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The importance of personal branding for ice hockey players

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to identify the importance of personal branding for ice hockey players. The study focuses on the key factors in an ice hockey player's and athlete's personal brand and brand building such as sponsorships and social media.

In addition to literature review, this study utilizes qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research data consisted of four semi-structured interviews in which four different people are interviewed, each with the necessary information and experience on the topic under study.

The research revealed that personal branding is not necessary for ice hockey players because it does not have an impact on the player's athletic performance which has the most impact on athlete's career. However, the results also indicate that players can gain a lot from personal branding, and it can have an impact on a player's post-athletic career. The results of the research were partly inconsistent with literature review because the literature review pictures personal brand as important for ice hockey players.

The author recommends ice hockey players to focus more on their personal branding because they can gain a lot from it, especially in their post-athletic career. However, the players need to keep the main focus on the sport and if possible, acquire managerial support.

Keywords: Personal branding, ice hockey player, sponsorship, social media

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1 Introduction

The personal branding of athletes has become a very relevant and important topic because a strong personal brand can be the key to a successful career even after the actual career in sport has ended. Personal branding is an ongoing effort to show the world your best authentic self. It is your reputation, and the way people will remember you. Personal branding is a very powerful tool to access an athlete's target market and gives a chance for an athlete to act as an influential role model and make their voices heard. A successful personal brand can also have a huge financial impact on an athlete's career through sponsorships, and commercial cooperation (Lepistö 2020). Personal branding is individual-centered branding in which values are created from the individual's personality, story, and actions, and these values are communicated to the public through branding. From an athlete's perspective, personal branding means how athletes strive to turn their names into financial income (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Because it seems that personal branding is very important for athletes today and can have a big impact on their careers, it is also worth to take a closer look at this topic from the point of view of ice hockey players.

The literature review introduces the topic on the basis of 6 entities. The first and second part examines the brand and the personal brand and its construction in order to understand the real meaning of the brand. The third part focuses more on personal branding from an athlete's point of view. The fourth section delves deeper into ice hockey player's personal branding. The fifth section highlights sponsorship collaboration from an athlete's and company's perspective and the final part focuses on the impacts of social media on the formation of a strong athlete brand.

The research section of the study deals with the experiences and thoughts of professional ice hockey players and experts in the field about the ice hockey player's personal branding. The research is conducted through interviews in which four different people are interviewed, each with the necessary information

and experience on the topic under study. The aim of the interviews is to get an accurate picture of the importance of personal branding for ice hockey players and the factors that have been involved in personal brand building. Observations and results based on the literature review and research are presented at the end of the study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Branding

There are many definitions for a brand but the traditional view of branding states that a brand is: a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service from others. Essentially, the word brand is derived from the Old Norse word *brandr* which means "to burn " and was used in reference to marking cattle by burning the owner's brand onto them. The idea of branding has developed over the years and today it is seen as far more extensive than just a product or a service with a logo, unique name, and reputation (Rowles 2014). In addition to a product or service, a brand can be a person or community and Hall (2009) explain branding as:

"Branding is the process of creating a personality for a product or service using a consistency of design and self-description which gives the object a distinctive feel, look and competitive position".

Brands also have a personality, and it is a combination of sensorial appeal (the way it looks, smells, or tastes), rational appeal, (the way it performs and how cost-efficient it is) and emotional appeal (the emotions that it induces). Successful brands are memorable and meaningful, and they appeal to the target audience in many ways. So, a brand is not just a logo or name, it is what people feel about the company or service (Chritton 2014). Branding can have an impact on people's opinions and ultimately branding is the art of aligning what you want people to think about your brand with what people actually think about your brand (Cohen 2011).

Many brand strategies are developed with only the end-user in mind and with the focus on a high brand profile which would attract more buyers away from the competition. However, a company with a strong brand and good performance can draw more attention also from others than only consumers. Branding can also have an effect on staff, suppliers, business partners, and many other stakeholders. A strong brand can attract and retain quality members of staff and lead to better terms of business (Fojt 2005).

2.2 Personal branding

It can be argued that everybody has a personal brand, no matter if they want it or not. A personal brand is one's reputation which is defined by their character. It is the way others remember you through your actions, your expertise, and the emotional connections you make (Chritton 2014). Chritton (2014) also states that personal branding is an ongoing, conscientious effort to show the world your best authentic self. It is the process of bringing every aspect of your life into alignment with your characteristics, strengths, values, and goals so that you can make an instant and lasting impression on the people you meet. Chritton (2014) states two important aspects of personal branding. Firstly, it is important to make a lasting impression on people you meet. People with memorable personal brands are far more interesting and that is one of the goals of personal branding that people remember you. Secondly, Chritton (2014) highlights showing the world your best authentic self. Being authentic is also very important in personal branding because otherwise, the person is pretending to be something they are not. Pretending to be some other version yourself requires a lot of maintenance. With public figures such as ice hockey players that could show up at some point which would not be a good image for the personal brand.

Deckers and Lacy (2012) on the other hand define personal branding as creating the right kind of emotional response you want people to have when they hear your name, see you online, or meet you in real life. It is important that the personal brand creates some kind of emotional response because then people are more likely to remember it. If the personal brand does not create any emotions, then it is more likely that people will not remember the brand either.

2.2.1 How to create a successful personal brand?

There are many ways and strategies to build a successful personal brand, but the first step is always the same. To build a brand a person must know themselves first. At the beginning of any branding process, it is necessary to define the brand and in personal branding, the person is the brand and the product. (Chritton 2014). When you know yourself and know your goals and competence it is easier to choose channels, events, and practices you want to use in building your personal brand (Hypement.com 2018). The second step is to stand out from the crowd. There are many ways to stand out, but a positive example is to deliver more value than the required level or do things a little differently than others. When the brand is unique, it is more memorable, and it stands out from the crowd (Arruda. W 2019). Other factors related to this step are knowing your competition and being bold. To have a unique and strong brand, it is important to understand the competition and which market niche works for you (Chritton 2014). When you know your market niche, be brave and tell about it and show it (Deckers, Lacy 2012). The third step is communicating. An appealing story about your personal brand is a good elevator pitch that can be communicated on traditional communication platforms and online platforms (Chritton 2014). Deckers and Lacy (2014) state that the key to good communication and telling about your story is not to tell about yourself. It is more important to show it. Instead of telling people you like football, you could write a blog about football or do a podcast about it. This is also a good way to communicate your brand and its values.

2.3 Personal branding with athletes

Being a professional athlete can be very expensive and not everyone can afford it, especially in the early stages. There are different options for athletes to earn income, but one significant additional factor could be athlete branding. A strong athlete brand built during the sports career is an investment in the future as that can be beneficial in the life after the sports career has ended (Lepistö 2020). Just

as in traditional branding, athlete branding involves interactions, reactions, and emotional responses the fans have when they engage with an athlete brand. The emotions the athlete's brand evokes make them desirable prospects for all kinds of endorsements. However, the athlete's ability to persuade consumers depends on the development and management of his or her own brand personality (Hodge, Walker 2015). In the end, personal branding for athletes means how to turn their names into capital. It is about creating significant turnover with the story of the athlete, their values, charisma, and athletic competence (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Other than financial benefits, a strong personal brand can give an athlete a chance to be an influential role model, make their voices heard, and influence issues that matter to them. With a strong personal brand, the athlete can also take part in a societal debate and work for the athlete's values and relevant issues. (Lepistö 2020).

2.3.1 Athlete brand building

Similar to building a normal personal brand, building an athlete brand is also a long process the typical components of which are awareness, image, and loyalty. The first step when building an athlete brand is to create awareness. Luckily to make this job easier, sport is always a popular topic in the media and in society. The media is also always interested in what happens in the athlete's private life. For example, with whom they spend their free time and what events they attend. Activity towards the media helps the athlete to grow their awareness and fan base which on the other hand draws attention from the sponsors. The right kind of media visibility is important when thinking about positive brand image and athletes should always think about the ramifications of their acts and sayings (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017).

Just like in regular personal branding, athletes need to be authentic and brave when building their brand. Finnish professional snowboarder Eero Ettala reminds that it is good to have idols, but you should not imitate anybody. Especially in individual sports, you can separate yourself from others by only being yourself (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Although it is good to be active with the media and other partners it is important for the athlete to focus on training and playing their

sport. If necessary, the athlete can also seek help from managerial cooperation. If the athlete's goal is to be on top of the sport the Manager's job is to help especially with sales, so that the athlete can focus on the essentials. Although managers would have sales responsibility, it is still important for the athlete to understand the laws of branding and participate in building their brand (Lepistö 2020).

Figure 1 represents the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) developed by Arai, Ko and, Kaplanidou (2013). MABI is an athlete's personal branding model with three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) and ten subdimensions. Athletic performance refers to an athlete's performance-related features which are defined by athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry. Athletic expertise means the athlete's individual achievements and athletic capability. It is the most significant factor in making athletes recognizable in the target market. Competition style refers to how an athlete performs in a competitive situation. There are different competition styles in each sport and some athletes perform aggressively while others might take a tactical approach (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Sportsmanship refers to an athlete's moral behavior on the field and is often defined as fair play, respect for the game, and self-integrity. Sportsmanship is not an essential part of today's competitive sport, but it is an essential part when branding athletes. On the other hand, unsportsmanlike behaviour can have a huge negative impact on an athlete's brand. For example, footballer Luis Suarez will always be remembered for biting opponents (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Rivalry refers to an athlete's competitive relationship with other athletes. In both team and individual sports, it is always entertaining if there are rivalries between teams or individuals. (Arai, Ko, Kaplanidou 2013).

Attractive appearance refers to an athlete's external appearance that is defined by physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness. From a marketing point of view, it is a fact that an athlete's attractive appearance is relevant. Physical attractiveness refers to an athlete's physical quality and characteristics but is not limited to their face or physical structure but includes their physical expressions. The symbol refers to an athlete's attractive personal style, fashion, or any outward

unique features. Athletes often utilize their personal style to express their personality or character. Body fitness refers to how physically fit an athlete is for his/her sport (Arai, Ko, Kaplanidou 2013).

Marketable lifestyle refers to an athlete's off-field marketable features which contain aspects of their life story, role model, and relationship effort. A life story refers to the off-the-field life story of an athlete that reflects the athlete's personal values and therefore can be used in the formation of their own brand message. People love stories where an athlete has come from a simple background and made it to the top of their sport. A role model refers to an athlete's ethical behavior. It is related to the athlete's active participation and contribution to society, conformance to social norms, and virtuous behavior. Relationship effort refers to an athlete's level of interaction with fans, sponsors, and media (Arai, Ko, Kaplanidou 2013). This subdimension has changed a lot in the past few years because social media has made interaction between fans and athletes much easier. Interacting with fans and supporters through social media can bring added value to an athlete's brand (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017).

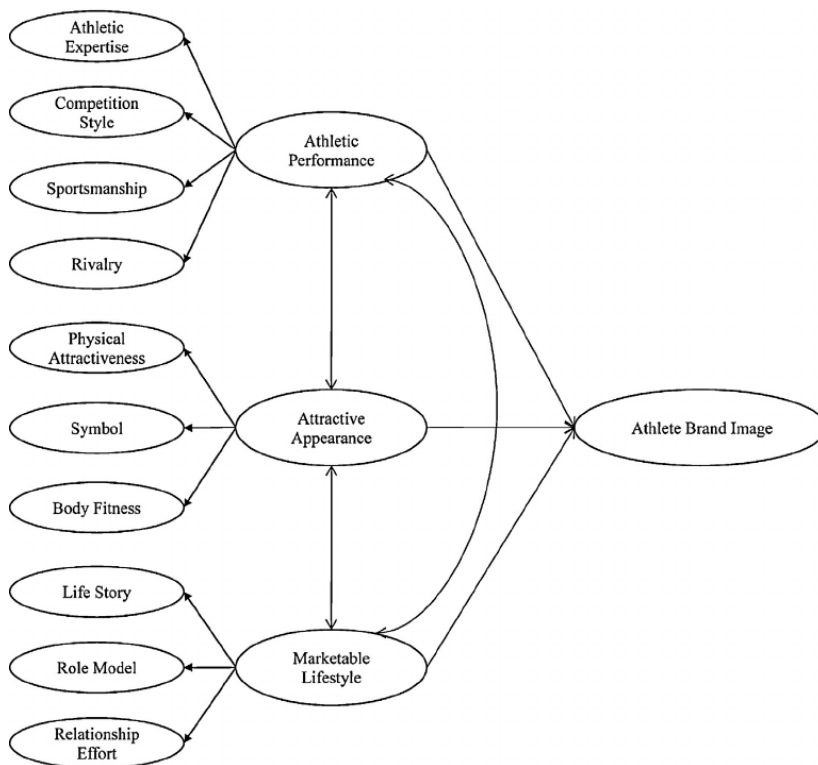


Figure 1 Model of Athlete Brand Image (Arai, Ko, Kaplanidou 2013)

2.3.2 Personal brand equity

Brand equity can be defined as the added value attached to a brand name or other brand elements and it includes both financial and customer-based perspectives of value. Positive brand equity is developed when people have awareness, familiarity, and brand loyalty towards the brand and hold strong, unique, and favorable brand association in memory. Brand choice and brand loyalty are highly influenced by the image that people make with the brand and marketing an athlete is all about selling an image while other product brands might have more tangible brand elements that could be managed (Arai, Ko, Ross 2013)

The financial value of a personal brand can be difficult to measure but it can be measured by practical observations. Ongoing job offers, interview requests from the media, and a high number of followers on social media are all examples of indicators that can be used to measure personal brand equity. Personal brand equity is difficult to measure but if the personal brand is successful in these areas, it clearly has value (Kurvinen, Laine, Tolvanen 2017).

It is also possible to increase intangible added value around an athlete's brand. The value of an athlete's brand is built through different components. These components are for example athletic success, personal brand story, social media channels, personality, and the appeal and attention value of the sport. Athletic success and the appeal and attention value of the sport create a good base for building brand equity but today, athletes' personalities, stories, other special skills, or strong social media channels can also add equity (Lepistö 2020). Athlete's professional skills and brand equity can also impact sports teams' brand equity. A star player can influence a team's brand equity because this person can affect the true value of a team. There is an example from basketball where the Cleveland Cavaliers sold \$1 million in season tickets within 24 hours of LeBron James announcing his return to the team. Conversely, LeBron's departure from the Miami Heat cost the team upwards of \$100 million in annual revenue. A star player in the team has a positive influence on consumer brand association and it can enhance the attractiveness of the team (Hodge, Walker 2015).

2.3.3 Gender differences

When reviewing the theory about personal brand equity, the fact that there can be a divergence between male and female athletes' personal branding and in their brand equity should be highlighted. Female athlete branding and the barriers they face in building their brands are not well researched in sports management, marketing, and diversity literature (Lobpries, Bennett, Brison 2018). However, Lobries et al (2018) have explored the phenomenon in more depth and state that there are several barriers that female athletes face when building their personal brands. For instance, female athletes receive less than 10% of sports coverage in television and print media. This already creates the perception that female athletes are not as valued and therefore not as equitable as male athlete brands. This lack of visibility for women's sports hampers the female athlete's ability to increase their brand awareness to mainstream audiences. Because of limited visibility, it is harder for female athletes to build their brand solely upon on-field performance. In addition to lack of visibility, female athletes also face challenges from gender norms when building their personal brands. Women who self-promote themselves may be seen as having the masculine characteristics of dominance and arrogance, thereby defying traditional gender norms (Lobpries et al 2018).

Another thing that differentiates female athlete brands from male athlete brands is that men are socialized to be expressive, aggressive, and exhibit contrasting behaviors. These behaviors are seemingly approved and celebrated in men, but not appropriate for women. Instead, being feminine and physically attractive are still primary components for branding the female athlete (Lobpries et al 2018). Building successful personal brands is important for female athletes because they earn a fraction of their male counterparts' salaries. Unequal payment is another problem in sports where the income of female athletes is far behind that of male athletes on average. Income differences are especially high in team sports, for example in Finland women's ice hockey players earn 0,003 euros when compared to the euro for men (Kössö 2017).

2.4 Personal branding of ice hockey players

Athletes with their own personal brands is not a new phenomenon in ice hockey, but the personal branding of athletes is done differently in other sports and leagues. In the NBA (National Basketball Association) personal branding of athletes is taken to a different level as the league is marketed and tickets are sold through individual players that have big personalities. In the NHL (National Hockey League) and in ice hockey overall this is not as common as players do not have as big personalities and do not like to make a big deal out of themselves (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Auvinen and Kuuluvainen (2017) also mention Michael Jordan from the NBA and Paul Pogba from the English Premier League as examples of players with big personal brands. Ice hockey is a very popular sport in countries such as Canada, Finland, and Russia, but in the largest sports market in the United States, ice hockey is just the fourth most popular sport after American football, baseball, and basketball (Five Reasons 2022). The highest level of ice hockey is played in Canada and in the United States in the NHL which had an average total audience delivery (TAD) of 391,000 viewers in season 2020-2021 (Carp 2021). For the 2021-2022 season the NHL signed a seven-year deal with ESPN which is one of the largest cable sports channels in the world. Immediately TAD rose to over 800,000 viewers in the first week of the new season (Young 2021). The 2022 winter Olympics were held in China and although the biggest stars of the sport were out of the Olympics this time because of Covid-19 it was still a great chance to lure new and massive audiences from China and attract more attention to the sport (Five Reasons 2022). This means that NHL and ice hockey overall will get a lot more publicity in the future, so it is important for the players to focus more on their personal brand.

2.4.1 Personal brand development in Liiga and NHL

Personal brand development is done differently in different cultures as some cultures are subdued and introverted while in others standing out is encouraged (Liu 2015). Personal brand development for ice hockey players differs also in the league they play in. Leagues have different cultures and market sizes which also affect personal brand development. Personal brand development in the Finnish

ice hockey league (Liiga) and National Hockey League (NHL) are compared here. Liiga is a Finnish ice hockey league that includes 15 teams across Finland. Liiga is still the most-watched ice hockey league in Finland, but things are changing at a fast pace as the NHL is increasing its popularity, especially with young people. The reason for this increase is the rising number of young Finnish superstars in the NHL such as Sebastian Aho, Mikko Rantanen, and Patrik Laine. These players are important role models and have interesting personal brands which makes them popular with people and the media. (Riihentupa 2021). When compared to NHL, Liiga is much smaller and has fewer viewers, but it is good to compare the player's personal brands for differences, if any, and why these occur.

The viewer market in the NHL is of course much larger which gives the players there more followers and a good boost to their personal brands. To help build their personal brands, NHL has partnered with a company called Opendorse. Opendorse is the leading athlete marketing platform, that helps players share their most powerful moments, highlights, in-game images, and other media on their own social media. Opendorse makes this very easy for the players and they can share content with just the tap of the button. For example, a player can get a message from Opendorse after a game that they have content ready for the player, and then the player can edit the content or just press approve after which Opendorse shares the content for the fans in appropriate channels. The goal of this partnership is to help players expand their presence on social media and engage more with their fans (NHL.com 2019).

To help players build their personal brands and increase their social media engagement NHL has also partnered with a company named Greenfly. The partnership enables the league's Live Social Contributors to produce and upload original social content on Greenfly's app in order to distribute the collated social content to their own audiences. It makes the content procurement process automated, seamless, and streamlined for NHL's in-house social media operators, as well as teams, players, and broadcast partners (Jones 2021). NHL is also looking to engage more with the next generation of fans through its Power Players youth advisory board which consists of youngsters aged between 13 and 17. The program provides the youth advisory board with a platform where they

can voice their opinions on how the league's digital content and marketing campaigns can be more relevant to younger generations (Jones 2022). Liiga does not have this kind of partnerships, which can also be seen in the players' social media as Liiga players share fewer pictures and more off-ice pictures from their personal lives.

2.4.2 Personal branding after a career

A sports career does not last forever. For ice hockey players, their career is relatively short when compared to a normal working career as they retire on average between the ages of 28-30 (Maymon 2021). There is always the risk of injury that can end the sports career even sooner, so it is good for all athletes to think about their career and brand before their sports career has ended. During their sports careers, athletes should think about their interests, passions, and what they want to do when they retire from sports. Athletes can develop themselves during their careers by studying and analyzing their learnings and skills. A sports career gives a unique chance to learn theories in practice, so studying or developing yourself alongside of a sports career gives the athlete a great opportunity to work as an expert in the field (Lepistö 2020).

A strong personal brand built during the sports career is an investment in the future because it is a remarkable benefit for the athlete's post-athletic career. The athlete learns to work with different people, experts in different fields, and sponsors (Lepistö 2020). Many ice hockey players become coaches, announcers, and player representatives after their sports career, but these jobs are only for the few, and many struggle to find a new career path after hanging up the skates (Miller 2013).

A good example of exploiting a strong personal brand in a post-athlete career comes from Finnish ice hockey player Ville Leino. Leino played in the NHL for several years and during his career, Leino was injured a lot and needed to take his mind off from ice hockey and stress, so he began to paint. Later his signature on the paintings became the logo of his clothing brand Billebeino (Leino n.d.) Leino was able to utilize his connections to the ice hockey and sports world with

his clothing brand because superstars such as Kimi Räikkönen, P.K Subban, and Teemu Selänne have been wearing Billebeino products (epressi.com 2020).

Another and more traditional post-athlete career example comes from another Finnish ice hockey player Olli Jokinen. Jokinen had a long and successful career in the NHL and after his sports career, he founded his own South Florida Hockey Academy where he coached many young players. In 2021 Jokinen got his first coaching job at the pro level in Finland as the head coach of Jukurit (Richards 2021).

2.5 Sport sponsorship

Due to the technological developments in the past 10-years, the way sports are produced, marketed, delivered, and consumed has changed significantly and this has created a dynamic relationship with media and sports sponsorship. Because of today's complex global business environment companies try to strengthen their brand in new ways and sports sponsorship has become a keystone within their marketing plan (Santomier 2008). Properly utilized, sponsorship is one of the most effective marketing tools. Sponsorship and the consequent strengthening of the brand can have a positive effect on consumers purchasing behavior (Hypement 2018). Bühler and Nufer (2010) define professional sports sponsorship as a business-related partnership between a sponsor and a sponsored based on reciprocity. The sponsor provides financial or non-financial resources directly to the sponsored and receives a predefined service in return in order to fulfill various sponsorship objectives. Because both sponsor and sponsored give and receive there is a clear distinction from patronage or charity donations. Continuous visibility in successful sponsorship cooperation is one of the factors that has a key impact on the memorability of the cooperation and thus on the effectiveness of the cooperation (Sponsor Insight Finland 2019).

Sports sponsorship is important for an athlete because it can bring the necessary income the athlete needs to practice their profession. Common values with the athlete and the sponsor are a good baseline for any sponsorship. When there is a good match between the athlete's and the sponsor's values and brand image,

the cooperation has potential for a long-term, continuous partnership that adds value to the company's business and builds the athlete's brand even further. Although the athlete would be very successful it could be hard to find good and matching sponsorships and most sponsorship agreements are based on a lot of pure sales work. Even for Olympic gold medalists, it can be hard to find prolonged sponsorship partners if there is no investment in other aspects of the athlete's brand. Of course, success in the sport can help the sales work but good and long-term brand building definitely helps to acquire sponsors (Lepistö 2020).

Covid-19 has had a negative impact on sports sponsorship. In Finland, the amount of sponsorships in sports decreased by 20,4% in 2020 which is in line with the whole European level (-23%). As many games and events have been canceled, social media has become the main channel for sponsorship. Instead of logo visibility, sponsorship now appears on the social media channel of the athlete or other sponsored (10.fi 2021). According to research conducted by Sponsor Insight Finland (2020), the importance of social responsibility in sponsorship was highlighted during Covid-19. 52% of the respondents will favour companies in the future that showed social responsibility during the crisis and 62% of respondents think that sponsorship is important social responsibility from the companies. The amount of sports sponsorship increased in Finland by 12,4% in 2021 (Sponsor Insight Finland 2022).

2.5.1 Relationship building with the sponsor

Signing the sponsorship contract is not the culmination of the sponsorship process. Instead, it is just the beginning, and building a strong relationship ensures greater degrees of loyalty between both parties (Ennis 2020). Identifying the factors for successful relationships in sports sponsorship is the first step in the right direction. These factors are represented in Figure 2. It all starts with the trust which is an essential variable in the relationship between the athlete and sponsors. It is important for athletes to deal fairly and openly with sponsors and not make any promises they cannot keep. Open dealing implies the courage to communicate unpleasant truths such as problems or conflicts. Of course, the same applies to the sponsoring company as well (Bühler, Nufer 2010).

Mutual understanding of each other's objectives is another crucial factor regarding good sports sponsorship. It is important that both parties of the partnership understand the objectives and the needs of the other partner. Only then can both parties help each other to reach their objectives. A long-term perspective is also a factor that enables successful relationships. Athletes should see their sponsors as long-term partners rather than as companies spending money for a few years. Sponsorship partners who look for long-term success would be well advised to build up a relationship with each other and think about relationship quality when doing so (Bühler, Nufer 2010).

Fluent sports sponsorships are also based on effective communication between the athlete and the sponsor. Communication can take many forms as some sponsorship partners keep in touch on a regular basis via phone, e-mail, or face-to-face meetings. It is important that athletes make sure that they provide important information about themselves and recent developments. For example, it would be smart to inform the sponsor about possible injuries before talking about it publicly. Cooperation is another important issue when it comes to successful sports sponsorship. Involvement in each other's marketing and planning efforts is one form of cooperation that helps to achieve both parties' sponsorship objectives. Sponsors usually have a lot of marketing skills and could therefore support the athlete in marketing issues whereas the athlete could provide sponsors with sport-related know-how in order to improve their communication with sports fans (Bühler, Nufer 2010).



Figure 2 Important factors for successful sponsorship relationship (Bühler, Nufer 2010)

2.5.2 Sponsors perspective

Sponsoring today is much more than just a logo on a team uniform and many companies do not realize the opportunities that it can offer to them. Sponsorship is still sometimes seen as just charity as it maybe has been in the past (Hypement 2018). Athlete's popularity and visibility have been the traditional reason for sponsorship but there are also more active ways to utilize the relationship between the athlete and the sponsor than just visibility in the uniform or equipment (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017).

Companies are involved in professional sports sponsorship for a multiple of benefits. One essential reason is that sponsorship of sports entities is an effective way to generate widespread awareness in a short period of time and enhance the image of the company or the brand because sports are very popular and delivers a good image (Bühler, Nufer 2010). Gaining visibility and awareness can be challenging for companies today as younger generations are skilled in filtering and preventing marketing. With sports sponsorship, companies can reach even more challenging target audiences (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Besides awareness, there are multiple other benefits for companies from sports sponsorship. For example, some companies want to improve their relationship with business associates by inviting them to games of their sponsored club or motivate their employees by giving away free tickets or merchandise. Sponsorship can also be used to promote the company's involvement in the local community which increases the company's social responsibility. Other advantages of sports sponsorship for companies are that it can be cost-effective, flexible and can reach people in numerous different ways (Bühler, Nufer 2010).

Challenges of sport sponsorship relate to performance measuring of the sponsorship. Many companies do not do it all or do not know how to measure the performance of the sponsorship. In social media sponsoring results can be measured in real-time (10.fi 2021). Other challenges of sports sponsorship relate

to the risks of using athletes as the face of the company. No matter how perfect an image the athlete might have, there is always the possibility of a negative event, association, or comment that can affect the way the athlete and their sponsors are perceived. There have been numerous cases where the athletes have been involved with substance abuse, violence, or insensitive comments on social media and no company is immune to the negative actions of athletes. It is common for athletes to suffer injuries that can impact their exposure and performance. For example, an athlete's injury before the Olympics can also be a setback for the sponsor (Chadwick, Chanavat, Desbordes 2018).

2.6 Social media as a tool for personal branding

Today social media connects billions of users, and it has become one of the best and easiest ways to build and grow a personal brand. Social media enables users to establish a reputation and become visible in specific industries. It is a good place for a personal brand to be actualized because almost everybody and everything is now online, so that is the place where personal is the most visible. Social media can help in personal brand promotion, open new career doors, and bring new opportunities for growth and development. Having accounts on different social media platforms is important because then the personal brand can reach more people (Petruca 2016). Stavros and Smith (2020) remind that great digital branding has to do more than just use new technology. Just as analogue branding it has to respond to the needs and expectations of consumers. Only adding another channel for branding will do nothing more than add the noise. Digital channels are therefore best employed where they can take advantage of the new ways that followers want and expect to engage various kinds of information and entertainment content.

2.6.1 Athletes on social media

Active use of social media is becoming necessary for athletes today. If the athlete does not want to be active in social media, they have to accept that acquiring certain kinds of partnerships is more difficult. Social media provides a platform

for increasing the attention value of target groups primarily interested in the athlete's content. It gives a chance for every athlete to build their brand and it is one of the key platforms today in brand building and the utilization of sponsorship. Through long-term commitment, the athlete can use social media as their brand-building platform and gain significant financial income. The athlete's social media channel is their own media, through which they can create their brand image, bring out their personality and life story even better than through athletic success (Lepistö 2020).

In addition to athletic performance, the athlete's fans and followers are interested in the everyday life of the athlete. Athlete's social media does not have to be smoothed over because ups and downs and challenges are part of an athlete's life so many followers can relate to that and find inspiration. This makes the athlete look more humane with weaknesses and challenges (Lepistö 2020). Athlete's social media content can be divided into frontstage and backstage content. Whereas frontstage content is closely aligned with an athlete's public personality and engaging in their chosen sport, the backstage content is more relaxed, less filtered, and presents the athlete in their personal settings. According to research athletes are more likely to post non-sport (backstage) content rather than sport-related (frontstage) content (Doyle, Su, Kunkel 2020). However, it is important to make decisions on how much the athlete wants to share about their personal lives. It is not always simple as the personal life of an athlete is interesting for many followers and backstage content gathers a lot of attention and creates an image of an easily approachable and identifiable person. Typical themes that athletes share in their social media are, for example, training and competition atmosphere, training and nutrition advice, video material behind the scenes, or Q&A (Question & Answer) sessions (Auvinen, Kuuluvainen 2017). Through social media, an athlete can also build their brand in target groups that are not primarily interested in sports. Some people are more interested in an athlete's personality and lifestyle than their athletic success and performance. Therefore, social media must truly look like an athlete and come from the athlete itself (Lepistö 2020).

2.6.2 Athletes as influencers

Influencer marketing has established itself as a crucial factor in modern marketing and it focuses on authenticity and diversity. Influencer marketing means commercial collaboration on a popular person's own channels on social media. Brands want to especially invest in micro-level influencers that might not have the most followers but who know their audience and commit to their job with authentic content. Utilizing the unique emotional charge of sports will also become an increasingly popular means of influential marketing. Brands have a chance to create awareness and lure new followers through athletes which can create new and authentic content (Heikkeri 2021).

Most companies use influencers as part of their marketing plan because today especially young generations do not watch or trust advertising. No one reads and clicks banners and ads anymore. Consumers trust their friends and family in product recommendations and today consumers can consider social media influencers as their friends. Influencer marketing is also a cost-effective and powerful tool that exists in every channel or platform (Sammis, Lincoln, Pomponi, Ng, Rodrigues, Zhou 2016). Using athletes can be interesting for many companies because not many have used them before as most of the athletes have not yet been able to commercialize themselves. Athletes are good partners for companies because they represent values that many companies want to be attached to their brand also such as unyielding and healthy. For an athlete to be an influencer he/she does not have to be the best in his/her sport. Other than world champions, companies are looking for an athlete that is a nice person that represents the same values that interest the followers of the company. Because creating content is not the athlete's primary job, they should not stress about the quality of the content either. Rather than the technical quality of the picture or video, authenticity and the athlete's own style are more important (Heikkeri 2020).

For an athlete, commercializing social media can be an attractive option because it can bring important additional income and safety in case of injury. Although it seems an attractive option, athletes should always know what they are agreeing to. Athletes and their managers should be precise with contractual matters and

especially if social media is involved. It is good for athletes to know what they can and cannot post. From a legal point of view, athletes should also pay attention because if the athlete is doing commercial cooperation with a company, they need to make sure they tell it in their posts and make it obvious to followers (Heikkeri 2020).

Being an influencer does not only mean commercial corporations with companies. Growing into a known athlete brand opens possibilities to act as an influential role model and utilize their attention value and influence also in matters they consider important. It is good for athletes to also remember what does not belong on social media. Authenticity and the feelings of sport are part of life, but in the moments of the most violent outbursts of emotion, it is good to remember that the values of every responsible athlete role model include the spirit of fair play and respect for the opponent and the players in the sport (Lepistö 2020).

2.6.3 Utilizing social media in sponsorship cooperation

Social media has become a significant part of the utilization of sponsorship, and it can support the goals of wider cooperation. The sponsor and their products or services can be regularly tagged into social media posts, mentioning the sponsor in the athlete's account biography or offering followers discount codes for the sponsor's products and services. There are several ways to utilize cooperation between the athlete and the sponsor and social media offers a good platform to support the goals of the sponsorship (Lepistö 2020).

Although social media offers an excellent platform to bring out commercial cooperation, the athlete should be aware of not over commercializing their social media channels. The fans and the followers primarily follow the athlete's story so most of the content should be kept authentic. It is also important that all sponsorships and cooperation are done with companies that the athlete can genuinely stand behind. At best the athlete would in any case share about the companies on their social media channels (Lepistö 2020).

2.6.4 Social media channels

Social media can be described as a group of internet-based applications which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Preferred social media channels are for example Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter (Karaduman 2013). Social media can offer an opportunity to spread awareness of a personal brand, but it is advisable to choose an appropriate combination of social media channels. It is not always effective to apply all available options (Zabojnik 2018).

Facebook can be used as a personal branding tool by sharing pictures, opinions, and content about one's personal life. Facebook is used in all age groups, and it can be used for personal use and professional use. Facebook is a good platform to build a personal brand and enhance professional networks but especially for athletes, it could be best to use Facebook as a professional page rather than a personal profile or at least keep these profiles separate (Deckers, Lacy 2012). Although Facebook is well designed to share all kinds of information it is important for an athlete to keep in mind not to share wrong information to the wrong people in a wrong way because it can impact their personal brand (Chritton 2014).

Instagram is a popular image-based site that has been adopted as a branding platform by many sports organizations and athletes. Instagram is favored as a branding tool because it has over one billion monthly users and it has the highest engagement of all social media platforms (Doyle, Su, Kunkel 2020). Instagram is a good personal branding tool for athletes as they switch their personal accounts to a company or content providers account with which they can collect more information about their posts (Leppänen 2019).

Twitter is a platform that enables instant sharing of opinions and ideas through "tweets" to potentially millions of followers. Tweets are short messages shared to followers that prompt conversation with other users. Twitter is a good platform for personal brand building because it is one of the easiest and quickest ways to share information, ideas, and content. Twitter also allows an athlete to share their

story with millions of users and communicating with followers and fans is made very easy on Twitter (Deckers, Lacy 2012). Most fans prefer to tweet before, during, and after the game rather than using Facebook. As with Facebook, athletes should be aware of what they write on Twitter as athletes have even been fired from their teams due to controversial tweets (Pegoraro, Jinnah 2012).

LinkedIn is a professional networking site that gives opportunities to connect with other people who share the same interests and careers. LinkedIn can be seen as a window to one's professional soul and works as an online resume. It is a way to promote the professional side of your personal brand and to tell others about your skillset, professional personality, and what makes you valuable (Deckers, Lacy 2012). LinkedIn is not yet so popular among athletes as they are not usually looking for normal work, but it can be useful for players looking to pursue entrepreneurship off the field or new investment opportunities (Murphy 2020).

3 Methodology

Research can be viewed as a tool to provide information. In order to provide information, every research requires a design. A research design serves as a gap between the research objective and what is to be done in order to realize those objectives. It is the framework for a study that guides the collection and analysis of the data. All research approaches can be divided into three categories: descriptive design, exploratory design, and causal design (Nair 2008).

The descriptive design describes phenomena without establishing the associations between factors (Nair 2008). It can describe, for example, the characteristics of a given product, the degree of product use varies with income, age, or sex. Descriptive design is used for preliminary, exploratory, and conductive studies and it is typically concerned with determining the frequency with which something occurs or how two variables vary together (Sontakki 2009). The exploratory design aims to discover new relationships and ideas. It is a preliminary investigation that does not have a rigid design and is generally based on secondary data. The objective of exploratory research is to uncover a

hypothesis that later can be tested with descriptive or experimental research (Sontakki 2009). Causal/experimental design is used to demonstrate cause-effect relationship. The experimental approach is used when it is necessary to show that one variable determines the values of other variables. Experimental research is divided into two categories: laboratory experiments and field experiments (Nair 2008).

The purpose of this research is to resolve the importance of personal branding for ice hockey players and for other athletes. The research is based on exploratory design, and it aims to identify the impact of personal branding on their career. Based on the foregoing literature review, the following research question is developed to guide the research:

- *How important is personal branding for ice hockey players and other athletes today and what is the impact on their careers?*

Due to the scope of the main research question, further research questions were prepared for support. Further research questions are formed according to the themes of the theoretical background.

Further research questions:

- *What are important aspects of athlete's brand building?*
- *What are the key factors in successful sponsorship cooperation?*
- *Is it possible for athletes to develop their personal brand without active social media use and how social media can be utilized in personal branding?*

3.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is called exploratory, and it is used to discover patterns in ideas and views. In qualitative research data can be collected through interviews, focus groups, or telephone surveys. Qualitative research aims to answer questions of what, how, and why and it is the opposite of quantitative research. Quantitative research is used to measure the issue through numerical data or

data that can be translated into usable statistics (Abuhamda, Ismail, Bsharat 2021).

This research was conducted as qualitative research in which material was collected through interviews. Qualitative research was used as a research method because the lack of literature and a reliable number of respondents that have knowledge about the subject would have proved to be challenging. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the subject through qualitative observations.

A number of interviews were used to gather information on the qualitative method. An interview is a conversation usually between two people where one person (interviewer) is seeking responses for a particular purpose from the other person (interviewee) (Gillham 2000). An interview is suitable as a research method when there is not enough information about the subject in the literature. The interview is a flexible method to gather information as the order of the questions can be changed and follow-up questions can be asked. Other advantages of the interview are the interpretability of the answers, and the risk of misunderstandings and refusal is lower. Disadvantages of an interview are related to time consumption of analysis and that the interview requires skills, and the interviewer should be trained (Hirsjärvi, Hurme 2015).

It is typical for an interview that the interviewer and respondents both have knowledge of the subject. The respondents were chosen based on their knowledge and potential useful information about the subject. Interview questions were the same for all the interviewees, but answers were not tied to the answer options and the interviewees were able to answer in their own words (Hirsjärvi, Hurme 2015).

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data used in this research was collected through four semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is an interview method where questions are the same for all participants, but the order and the formatting of the questions can be changed. In a semi-structured interview, answers are not tied up to options and the respondents can answer the questions using their own words (Hirsjärvi,

Hurme 2015). The interviews were conducted through phone calls during 10.03.2022-29.03.2022. The interview contained 22 questions which were divided into three themes based on the literature review topics. The first part of the interview dealt with the athlete's personal brand in a general way. The second part focused more on sponsorships from an athlete's point of view and the last part dealt with social media from an athlete's perspective. Interviewees were divided into two groups: ice hockey players and experts in the field. Ice hockey players gave valuable information on the subject based on their own experiences when the experts gave more diverse views on the subject. With interviewees from different categories, the data collected was comprehensive and diverse although the number of interviews was low. All the interviewees had broad experience and knowledge of the subject although they were from different age groups. All the questions in the interview were the same for all interviewees but the forms of the questions varied by category.

The interviewees were contacted through email or social media. The questions of the interview were sent to the interviewees before the actual interview. This way the quality of answers was higher as interviewees had time to prepare for their answers. Before the actual interview, all the interviewees were told the reasons and background for the interview and that responses would be published anonymously. Permission to record the interview was also requested before the interview.

Athlete A is a Finnish professional ice hockey player who plays ice hockey in the women's highest league in Finland. She has also had multiple appearances and success on the women's national hockey team.

Athlete B is a Finnish professional ice hockey player who plays in the men's highest league in Finland. He is an experienced player and has had a long-playing career in the Finnish Liiga. He is also an active player in social media who is not afraid to take a stand on things and tell his opinion.

Expert A is a marketing and media entrepreneur with over 20- years of experience in the field. He is the founder of a Finnish start-up company that publishes

interesting and useful content for sports and marketing professionals and brings athletes and brands together.

Expert B is a former professional ice hockey player who has played in the men's highest league in Finland. He is also a co-founder of an influencer marketing agency that publishes interesting and useful content on sponsorship and influencer marketing. He also works as a scout for an NHL organization.

Data analysis began by transcribing the interviews. The data was reviewed several times by reading the transcriptions and listening to the audiotapes. After reviewing the material from the interviews, the answers were divided into groups by theme. The division followed the structure of the literature review: athlete as a personal brand, sponsorship, and social media.

3.3 Limitations

Despite a comprehensive literature review and research, this study has some limitations. The primary limitation of this study is time. Time was a limitation especially in the research process as conducting interviews took a longer time than expected. The reason for this was that only a few people responded to the interview request. Because conducting interviews took longer than expected, there was time for only four interviews and less time to analyze the data which may show in the results. For future studies, the author recommends starting contacting interviewees sooner, and in different social media channels.

The second limitation concerns the lack of literature on the subject. There is not a lot of literature about the personal branding of athletes and even less concerning ice hockey players. Because of the lack of literature, the author had to rely heavily on previous studies and non-literature sources which affects the credibility of the literature review. For future studies, the author recommends choosing a sport or a topic with more reliable literature. For example, there could be more literature and studies made on the personal branding of football players as it is a more popular sport.

The third limitation of this study is the sample size and profile. Because of time limitations, only four interviews were conducted. A bigger sample size would have given more comprehensive results as there would have been more opinions on the topic. If the sample size had been bigger, data from different profiles could have been collected. For future studies, the author recommends gathering a bigger sample size from different backgrounds. For example, it would have been interesting to interview a player whose active career was in the 1990s or early 2000s.

4 Results

4.1 Ice hockey players as personal brands

All participants agreed that ice hockey players have interesting personal brands because their personalities and personal life are interesting. People are interested in what happens in the locker rooms, in players' personal life, and what kind of personalities the players actually are. The more players bring out their personalities the more interesting their personal brand also is. Some players that are not as good on the ice might have more interesting personal brands than the best players on the team.

Expert A highlights that there are already many social media influencers, and they tend to be quite similar, so ice hockey players and other athletes stand out from the crowd. Athlete B also points out that ice hockey is a fierce sport, and it enthralls people and at least in Finland ice hockey is the most popular sport so the players receive a lot of visibility and through it also interest towards them

When comparing the personal brands of hockey players to the brands of individual athletes all respondents agreed that ice hockey players could take an example of how individual athletes brand themselves. However, most of the respondents highlight the fact that ice hockey players do not have to brand themselves because they get paid anyway. Some individual athletes have to brand themselves because it is a necessity for them. Although ice hockey would

provide a good platform for personal branding, many players do not have the motivation for it because they get paid anyway.

Expert A states that ice hockey is a sport where individual players are least featured on social media. He believes that the reason for this is that in ice hockey culture, the team always comes first and the threshold to stand out is higher because you do not want to make a number of yourself. Expert B also adds that hockey culture is still a little “old school” where being different might not be good. Players seem to be moulded into a mould where putting oneself forward is not perceived as essential. Expert B also notes that ice hockey players could take an example from individual athletes’ content quality. Ice hockey players’ content quality could be a little lower as the players tend to be a little withdrawn sometimes.

All of the respondents think that teams could help the players in their personal branding, especially in providing social media content. Expert B underlines that if the team helped the players in their social media content the teams would also receive visibility through the players. Athlete A thinks that producing social media content would be easier if the teams had their own photographers that would give better quality content to the players. In Finland, only a few teams are doing this, and Expert A points out Greenfly and opendorse from NHL that help players in social media content production.

4.1.1 Key factors in athlete’s personal brand

A key factor that almost all participants mentioned in the personal brand building was being authentic. To be authentic the athlete needs to know themselves first. Athlete B mentioned that young ice hockey players need to start building their personal brands at a very young age and at that age the players might be searching for their own identity still. He also mentioned that if the personal brand is fake instead of authentic that will show eventually and that evokes a bad brand image. Expert B adds that players should highlight their own personalities and characteristics to stand out from the crowd.

Athlete A and Expert B point out that the players need to think about what they want to show about themselves and how they will show it because it is important to keep some sort of privacy. The players should focus on how they want to brand themselves and what they want to communicate with their band. It is also important to know your target audience but at the same time your resources. The players have a limited amount of time so they need to acknowledge what kind of partnerships they can jump in and spend their time with.

The author asked the participant how they have started or would start creating their personal brand and what are the challenges in personal brand building. Because of her young age, athlete A is still taking first steps in her brand building but struggles to find time for it. She adds that when she can start being a fully professional player, she can also focus more on her personal brand. Athlete B feels that building his personal brand was easy for him and it came naturally. He highlights the fact of being authentic in brand building. Expert A on the other hand points out that uncertainty about oneself and what one wants to share with others could be a challenge for athletes in their personal brand building.

4.1.2 The risks and opportunities of an athlete brand

Participants agreed that there are a lot more opportunities in athlete branding than there are risks. Sponsorships and other commercial partnerships are remarkable opportunities that a strong personal brand can enable. Through sponsorships and partnerships, athletes can earn extra income which is important, especially for young and individual athletes. Another good opportunity the respondents also mentioned was the chance to make an impact on others. Through their brand the athletes, can get their voices heard and express their opinions. Athlete A mentioned that a personal brand offers a chance to inspire young people and develop the sport. She also reminds that it is still important to keep responsibility and a bad comment can cause negative visibility. Another negative impact of a personal brand is that athletes must be on display even if they would not want to and their mistakes are judged publicly.

Expert A highlights the skills learned from personal branding as the most valuable opportunity for an athlete. From personal brand creation, the athlete learns performance skills, content production skills, and the basics of marketing. These skills are very useful if the professional sports career does not go as planned or the athlete retires. All in all, personal brand built during a sports career can be very useful in a post-athletic career. Skills and experience gained from personal brand building are useful in every industry and it can be a distinguishing factor in future job markets. A personal brand can give a good platform for a post-athletic career and an athlete's social media can be used as a free marketing channel with potential target audience or customers. Players also make a lot of connections with different people during their sports career and those connections can also be useful in a post-athletic career.

4.1.3 Gender differences

Participants agreed that there are differences in personal branding between men and women but not all agreed that building a personal brand is easier for men. Athlete A thinks that personal brand building in ice hockey is easier for men because they receive a lot more visibility than women through the team they play for. She says that men do not have to invest in personal brand building if they do not want to and they still get a lot of visibility. Expert A on the other hand thinks that personal brand building can be easier for women because it is more natural for them, and women like to bring themselves out more than men. It is more natural for women to be on social media and their followers are also more involved which makes them great partners for sponsorships.

Although respondents did not agree on the ease of brand building between the genders, they all pointed out that women generally brand themselves better than men. This is affected by the need to build a personal brand. Especially in ice hockey, women need to brand themselves because they do not earn income for playing. Through sponsorships and other partnerships, women can receive assistance with equipment costs and earn some income. Some respondents also pointed out that women can emphasize physical features better and good looks can get more followers.

4.2 Example cases

To give a better picture of ice hockey player's personal brand it is good to take a look at two example cases from NHL. The cases are from Connor McDavid and Alexander Barkov. They both are one of the best players in the NHL, but their personal brands differ a lot. These example cases are evaluated with the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) developed by Arai, Ko and, Kaplanidou (2013). The model is presented in Figure 1 in page 8, and it includes three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) and ten subdimensions.

4.2.1 Connor McDavid

Connor McDavid (25) is a Canadian ice hockey player who plays in the NHL for Edmonton Oilers. Despite his young age, he is considered as the best player in the world and is often compared to Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, and Sidney Crosby who have been carrying the same title in the past. He is seen as the face and future of the sport but not in vain (Crossman 2015). He has won three Art Ross trophies that are given to the best player of the league, three Ted Lindsay awards that are also given to the best player of the league but are voted by NHLPA (National Hockey League Player Association) members, and two Hart Memorial Trophies that is given to the most valuable player of the league (NHL.com 2022). McDavid is one of the fastest skaters in the league and is every year competing for the title of the player with the most points in the league. All trophies and player statistics prove that he is the best player in the league and that his personal brand is not lacking in athletic performance.

Attractive appearance is harder to judge but as a professional ice hockey player his body fitness has to be in perfect condition and that is often considered physically attractive. On his social media McDavid is not sharing much about his appearance as he is not wearing any designer clothes or highlighting his body fitness in his pictures.

McDavid has also a marketable lifestyle as he has many endorsement deals and is one of the biggest role models in the sport. When compared to other ice hockey players McDavid is very active on social media and has almost 1 million followers on Instagram. On his Instagram, McDavid shares a lot of content related to his endorsement deals such as CIBC, GoAuto, and Adidas, and overall McDavid has a lot of sponsors and endorsement deals for an ice hockey player. McDavid also acts as a role model for many younger players. In addition to his special skills as a player, he is doing charity work and helping others with organizations such as Canadian Tire Jumpstart. Based on MABI evaluation Connor McDavid has a very strong personal brand and shows a great example to other ice hockey players.

4.2.2 Alexander Barkov

Alexander Barkov (26) is a Finnish ice hockey player who plays in the NHL for Florida Panthers. He is one of the best players in Finland and in the whole world. He is considered to be one of the most underrated players in the NHL and the big reason for that is the city and the state where is playing. Barkov plays in Florida where ice hockey is far from the center of attention. Ice hockey media is also much more interested in the teams that are playing in Canada and in big cities in the United States (NHL.com 2019). He has won one Frank J. Selke trophy which is given to the best defensive forward and one Lady Byng Memorial trophy that is given to the player with the best sportsmanship (NHL.com). Barkov's trophies and player statistics prove that his athletic performance is first class and enhances his personal brand.

Barkov's attractive appearance is again hard to judge but as a professional ice hockey player his body fitness has to be excellent and that is often considered physically attractive. On his social media Barkov is neither sharing much about his appearance as he is not wearing any designer clothes nor highlighting his body fitness in his pictures. When compared to Connor McDavid, Barkov has more photos of him wearing his player uniform which does not give a picture of his personal style.

Barkov could have a marketable lifestyle, but he has decided not to commercialize himself as much. When compared to McDavid and other ice hockey players, Barkov is not active on social media. On Instagram, Barkov has 192 posts while McDavid has 250 posts. When compared to McDavid, Barkov does not have as many endorsement deals at least visible on his social media. Barkov has signed cooperation deals with Hockey Shot and done lately a commercial with Elisa in Finland. Although Barkov is not as active in social media, he still acts as a big role model, especially in Finland. In addition to his unique skills as a player he is doing charity work and last summer he donated over €60 000 to the children's hospital. Based on MABI evaluation Alexander Barkov has a very successful and unique personal brand but if wanted the brand could be grown to an even bigger level.

4.3 Sponsorship with ice hockey players

All the participants agreed that ice hockey players would be great targets for sponsorship. The players would be great targets because at least in Finland ice hockey is the most followed sport and companies would get a lot of visibility through ice hockey players. In Finland, ice hockey is also played across the country so the visibility would be broad. Expert A added that players tend to move to different countries to play ice hockey so the company could get worldwide visibility through the player. This would of course require a strong partnership and a product or service that can be served worldwide. He also highlighted that ice hockey players are interesting characters with great personalities which makes them great targets for sponsorship.

When asked about the current state of sponsorship among ice hockey players and if the players should acquire their own sponsors, the respondents gave mixed opinions. All of the respondents agreed that players should acquire their own sponsorships and athlete A underlined the importance of the personal sponsors in women's ice hockey, but athlete B and expert B brought up that acquiring sponsors in the Finnish men's league is hard if not even impossible. They both have player experience from the Finnish men's league, and they explain that acquiring their own sponsors is nearly impossible because of the current

agreements in the league. These agreements prevent the players from getting their own sponsors and therefore many players do not see it as sensible. Both respondents also agree that there should be some kind of change in this because that could also bring more visibility to the teams and for the whole league if the players would have their own sponsorships. Expert B also highlighted that sponsorship in ice hockey generally is going through changes. He expresses that digital marketing has become an important part of sponsorship and sponsorship today needs to be more than just a company logo in a team uniform.

4.3.1 Good sponsorship cooperation

When discussing what constitutes good sponsorship, the participants gave a lot of good answers. The most common answer was that both parties need to benefit from the partnership. It is not a successful partnership if both parties do not benefit from it and it can be much more than just a company logo or a mention in social media post. The sponsorship can include deeper cooperation such as visiting company events.

Many respondents also mentioned that the values of the athlete and the sponsor must be met. The athlete cannot start cooperation with a company that has totally different values and it would be preferable if the athlete is interested in the company's operations. This is all part of finding the perfect match between the athlete and the sponsor. The results of the sponsorship are better if the match between the athlete and the sponsor is good. Other good points the respondents brought up about good sponsorship were good communication between parties, clear responsibilities and duties, and that the cooperation needs to be important for both parties.

4.3.2 Opportunities and challenges in sponsorship

Participants mentioned the obvious opportunity of sponsorship which is the financial benefit. The financial benefit is usually the biggest motivation for a player to search for sponsors. Athlete A expresses that sponsors are important in women's ice hockey and sponsorships can relieve stress. She explained that

many female ice hockey players struggle to afford to play at a professional level, so financial benefit from the sponsors can relieve the stress when the player does not have to worry about if they can afford to play. This can also affect the results on ice when the player can focus only on the game. Expert B adds that sponsorships can provide also more than financial benefits. He relates an example from the energy drink company Red Bull which offers unique experiences to their athletes. Athletes can also benefit from the company's public image. If the company is well known and it has a good public image, the athlete can also benefit from it as people connect the company to the athlete.

There are also challenges in sponsorship and athlete A reveals that acquiring sponsors can be challenging especially in the early stages of a career because she did not have time to create a name for herself. With success and visibility, approaching companies becomes easier. She advises being bolder and thinking beforehand about what you can offer the company. Expert A stresses that acquiring sponsorships can be challenging because many other athletes are also asking for sponsorship. Therefore, athletes should stand out and have an offer ready for the company. The athlete should have a clear suggestion to the company on what they offer to the company and not just ask them for money. Expert B adds that selling yourself to the companies can be challenging but that is why it is good to have a ready offer for the companies and show what they can benefit from.

Expert A points out that acquiring sponsors and maintaining sponsor relationships also requires a lot of time. This time is taken off from training and it can affect sports performance. A company's public image can also do harm to the player and expert B points that companies could have scandals that harm also the athlete's public image. Therefore, athletes should consider with whom they do sponsorships with.

There are also risks in sponsoring ice hockey players from the company's point of view. With ice hockey players, visibility is not guaranteed, or it might not meet expectations. There are also a lot of emotions attached to ice hockey and sometimes there can be overreactions on or off ice. These overreactions can

cause harm to a company's public image, but these cases are rare and there are always risks in sponsorship that both parties have to accept.

4.4 Athletes in social media

All of the participants agreed that athletes do not have to be active on social media in order to create a personal brand for themselves, but social media offers numerous opportunities to develop a personal brand so using it would be advisable. Athlete A and expert A highlight that athletes do not have to be on social media to be the best in his/her sport. Athletic performance does not improve because of social media and athlete A adds that some athletes can build their personal brands solely through their athletic performance. If the athlete is successful, that creates already a lot of awareness and visibility.

Although the athletes do not have to be active on social media and it is possible to create a personal brand without it, all the respondents recommend using it actively because it is one of the best tools to develop a personal brand. Respondents recommend athletes to be active in social media because it is a good and easy way to reach new followers and gain visibility. Social media is a free marketing channel that can create social capital and enable commercial cooperation. Athlete B tells that his activity on social media is also noted in his player agreement. Players that are active in social media could earn more because they bring visibility to the team they play for also.

Athletes can develop their personal brands through social media by showing their personality to their followers. Respondents think that a good way to bring up an athlete's personality is to share backstage content with followers. Sharing pictures and videos from locker rooms, training sessions and personal life creates a sense of identification that brings the followers closer to the athlete. Athletes can also create and modify a certain image of themselves through social media. The athlete can bring out those things about how they want people to see them. Expert A emphasizes that social media shows what kind of people follow you and are interested in your content. Based on that information, the athletes can develop their personal brands.

When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of social media in the athlete's career, the respondents gave many more examples of advantages than disadvantages. Experts A and B highlighted that social media activity can be the decisive factor in player acquisition. If the team is struggling to choose between two equal players, the one with a good personal brand and social media activity is more likely to be chosen because they bring more value to the team also. Athlete A thinks that the biggest advantage of social media is the visibility to current and potential partners and to new followers and enthusiasts which helps to develop the whole sport. She also brings up an important factor that social media can also cause stress to some athletes. Being active in social media is not easy for every athlete and that can cause stress if they feel like they have to post content. She adds that posting social media content and thinking about what is appropriate to post takes time. Other disadvantages of social media the respondents brought up were that all the mistakes in career and in personal life are visible to all and everybody can come to comment their opinions about the athlete.

4.4.1 Social media channels

In the discussion about the best social media channel for personal branding, all the respondents agreed that Instagram is the best social media platform for personal brand development. Instagram is the best platform because it is the most common and it has the widest age distribution. Expert A emphasizes that athletes should still be active in multiple social media channels because channels have different audiences and age groups. Facebook is used today by older age groups and younger generations have moved on to Instagram or TikTok. Although Instagram or TikTok might be the most popular channels, respondents remind that athletes should use social media channels that suit them best. Social media channels should be decided based on the type of content. If the athlete wants to take a stance or post more appropriate content, then they maybe should use Twitter more but if they want to post pictures and entertaining content then Instagram could be the best option. When asked about respondents' own use of social media the athletes told that they feel using social media as their personal

branding tool is very comfortable and easy. The experts added that social media usage among athletes is very individual as some athletes are comfortable with it when others want to avoid it.

4.4.2 Utilizing social media in sponsorship cooperation

Social media is a great way to utilize sponsorship cooperation by making posts with sponsors and tagging them into photos, but athletes should still be aware of not over commercializing their social media channels. Athlete A mentions that a social media post made with a sponsor is an easy post to make and there is an idea behind the post. At the same time, she underlines that athletes should not make posts with sponsors or partners too much or too often. The followers are rarely interested in sponsors, and they might feel that the athlete is posting pictures only to get money from sponsors. Other respondents also agree that athletes should not over commercialize themselves because that does not give an authentic image of the athlete. Respondents advise that there should be a good balance between normal social media posts and the ones done in commercial cooperation. Expert A told that he advises athletes that every fourth post can be done in commercial cooperation.

4.5 Importance of personal branding for ice hockey player's career

In summary, the respondents were asked about the importance of personal branding in an ice hockey player's career. There was a division in the answers between the athletes and the experts. The athletes felt that personal branding is not necessary in an ice hockey player's career whereas the expert felt that personal branding is very important.

Athlete A highlighted that the player can succeed in the same way in their career without personal branding. She underlined that personal branding does not have anything to do with a player's performance on the ice. However, she also says that personal branding can offer a lot of help, especially in the financial aspect of a player's career. She says that acquiring sponsors and partners is much easier if the player has a strong personal brand.

Athlete B agrees with athlete A that personal branding is not necessary in terms of the player's athletic career. He also says that the player can be as good with or without personal branding. However, he also thinks that personal branding enables different opportunities in the player's career.

Expert A on the other hand thinks that personal branding is important in terms of the player's career. He felt that personal branding among ice hockey players has become even more important than it was before, and it can have an impact on player acquisition and market value.

Expert B also says that personal branding is important, but it highly depends on the career objectives of the player. He felt that no harm comes from personal branding. Vice versa, he highlights that the players can only gain from personal branding, and it is very valuable, especially in the player's post-athletic career.

5 Discussion

The objective of this research was to cover the current state of an athlete's and especially ice hockey player's personal branding and explore the importance of personal branding in their career. The research consists of three dimensions that proved important for the subject: athlete personal branding, sponsorship, and social media. These dimensions proved to be important because an athlete's strong personal brand increases visibility on social media and the number of increased followers has a significant effect on companies' desire to sponsor. However, based on the literature review and research it can be stated that ice hockey players can gain from personal branding, and it can enable a lot of opportunities, but it is not a necessity in their career. The impacts of personal branding are highlighted particularly in the player's market value and in their post-athletic career. The research showed that personal branding is more important to female players as the financial impact of personal branding is more significant. Personal branding is not a necessity for the player's career because it does not have an impact on the player's athletic performance which, after all, affects the player's career the most.

Based on the literature review and the research, the most important aspects of personal brand building are authenticity, knowing yourself, and having a clear vision of brand communication. In addition to the interview respondents, Chritton (2014) also agrees that the first step in personal branding building is to know yourself. At the beginning of any branding process, it is necessary to define the brand and in personal branding, the person is the brand and the product. Chritton (2014) also agrees that brand communication is one of the most important aspects as an appealing story about your personal brand is a good elevator pitch that can be communicated on traditional communication platforms and online platforms. In athlete personal brand building it is important to highlight Arai, Ko and, Kaplanidou (2013) Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) which emphasizes athlete's athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle as important dimensions. The research also shows that a strong personal brand can have an impact on an athlete's post-athletic career. Particularly the skills and experience gained from the personal brand building are useful in every industry and they can be utilized in an athlete's post-athletic career. Lepistö (2020) also agrees that a strong personal brand built during the sports career is an investment in the future as the athlete learns to work with different people, experts in different fields, and sponsors.

Based upon the literature review and the research, the financial benefit of sponsorship can be seen as the main opportunity of sponsorship. The financial benefit from sponsorship is particularly important for female ice hockey players because they do not earn income from playing the sport. Lepistö (2020) also thinks that sponsorship is important for athletes as it brings the necessary income the athlete needs to practice their profession. The research also points out the key factors of successful sponsorship cooperation. In order to have successful cooperation, the parties need to have the same values. The athlete cannot start cooperation with a company that has a totally different set of values. Shared values are a good start in creating the best match between the parties. This is supported by Lepistö (2020) who agrees that common values between the athlete and the sponsor are a good baseline for good sponsorship. When there is a good match between the athlete's and the sponsor's values, the cooperation has the

potential for a long-term, continuous partnership that adds value to both parties. Successful cooperation also requires that both parties benefit from it. The results of the sponsorship are better if the sponsorship matters to both parties and both benefit from it. So that both parties benefit, they need to understand each other's objectives. Bühler and Nufer (2020) emphasizes that it is important that both parties of the partnership understand the objectives and the needs of the other partner. Only then can both parties help each other to reach their objectives. Research reveals that due to technological development and Covid-19, sponsorship, in general, is going through changes. Digital marketing has become an important part of sponsorship and sponsorship today needs to be more than just a company logo in a team uniform. Santomier (2008) highlights that sports sponsorship has become a keystone for many companies within their marketing plan, but Auvinen and Kuuluvainen (2017) remind that there are also more active ways to utilize the relationship between the athlete and the sponsor than just visibility in the uniform or equipment.

Based on the research, it is not necessary for players to be active in social media to have a personal brand, but it is difficult to grow and develop a personal brand without social media activity. Social media is a free marketing tool that enables a good and easy way to reach new followers and gain visibility. The research differs somewhat from the literature review, but Lepistö (2020) agrees that if athlete does not want to be active in social media, they have to approve that acquiring certain kinds of partnerships is more difficult. Social media provides a platform for increasing the attention value of target groups primarily interested in the athlete's content. According to the research, athletes can develop their personal brand through social media by sharing backstage content with their followers, highlighting their values, and modifying a certain image of themselves. Social media also offers a chance to obtain information on athlete's followers and the athlete can develop their brand based on that information. Again Lepistö (2020) agrees that sharing backstage content is a great way to develop an athlete's personal brand because the athlete's fans and followers are interested in the everyday life of the athlete who also has ups and downs and challenges, but that the followers can relate to that and find inspiration.

The research revealed many results that were not expected on the basis of the literature review. On the basis of the literature review, the author expected personal branding to be more important for ice hockey players today. The gains and impacts of personal branding are significant and proven but the research shows that personal branding is not necessary for ice hockey players. The reason for this is that many ice hockey players are paid well anyway, so they do not see personal branding as necessary for them. Another unexpected result that emerged from the research was that it is hard for ice hockey players playing in Finland to acquire their own sponsors. The respondents said that Liiga player agreements make sponsor acquisition for individual players very difficult and that is why many players do not bother doing it. This could be the reason why individual athletes have many times better and more visible personal brands.

The research shows that the topic is broad, and it needs further investigation. Personal branding is an extensive and interesting topic that is constantly changing. New ways of implementing personal branding are constantly emerging with new trends and marketing tools. This is why continuous research on the topic would be really important as social media is constantly changing. Further investigation would be definitely needed into women athletes' personal branding. There is a gap in the literature and only a little research was conducted on the topic. Athlete A also gave very good answers during the interview and brought up interesting views that did not come up in the literature review. Further investigation would also be required on a global scale. All the respondents interviewed in the research were Finnish ice hockey players or experts that had only played in the highest Finnish ice hockey league. It would be interesting to see how the personal branding of ice hockey players is done in bigger markets and in different cultures.

6 Conclusion

This research aimed to identify the importance of personal branding for ice hockey players. Based on the literature review and qualitative research, it can be stated that personal branding is not necessary for an ice hockey player's career.

However, the results also indicate that players can gain a lot from personal branding, and it can have an impact on a player's post-athletic career. Personal branding is not necessary for an ice hockey player's career because it does not have an impact on the player's athletic performance which, after all, affects the player's career the most.

Based on the literature review, three themes proved to be important for the subject: athlete personal branding, sponsorship, and social media. These themes proved to be important because an athlete's strong personal brand increases visibility on social media and the number of increased followers has a significant effect on companies' desire to sponsor. Ice hockey is a popular sport in Finland, and it provides a visible platform for personal brand building. In personal branding the ice hockey players and other athletes need to remember to be authentic and learn to know themselves first. Sports sponsorship is going through changes and companies try to find new ways to get visibility through athletes. Other than financial benefits, the athletes also need to focus on finding the best match with sponsors where both parties benefit. It is not necessary for players to be active in social media to have a personal brand, but it is difficult to grow and develop a personal brand without social media activity. Social media is a great way to develop a personal brand because it is a free marketing tool that enables a good and easy way to reach new followers and get visibility. It is also a great way to share backstage content and acquire information on the followers on the basis of which the athlete can develop their personal brand.

The subject of personal branding of ice hockey players is relevant and important as ice hockey has gotten more attention lately. Ice hockey is getting more attention and a larger audience in North America when the National Hockey League (NHL) signed a seven-year broadcasting deal with ESPN which is one of the largest cable sports channels in the world. Ice hockey is also getting more viewers globally because the 2022 Winter Olympics were held in China. The Olympics offer more visibility to the whole sport and a chance to lure a new audience. This means that NHL and ice hockey overall will get a lot more publicity in the future, so it is important for the players to focus more on their personal brands also.

7 Recommendations

The author recommends ice hockey players and other athletes to focus more on their personal branding. The athletes can gain a lot in the forms of different cooperation and have a chance get their voices heard. The athletic career does not last forever either, so the athletes could benefit from their personal brand in their post-athletic career. The personal brand creation teaches many valuable skills which can be utilized in future career. If the athlete is aiming to be on the top of their sport it would be advisable to acquire managerial support. With managerial support the athlete can focus more on their training and athletic performance.

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Appendices

Interview questions

Personal branding:

1. What makes an ice hockey player an interesting brand?
2. What do you think are the most important things in an athlete's personal branding / brand building?
3. What are the pros and cons of a public personal brand?
4. How do you think gender differences are reflected in personal branding? Do you feel that women should build their personal brand differently than men?
5. How do you see an athlete's personal branding helping after a sports career?
6. How have/would you set out to design and build your own personal brand?
7. How ice hockey player should develop their personal brands when compared to other sports?
8. Could teams help the hockey player to create a personal brand?

Sponsorship

1. How do you see the current situation of ice hockey sponsorship in Finland and should players acquire their own sponsors?
2. What are the benefits of sponsorship? Is there a downside to sponsorship?

3. What elements are part of a good sponsorship cooperation?
4. Why would a hockey player be a good target for sponsorship?
5. Is it difficult to approach sponsors? Is acquiring sponsors challenging in Finland?
6. What opportunities / risks do you see in sponsoring hockey players from a company's perspective?

Athletes on social media

1. Is it necessary for an athlete/ice hockey player to be active on social media?
2. How can an athlete develop his/her personal brand through social media?
3. What are the benefits / disadvantages of social media in a career?
4. What do you think are the most important social media channels for personal branding?
5. Why is it good to highlight sponsors on athlete's social media? Can this be done too much?
6. Why do you see athlete's personal branding on social media as important?
7. How do you feel about making social media updates yourself? Do you prefer to update on ice hockey related post or personal life related posts?

Final question: Is personal branding important for ice hockey player's career?