire. We changed the questionnaire's wording and display format to improve the questionnaire's quality.

This study applied Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for measurement and structural model analysis. More specifically, this study used SmartPLS to conduct measurement model and structural model analyses with a bootstrapping application of 5000 samples to ensure the results of path significance. We conducted measurement model analysis to assess the validity of measurement items (convergent and discriminant validity) and the reliability of the observed constructs (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability). Meanwhile, a structural model analysis was carried out to obtain the path coefficients and significance values that will be used to respond to the formulated hypotheses (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2014).

RESULTS

Measurement Model

The measurement model evaluation results show no problems with the convergent and discriminant validity calculation results. Based on the results of validity with convergent validity, the evaluation of the measurement model gives the result that the outer loading and AVE values meet the threshold standards, which are respectively above 0.7 and 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017). Regarding discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker value shows that the construct correlation value is higher compared to the correlation value with other constructs.

In addition, reliability issues are not a problem because the value of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability have also met the threshold requirements, which is above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019; Hair & Sarstedt, 2019). The evaluation of the measurement model is shown based on the reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values in Table 1

Table 1: Reliability and AVE values

Dimension & Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
ATP	0.891	0.925	0.755
ATA	0.818	0.892	0.734
MLF	0.889	0.931	0.819
ABI	0.940	0.949	0.652
PUQ	0.869	0.920	0.793
POR	0.833	0.900	0.751
PFP	0.831	0.898	0.747
PCR	0.881	0.927	0.808
IG	0.934	0.944	0.584
INTF	0.894	0.934	0.825

Note: IG= Instagram account characteristics, PUQ= perceived uniqueness, POR= perceived originality, PFP= perceived fit with personal interests, PCR= perceived creativity of the publications on Instagram. ABI= athlete brand image ATP= Athletic performance, ATA= Attractive appearance, MLF= Marketable lifestyle, and INTF= intention to follow Instagram accounts of favourite athletes.

Table 2: Results of first and second order (Structural model)

	Dimension & Variable	β	SD
First order	H1: PUQ → IG	0.856***	0.009
	H2: POR → IG	0.891***	0.007
	H3: PFP → IG	0.833***	0.012
	H4: PCR → IG	0.895***	0.006
	H5: ATP → ABI	0.935***	0.005
	H6: ATA → ABI	0.919***	0.006
	H7: MLF → ABI	0.910***	0.007
Second order	H8: IG → INTF	0.107***	0.025
	H9: IG → ABI	0.526***	0.025
	H10: ABI → INTF	0.537***	0.025
	H11: IG → ABI → INTF (indirect)/mediation	0.282***	0.019

Significant at p < 0. 05*, p < 0.01, ** and p < 0. 001***.

Structural Model

This study applied bootstrapping to evaluate the fit of all estimated models to answer the hypotheses and looked at the SRMR and NFI values as the estimated model fit values. Regarding the estimated model fit, the evaluation results showed that the SRMR= 0.065 < 0.08, so the model has a good fit. Next, we ran bootstrapping with 5000 sample replications to evaluate the structural model and to decide whether the planned hypotheses could be accepted or rejected.

Table 2 shows Instagram account characteristics as variable can be reflected by perceived uniqueness (β = .856, p < .001), perceived originality (β = .891, p < .001),), perceived fit with personal interests (β = .833, p < .001), and the perceived creativity (β = .895, p < .001). Subsequently, an athlete's brand image can be reflected positively and significantly by athletic performance (β = .935, p < .001), attractive appearance (β = .919, p < .001), and marketable lifestyle (β = .910, p < .001). So, H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7 can be accepted. Based on the calculation results, we also know that the athletic performance dimension produces the highest coefficient of influence on the form of Instagram account characteristics produced by the perceived originality dimension and the highest coefficient of influence on forming an athlete's brand image.

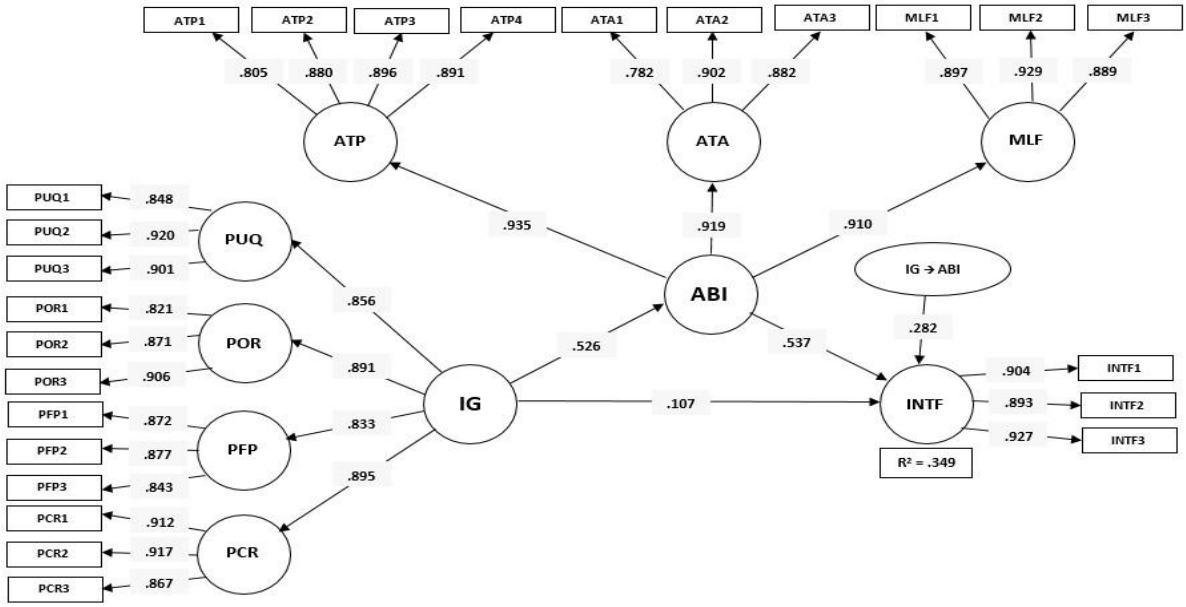


Figure 1: Structural and measurement model

Regarding the significance of the effects, the results of evaluating the structural model with the second-order model show that Instagram account characteristics significantly positively affect athletes' brand image (β = .526, p < .001). Instagram account characteristics significantly predicted fans' intention (β = .107, p < .001) and athlete's brand image (β = .537, p < .001). Therefore, H8, H9, and H10 were accepted. Similarly, the effect of Instagram account characteristics on the intention to follow Instagram accounts was mediated by an athlete's brand image (β = .282, p < .001). Therefore, H11 was accepted.

Based on Table 2, we know that the coefficient of influence of an athlete's brand image is higher than the coefficient of influence of Instagram account characteristics. In addition, the existence of an athlete's brand image can mediate the influence of Instagram account characteristics on the intention to follow the Instagram accounts of favourite athletes. For easy reading of evaluation results, we display Figure 1 to show the coefficients of each path between constructs based on the total sample.

Multi-group Analysis

This study also applies Multi-group Analysis to obtain answers to the significant differences in the influence of ABI on the fans' intention to follow Athletes' Instagram accounts between rural vs urban areas within generations Y and Z. Table 3 shows that H13 and H14 were accepted.

Table 3 Multi-group Analysis Results

Digital Generation	Dimension & Variable	Path Coefficients-diff (urban-rural)	p-Value original (urban vs. rural)	p-Value new (urban vs. rural)
GEN Y	ABI -> INTF	0.166	0.004	0.009
GEN Z	ABI -> INTF	0.166	0.006	0.011

DISCUSSION

The results of calculating the total sample of this study show that athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle as dimensions can significantly explain the form of ABI. In addition, we notice that ABI significantly influences fans' intention to follow athletes' Instagram accounts. These results are in line with previous research findings, which stated that ABI attributes positively influence fan loyalty (Mahmoudian et al., 2021).

The next finding of this study is that the athletic performance dimension shows the largest contribution in forming ABI, followed by the attractive appearance dimension. As an ABI dimension, athletic performance is considered to be a product-related attribute (on-field attribute) because the main role of an athlete is to provide athletic performance that can support their continued success in sports. This record of success can be used to develop their ABI (Arai et al., 2013). Hasaan and Fişne (2021) also categorizes athletic performance into athletes' on-field attributes.

Performance is an important aspect in promoting athletes as individual celebrities. An athlete's outstanding performance will increase their market value, so the athlete's success on the field is key to building an athlete's brand (Hasaan et al., 2018a). Furthermore, Doyle et al. (2020) stated that athletic performance content is considered to be able to generate much more consumer engagement. Athlete performance is also considered to have an impact on the amount of exposure they generate for their sponsors. This means that performance is a vital dimension that will assist athletes in building a strong brand (Hodge & Walker, 2015).

Based on the findings of this study, athletes need to realize that improving athletic performance must remain their main agenda. One aspect of communication that can improve athletic performance is communication with significant others to gain support. Communicating intensively with family or friends (either before or during an event, either through social media or directly) is associated with several satisfactions, such as a sense of connectedness, receiving positive reinforcement, relaxation or even a momentary escape from overwhelming pressures (Hayes et al., 2019).

The athlete branding emergence in the digital environment depends on the content shared on their social media channels (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020). Social media features have changed, improved business operations, and effectively provided new opportunities for businesses to connect with consumers (Egan, 2015), including athletes with their fans. This connection can open up opportunities for an athlete who wants to develop a certain brand on social media by conditioning fans or followers on social media as potential customers when the athlete starts a business. On the other hand, Instagram allows the

opportunity to present various posts containing information about daily life, family, or achievements that can represent an athlete's personality. Regardless of the veracity of this posted information, these posts have the potential to form an athlete's image, either positive or negative (Hasaan et al., 2018a). Therefore, an athlete needs to maintain an image in front of the public.

An athlete's brand is also associated with the brand of the team and the sport that is its holding. This brand association can trigger fan behaviour to follow an athlete's account (Su et al., 2020) or vice versa. Therefore, an athlete needs to notice the brand condition of his team or sport, because their brand is directly or indirectly associated with the brand that is owned by the athlete. Demonstrating interaction with a positive brand association, especially if it involves fans, can increase an athlete's opportunity to develop a personal brand while increasing the number of followers because interactions involving followers influence the level of participation and satisfaction, which leads to their desire to recommend the account to others (Casaló et al., 2017), for example, among fellow fans. Increasing the number of followers is an important step for an athlete who is developing a brand. Athletes can act as influencers, and influencers with a large number of followers are considered more preferred (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Optimizing Instagram characters can also broaden athletes' opportunities to develop aspects of support from fans. Optimizing Instagram characters can also broaden athletes' opportunities to develop aspects of support from fans. Instagram has a photo-sharing feature; this feature can facilitate visual connections between athletes and their followers (Egan, 2015). However, visual connections require good photo/video quality. The quality of visual content in Instagram posts plays a more important role compared to social networks that are more textual (Salomon, 2013). The implication is that the better the appearance of the photos/videos on an athlete's Instagram account containing athletic performance content, the greater their hope of having a good brand image.

The definition of an athlete brand is a public persona that has symbolic meaning in the business market and can be displayed through various forms of elements (Arai et al., 2013). Fan support for athlete-related brands involves various elements such as: athlete origin, the fit of the brand's nature, gender, good and consistent athletic achievements, and positive impressions (Hasaan et al., 2018b). Previous research also stated that the credibility factor of the athlete is considered an important element in determining whether or not he is worthy of being chosen as an endorser (Park et al., 2020). Various elements have been associated with athlete-related brands. Yang et al. (2009) have mentioned that the elements associated with athletes' brands contain cultural meanings that make athlete brands considered as valuable entities to penetrate a particular market segment. So, it is not surprising that athlete figures have long been used to attract attention, increase awareness, and encourage fans to support products and brands. This kind of marketing activity can shape the brand of the product as well as the athlete himself. Therefore, an athlete's brand is an asset that must be maintained to continue to have a sustainable positive image in the future (Hasaan et al., 2021; Hodge & Walker, 2015).

The results of the current study offer several theoretical contributions. First, this study provides a theoretical contribution to the under-researched literature on athlete branding on the Instagram platform. This study also addresses the concerns highlighted by Abeza et al. (2015), who stated that current research linking social media and sport has concentrated more on the use of the Twitter and Facebook platforms. Second, this study tests athletes' brand image as a variable that mediates the effect of Instagram account characteristics on

the intention to follow their favourite athletes through Instagram. The third is the use of multi-group analysis in rural vs urban areas.

As for practical implications, the results of this study strengthen the findings of previous studies, which show the important role that aspects of athletic performance play in an athlete's brand image on social media platforms such as Instagram. The athlete's performance also increases the exposure and visibility of the sponsors they represent (Hodge & Walker, 2015). Therefore, for athletes who are trying to develop their brand image, it is advisable to increase posts related to athletic performance and also attractive appearance on their Instagram accounts in order to maintain relish among their followers, while increasing personal value to attract sponsors using athlete figures as endorsers, brand ambassadors, or influencers. The same suggestion also applies to sports-related product/brand owners. They can encourage athletes to insert the brand or product they want to promote through appropriate athletic performance-related posts, in addition to considering the number of Instagram followers as an indicator of an athlete's popularity (Su et al., 2020). Finally, the findings related to the influence of ABI factors on fans among generations Y and Z who live in rural and urban areas. Testing of samples from both areas shows differences in the strength of the influence of ABI factors in driving fan intentions among generations Y and Z. This finding is in line with research which concluded that sociodemographic differences in the younger generation also show differences in preferences in seeking information on social media related to the athletes they idolize (Hafiar et al., 2023). These findings provide insight so that athletes can tailor posts on their Instagram accounts to the fan base they are targeting.

Although this study presents several contributions, there are also several limitations that are worthy of being followed up by researchers who are concerned with this field. First, we carried out this study in the framework of a survey conducted in Indonesia. Future researchers can expand to explore other contexts to validate the results. Second, this study used a survey method using Google Forms, associated with less stringent controlling and snowball sampling. As a result, future researchers should strive to conduct data collection with more personalized and rigorous supervision and utilize random sampling techniques in evaluating the proposed research model. Third, this study focuses on several dimensions from the many variations of dimensions related to athlete branding. The implication is that future researchers can explore other aspects as independent factors, such as sportsmanship, fanaticism, nationalism, religiosity, and even aspects of motives and satisfaction with social media use related to intentions.

As for the independent variable, we can develop it into various variants of intentions, such as the intention to recommend Instagram accounts, the intention to follow recommendations, to the intention to buy products used or promoted by an idol athlete. Despite these limitations, our research contributes to more research on athlete branding and the intention to follow a favourite athlete's Instagram account.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the dimensions of perceived uniqueness, perceived originality, perceived fit with personal interests, and perceived creativity can significantly explain Instagram’s social media characteristics. Likewise, with the athlete brand image factor, all three dimensions can significantly explain this variable.

The characteristics of Instagram social media also have an influence on the athlete's brand image factor and the intention of fans to follow the Instagram accounts of their favourite athletes. While the athlete's brand image factor has also been proven to be a factor that influences fans' intention directly, as well as when positioned as a mediating factor.

The athlete's brand image also provides an overview of its influence on fans' intention to follow their favorite athlete's Instagram account and shows significant results when tested partially on generations Y and Z. Finally, this study concludes that the influence of the athlete's brand image on fans' intention to follow their favorite athlete's Instagram account in both digital generations (Y and Z) has a significant difference when applied to rural vs. urban areas.

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ETHICAL CLEARANCE STATEMENT

This research was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Commission, Universitas Padjadjaran.

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