

The Impact of Sports Stars' Personal Brands on Brand Love with the Mediating Role of Global Brand Value (A Study Among Sports Stars' Fans)

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era, modern marketing has adopted novel strategies to penetrate global markets by focusing on consumer identity and utilizing shared cultural symbols. As powerful tools and transnational symbols, sports stars play a key role in transferring brand meaning and forming deep emotional relationships. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of sports stars' personal brands on brand love, considering the mediating role of global brand value. In terms of purpose, this is an applied study, and methodologically, it employs a descriptive-survey design. The statistical population comprised fans of sports stars in the city of Zanjan, from which 384 individuals were selected using a convenience simple random sampling method. Data were collected using a standardized and localized questionnaire, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was utilized for data analysis. The findings indicated that all dimensions of personal branding (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence) have a positive and significant impact on global brand value. Furthermore, global brand value has a positive impact on brand love. The results confirmed that global brand value plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between sports stars' personal brands and brand love. Overall, this research highlights the necessity for managers to pay attention to the personality dimensions of stars and global brand perceptions in order to create fans' emotional loyalty.

Keywords: Global Brand Value, Personal Brand, Brand Expertise, Brand Love, Brand Congruence.

Introduction

The intersection of psychological science, consumer behavior, and sports management has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade, driven predominantly by the evolution and maturation of personal branding. Historically, the overarching value of an athlete was conceptualized almost exclusively through the lens of their on-field performance, statistical achievements, and athletic prowess. However, contemporary socio-economic paradigms within sports necessitate a broader conceptualization, viewing athletes and coaches not merely as physical competitors, but as multifaceted, psychologically complex personal brands (1). This conceptual shift has significantly elevated the commercial aspects of personal branding, fundamentally altering the psychological dynamics of how athletes interact with their fanbases, sponsors, and the broader global consumer market (2). In the modern era, the reconfiguration of an athlete's intrinsic and extrinsic value is heavily influenced by external brand sponsorship and the strategic utilization of digital ecosystems, which allow athletes to transcend



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traditional geographic boundaries and cultivate global communities (3). Consequently, the commercial potential of athletes is deeply intertwined with their digital communication strategies and how they psychologically position themselves within the highly saturated landscape of digital marketing (4). This ecosystem is in a state of continuous flux, with emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence and shifting platform power dynamics fundamentally reshaping the future of sport governance and the overarching infrastructure of athlete branding (5). To navigate this complex socio-technical environment, athlete managers and marketing professionals must employ highly sophisticated strategies to effectively monetize the athlete's brand image, recognizing that a brand's financial viability depends on a delicate balance of public perception, psychological engagement, and authentic strategic partnerships (6). This phenomenon extends far beyond localized or domestic markets; the strategic deployment and psychological resonance of athlete brands play a pivotal role in the international marketing of professional sports leagues, serving as a primary socio-cultural vehicle for penetrating new demographics and expanding global fanbases (7).

From a cognitive and psychological perspective, the efficacy of an athlete's personal brand hinges entirely on the emotional responses and behavioral intentions of the consumers. The psychological factors influencing consumer engagement on highly visual platforms like Instagram are intricate, requiring a deep understanding of cognitive triggers such as perceived authenticity, aesthetic relatability, and the cultivation of parasocial interactions (8). These underlying psychological factors dictate the overarching social media following of athletes, effectively quantifying their digital influence, social capital, and brand equity in a measurable format (9). Different demographic segments exhibit unique cognitive processing regarding these brands; for instance, students and younger demographics demonstrate specific attitudes toward athlete brand development on social media, often valuing lifestyle integration and behind-the-scenes content that fosters a psychological sense of intimacy, transparency, and peer-like connection (10). Furthermore, the visual components of a brand identity, including personal logos and the psychological impact of aesthetic rebranding, significantly influence how an athlete's core identity is cognitively processed, categorized, and retained in the memory of the public (11).

The psychological impact of an athlete's brand image on fans' subsequent behavioral outcomes is largely mediated by the depth of emotional attachment and the consumer's perceived price value of the associated products (12). When fans develop a robust, psychologically rooted emotional bond with an athlete, it significantly enhances their product involvement, highlighting the critical mediating role of celebrity endorsement in translating digital presence into tangible, real-world consumer behavior (13). This deep-seated emotional resonance is a foundational driver of brand loyalty, which is paramount for sustaining long-term commercial success and insulating the brand against competitive market forces (14). Interestingly, the cognitive motivations behind athlete-driven consumption behavior frequently extend into the realm of prestige, ego-enhancement, and luxury. The theory of prestige consumption provides a highly valuable psychological lens through which to understand why athletes themselves consume, and subsequently endorse, luxury brands; these associations project cognitive heuristics of high status, unparalleled success, and exclusivity, thereby subconsciously elevating the perceived premium value of the athlete's own personal brand in the psyche of the consumer (15).

Despite the highly curated and strategically managed nature of digital branding, the psychological authenticity of an athlete's brand is deeply rooted in their raw, lived experiences, which inherently include their vulnerabilities, traumas, and physiological limitations. Athletes operate in high-stakes, hyper-competitive environments where competitive anxiety is a ubiquitous psychological challenge that can significantly impact both performance and

public demeanor (16). Furthermore, the severe physical toll of professional sports, such as the ever-present risk of debilitating first-time anterior cruciate ligament injuries in adolescent and elite athletes, introduces profound psychological stress, identity crises, and career uncertainty (17). The arduous psychological and physiological journey of overcoming such physical setbacks, or actively addressing athletic traumas through targeted, evidence-based psychological interventions like Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), serves to deeply humanize the athlete (18). By integrating these authentic narratives of psychological resilience, trauma recovery, and mental health advocacy into their public persona, athletes cultivate a deeply authentic brand that resonates powerfully and empathetically with fans who face their own daily adversities.

Beyond personal resilience and individual trauma recovery, modern consumers increasingly apply immense psychological pressure on athletes to leverage their massive platforms for broader societal impact and moral leadership. Developing an athlete's personal brand through the integration of strategic philanthropy allows them to transcend the unidimensional identity of a mere competitor, positioning them cognitively as benevolent, morally elevated societal figures (19). Similarly, exploring the socio-psychological concept of the athlete brand as a definitive role model reveals that demonstrable prosocial behavior significantly enhances the public's perceived brand value, fostering a deep-seated fan respect that transcends athletic performance (20). However, engaging in athlete activism presents a highly complex psychological and sociological dynamic; while advocating for social justice can passionately galvanize a core, ideologically aligned fanbase, it simultaneously carries the inherent risk of alienating and polarizing broader audiences, necessitating a meticulous examination of how activism specifically and quantifiably affects the overarching brand image (21).

The strategies underpinning psychological attachment and personal branding are highly context-dependent and vary significantly across diverse demographic segments and sporting disciplines. For lifestyle and extreme sports athletes, the process of self-branding on platforms like Instagram involves a unique psychological synthesis of centering the self, performing the sport as an art form, and embodying a specific, highly stylized subcultural lifestyle that fans aspire to emulate (22). In the collegiate sporting sphere, social media serves as an absolutely foundational personal branding tool, with student-athletes distinctively perceiving and continually modifying their digital behaviors to navigate their dual, sometimes conflicting, roles as institutional representatives and emerging independent public figures (23). The sweeping psychological shifts of the post-pandemic landscape have further emphasized the absolute necessity for international student-athletes to utilize social media strategically for cross-cultural fan interaction, personal storytelling, and proactive brand cultivation (24).

Furthermore, sociological factors such as gender, systemic bias, and cultural nuances play a critical, undeniable role in shaping branding strategies and the psychological reception of the athlete. Women professional athletes frequently must employ highly strategic branding approaches deeply informed by self-presentation theory and social role theory, actively navigating and subverting entrenched systemic biases to establish authoritative, competent, and marketable digital identities (25). These psychological and societal challenges are exponentially more pronounced when examining specific intersections of identity, such as understanding, deconstructing, and overcoming the unique institutional and cultural obstacles faced by Muslim female athletes in their pursuit of equitable brand development (26). Establishing a robust, psychologically resonant athlete brand among female fanbases, particularly in developing nations or culturally conservative markets, requires highly tailored, culturally sensitive communication strategies that align with local values while promoting empowerment (27).

The conceptual and psychological boundaries of athlete branding are also rapidly expanding into non-traditional and digitized domains. For instance, the commercial mediation of Paralympic athletes often involves the socio-psychological process of “borrowing” established institutional or corporate brands to artificially create personal equity, highlighting systemic disparities in the organic development of personal brand identities for athletes with disabilities (28). Simultaneously, the rapid mainstreaming of digital stardom has led to the explosive rise of esports athlete branding, where the complex intersection of national identity, aggressive digital fan culture, and virtual performance creates entirely new, unprecedented paradigms of psychological engagement, parasocial interaction, and consumer loyalty (29).

In the context of highly localized and culturally distinct markets, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, the direct application of Western-centric global branding theories requires rigorous cultural and psychological adaptation. A targeted examination of Iranian professional athletes’ personal branding on platforms like Instagram reveals highly specific cultural nuances in how digital self-presentation directly affects fan engagement and emotional resonance (30). Designing a comprehensive, ecologically valid model for the development of professional Iranian athletes’ personal brands necessitates a robust grounded theory approach to accurately capture and integrate these unique socio-cultural dynamics and religious frameworks (31). Furthermore, actively designing and explaining the theoretical mechanisms of the personal brand image model specifically tailored for athletes in Iran provides critical academic insights into how local fans cognitively construct, perceive, and emotionally respond to the phenomenon of sports stardom (32). These highly diverse, interdisciplinary streams of research collectively underscore that an athlete’s personal brand is not merely a marketing asset, but a profoundly complex psychological construct that significantly influences global consumer perceptions of value, product quality, and ultimately, a deep, enduring emotional connection commonly conceptualized in the literature as “brand love.”

Therefore, to bridge the existing empirical gaps in understanding the psychological pathways from individual athlete characteristics to global market integration and profound consumer devotion, the aim of this study is to investigate the mediating role of global brand value in the relationship between the fundamental dimensions of sports stars’ personal brands and the ultimate development of brand love among fans.

Methods and Materials

Based on its purpose, this research is classified in the category of applied research, because its findings can be used for brand development. In terms of data collection method, this research is descriptive-survey. Also, in terms of nature and relationships between variables, this research is a causal study that investigates the relationships between independent variables (including personal brand attractiveness, congruence, and expertise), mediating variables (product quality and global brand citizenship), and the dependent variable (brand love).

The statistical population of this research includes all fans of global sports stars in the city of Zanzan. The sampling method used in this research is convenience simple random sampling, and 384 individuals were selected as the sample.

A questionnaire was used to collect the required data and measure the research variables. The questionnaire of this study consists of two general sections; the first section relates to demographic information (age, gender, education), and the second section includes questions related to the hypotheses. To measure the variables, the standardized questionnaires of Zhao et al. (2020) were utilized, which have been localized; these include brand love (6 items), global brand citizenship (3 items), product quality (3 items), brand expertise (3 items), brand

attractiveness (3 items), and brand congruence (3 items). Furthermore, a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) was used for coding.

Cronbach's alpha test was used to assess the reliability of the research instrument. The results obtained from the preliminary sample indicated acceptable reliability for all sections; such that the total Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.974, and for the components of brand expertise (0.968), brand attractiveness (0.861), brand congruence (0.864), global brand citizenship (0.956), product quality (0.946), and brand love (0.988). Regarding validity, face validity was examined through expert confirmation, and construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis, the results of which indicated appropriate factor loadings and significance for all variables.

In this study, descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. In the descriptive statistics section, measures of central tendency and dispersion such as frequency, percentage, mean, median, and standard deviation were utilized. In the inferential statistics section, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was first employed to check the normality of the variables, and then Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SPSS and LISREL software was utilized to test the hypotheses and examine the structural relationships. Furthermore, GFI, AGFI, RMSEA, NFI, and CFI indices were used to evaluate the model fit.

Findings and Results

In this section, the findings obtained from the analysis of the collected data are presented at two levels: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. In the first section, a general overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample and the status of the main research variables is delineated using measures of central tendency and dispersion. In the second section, after ensuring the normal distribution of the data, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis have been used to test the hypotheses and examine the structural relationships between the variables.

To begin the analyses, the demographic and background characteristics of the respondents were first examined to obtain a sufficient understanding of the sample structure. In this regard, the frequency distribution of variables such as gender, age, occupational status, education level, and favorite sports star was extracted. Also, the purchasing status of products advertised by sports stars was queried to measure the degree of consumer susceptibility. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic and background characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	255	65.4
	Female	135	34.6
Age	Mean	28.69	-
	Standard Deviation	7.77	-
Occupational Status	Student	171	43.8
	Self-employed	62	15.9
	Homemaker	54	13.8
	Employee	53	13.6
	Unemployed	24	6.2
	Worker	26	6.7
Education	Bachelor's degree	115	29.5
	Associate's degree	100	25.6
	Master's degree	62	15.9
	High school diploma	81	20.8
	Middle school	17	4.4

Favorite Star	Ph.D.	15	3.8
	Cristiano Ronaldo	83	21.3
	Neymar	64	16.4
	Michael Jordan	54	13.8
	LeBron James	44	11.3
	Lionel Messi	38	9.7
	Others	101	26.5
Product Purchase	Yes	312	80.0
	No	78	20.0

The results of Table 1 show that out of 384 respondents, the majority are men with 65.4%, indicating a higher presence of men among sports stars' fans in this study. The mean age of the participants is 28.69 years, which indicates that the statistical population is predominantly in the young and middle-aged categories. In terms of occupational status, the highest frequency belongs to students with 43.8% and self-employed individuals with 15.9%. Moreover, in terms of education, the majority of respondents (29.5%) hold a Bachelor's degree and 25.6% hold an Associate's degree. Regarding sports stars, Cristiano Ronaldo with 21.3% and Neymar with 16.4% have the highest number of fans. An important point is that 80% of the respondents stated that they have purchased or intend to purchase products advertised by their favorite sports stars, which highlights the prominent role of these stars in purchasing decisions.

Subsequently, the descriptive statistics of the main research variables, including the independent variables (personal brand attractiveness, expertise, and congruence), the mediating variables (product quality and global brand citizenship), and the dependent variable (brand love), are examined. For each of these variables, the mean and variance indices were calculated to determine the distribution status of the responses. The results of these calculations are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive indices of the main research variables

Variable	Mean	Variance	Interpretation
Personal brand attractiveness	3.46	1.06	Above average
Personal brand expertise	3.49	1.07	Above average
Personal brand congruence	3.65	1.07	Above average
Product quality (mediator)	3.90	1.70	High
Global brand citizenship (mediator)	3.09	1.67	Around average
Brand love (dependent)	3.49	2.81	Above average

Examining the results of Table 2 reveals that all research variables have a mean higher than the theoretical average (the number 3), which indicates a favorable status of the respondents' perceptions regarding the studied constructs. Meanwhile, the mediating variable of "product quality" has the highest mean at 3.90, indicating that respondents evaluate the quality of products associated with sports stars very highly. Following that, the independent variable of "personal brand congruence" ranks second with a mean of 3.65. The dependent variable of "brand love" also shows a mean of 3.49, demonstrating that fans have significant positive emotions and emotional attachment to the brands supported by their stars.

After examining the descriptive statistics, inferential statistical methods were used to test the research hypotheses and examine the causal relationships between variables. In the first step, to determine the appropriate type of statistical tests, the normality of the data distribution was evaluated using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results of this test for all research variables are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results for assessing the normality of variables

Variable	Number	K-S Statistic	p-value (Significance)	Decision
Brand attractiveness	384	0.542	0.231	Normal
Brand expertise	384	0.731	0.354	Normal
Brand congruence	384	0.547	0.645	Normal
Product quality	384	0.863	0.278	Normal
Global brand citizenship	384	0.628	0.345	Normal
Brand love	384	0.754	0.368	Normal

The results from Table 3 indicate that the significance value (Sig) for all research variables is greater than 0.05; therefore, the null hypothesis regarding the normal distribution of the data is confirmed at the 95% confidence level. This issue demonstrates that the collected data follow a normal distribution, and the conditions for using robust parametric tests, particularly Structural Equation Modeling, are fully met for subsequent analyses.

Table 4. Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis for All Research Variables

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	T-Value	Significance Level	Status
Personal Brand Attractiveness	I think the clothes that sports stars use are very well designed.	0.84	18.85	0.000	Confirmed
	By using the brands introduced by sports stars, one can feel comfort and quality.	0.91	20.95	0.000	Confirmed
	The equipment used by sports stars is always attractive and liked by everyone.	0.74	16.09	0.000	Confirmed
Personal Brand Expertise	The equipment used by sports stars is a perfect example of experience and innovation in sports products.	0.95	23.84	0.000	Confirmed
	The brands used by sports stars are always among the top brands.	0.96	27.27	0.000	Confirmed
	The equipment used by sports stars has extraordinary intelligence and gives its user self-confidence.	0.93	24.72	0.000	Confirmed
Personal Brand Congruence	The equipment and accessories used by sports stars are always from reputable and famous brands.	0.89	20.35	0.000	Confirmed
	The equipment and accessories used by sports stars are always approved and used by important and famous people; this is understandable to everyone.	0.84	18.91	0.000	Confirmed
	The equipment and accessories used by sports stars are a symbol of a famous and renowned brand.	0.76	16.59	0.000	Confirmed
Product Quality (Mediator)	The product quality of the equipment and accessories used by sports stars is very good.	0.95	24.76	0.000	Confirmed
	I think I always choose the clothes used by sports stars because of their excellent quality.	0.88	21.76	0.000	Confirmed
	The equipment and accessories used by sports stars say a lot about the market quality of a product.	0.94	24.24	0.000	Confirmed
Global Brand Citizenship (Mediator)	Buying the products used by sports stars makes you feel like you are a global citizen.	0.92	23.26	0.000	Confirmed
	Buying the products used by sports stars makes you feel like you are part of something bigger.	0.97	25.68	0.000	Confirmed
	Buying the equipment and accessories used by sports stars gives everyone a sense of belonging to the global market.	0.93	23.80	0.000	Confirmed
Brand Love (Dependent)	Buying the brands used by sports stars is amazing.	0.96	25.58	0.000	Confirmed
	Buying the brands used by sports stars makes everyone very happy.	0.98	26.45	0.000	Confirmed
	Buying the brands used by sports stars is enjoyable for everyone.	0.99	26.98	0.000	Confirmed
	Many people are attached to the brands used by sports stars.	0.94	24.56	0.000	Confirmed
	Many people have a great affection for the brands used by sports stars.	0.96	25.58	0.000	Confirmed
	Almost everyone loves the brands used by sports stars.	0.97	26.07	0.000	Confirmed

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) are presented in Table 4, assessing the construct validity of the research variables. For all latent variables—Personal Brand Attractiveness, Personal Brand Expertise, Personal Brand Congruence, Product Quality, Global Brand Citizenship, and Brand Love—the standardized factor loadings for all corresponding items were found to be higher than the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, the T-values associated with each item were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, indicating that all items are strong and statistically significant indicators of their respective constructs. These findings confirm the measurement model's validity and demonstrate that the questionnaire items reliably and accurately measure the intended latent variables.

After confirming the measurement model for all variables, the final structural equation model of the research was drawn, and the overall model fit indices were calculated. These indices indicate the extent to which the theoretical model of the research is consistent with the empirical data. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Overall Fit Indices of the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Fit Status
CMIN/DF (Chi-square/degrees of freedom)	2.89	Acceptable (less than 3)
GFI (Goodness of Fit Index)	0.95	Excellent (above 0.90)
AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index)	0.92	Excellent (above 0.90)
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.96	Excellent (above 0.90)
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	0.088	Acceptable (less than 0.10)

The results in Table 5 show that the structural equation model of the research has a good fit. The CMIN/DF index is 2.89, which is below the acceptable limit of 3. The GFI, AGFI, and CFI indices are all above 0.90, indicating an excellent model fit. Additionally, the RMSEA index is 0.088, which falls within the acceptable range.

Finally, the main hypotheses of the research were tested using standardized path coefficients and t-statistics within the framework of the structural equation model. The results obtained from the estimation of the final model, which includes all relationships between the independent, mediating, and dependent variables, are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Test Results

Relationship Between Variables	Standardized Coefficient (β)	T-value	Result
Effects on Product Quality (Global Value)			
Personal Brand Attractiveness → Product Quality	0.72	17.89	Confirmed
Personal Brand Expertise → Product Quality	0.70	16.54	Confirmed
Personal Brand Congruence → Product Quality	0.81	18.06	Confirmed
Effects on Global Brand Citizenship (Global Value)			
Personal Brand Attractiveness → Global Brand Citizenship	0.77	19.01	Confirmed
Personal Brand Expertise → Global Brand Citizenship	0.75	17.53	Confirmed
Personal Brand Congruence → Global Brand Citizenship	0.80	20.32	Confirmed
Effects on Brand Love			
Personal Brand Attractiveness → Brand Love	0.85	16.35	Confirmed
Personal Brand Expertise → Brand Love	0.76	15.80	Confirmed
Personal Brand Congruence → Brand Love	0.83	15.17	Confirmed
Product Quality → Brand Love	0.79	16.39	Confirmed
Global Brand Citizenship → Brand Love	0.73	17.46	Confirmed

According to the results in Table 6, all relationships examined in this research are significant at the 99% confidence level, as the T-value for all paths is greater than 1.96. Regarding the first hypothesis, which states the impact of sports stars' personal brands on global brand value, the results show that all dimensions of the personal brand (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence) have a positive and significant impact on both

dimensions of global brand value (product quality and global brand citizenship). The second hypothesis, which emphasizes the impact of global brand value on brand love, was also confirmed; product quality and global brand citizenship, as dimensions of global brand value, have a positive and significant impact on brand love with coefficients of 0.79 and 0.73, respectively. Given the significance of both direct and mediating paths, the third hypothesis regarding the mediating role of global brand value in the relationship between sports stars' personal brands and brand love is also confirmed. These results indicate that the personal brands of sports stars not only directly affect brand love but also enhance it among fans by improving perceptions related to global brand value.

Figure 1 illustrates the model of causal and structural relationships among the research variables. In this model, the independent variables, including personal brand attractiveness, expertise, and congruence, simultaneously affect the mediating variables (product quality and global brand citizenship) and the dependent variable (brand love). The mediating variables also influence the dependent variable, brand love. The standardized path coefficients are indicated on the arrows.

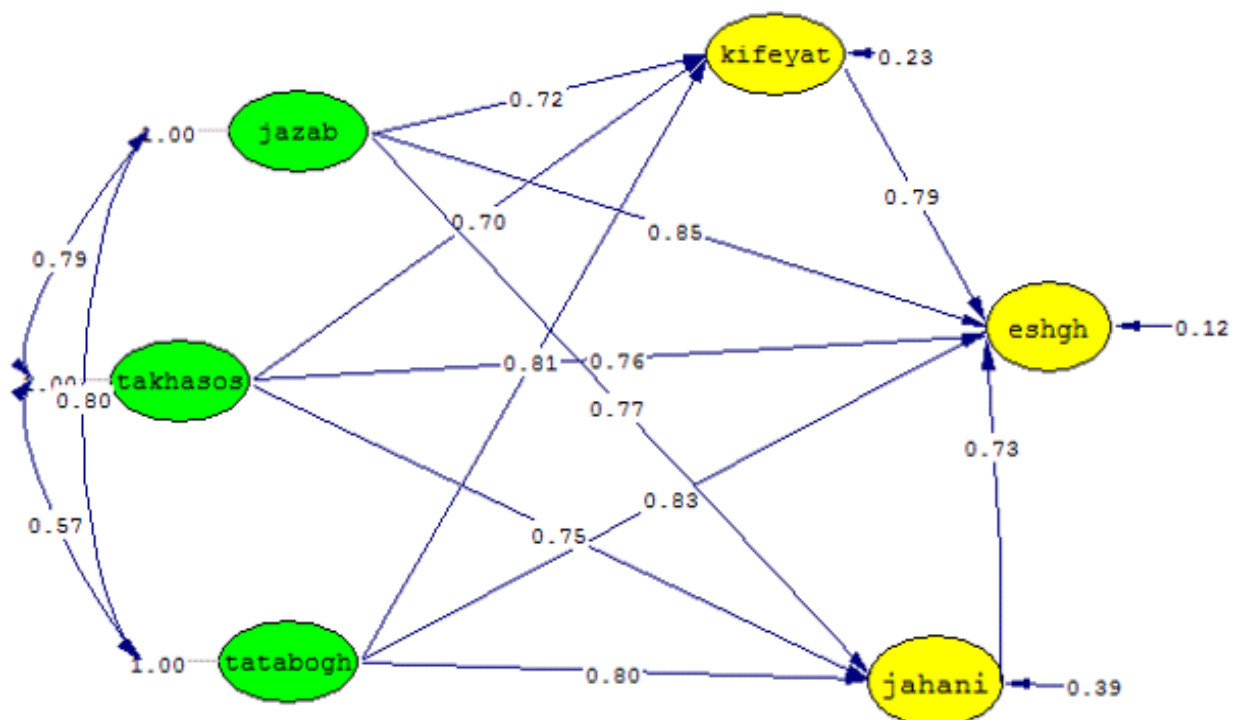


Figure 1. The final structural equation model of the research (Eshgh= Brand Love; Takhasos= Personal Brand Expertise; Kifeyat= Effects of Product Quality; Jazab= Personal Brand Attractiveness; Jahani= Global Brand Citizenship; Tatabogh= Personal Brand Congruence)

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the complex psychological and structural relationships between sports stars' personal brands, global brand value, and the subsequent development of brand love among fans. The results derived from the structural equation modeling demonstrated an excellent fit with the empirical data, confirming all hypothesized paths at the 99% confidence level ($T > 1.96$). These robust statistical findings offer significant theoretical advancements in the fields of sports psychology, consumer behavior, and digital marketing, providing empirical validation for the multidimensional impact of athlete branding in contemporary global markets.

The first major finding of this research confirms that the fundamental dimensions of a personal brand—specifically attractiveness, expertise, and congruence—exert a profoundly positive and significant impact on global brand value, conceptualized through product quality and global brand citizenship. Statistical analyses revealed that personal brand congruence had the strongest effect on product quality ($\beta = 0.81$, $T = 18.06$) and global brand citizenship ($\beta = 0.80$, $T = 20.32$), followed closely by attractiveness and expertise. This aligns seamlessly with recent scholarship emphasizing that an athlete's commercial potential is deeply reliant on how their internal identity aligns with external market expectations (4). When an athlete demonstrates high expertise—not just in athletic performance but in their overarching professional demeanor—it cognitively signals high product involvement and quality to the consumer (13). Furthermore, the robust link between personal brand attractiveness and perceived product quality supports the theory of prestige consumption, wherein fans associate aesthetically and socially attractive athletes with luxury, premium status, and superior product value (15). This dynamic is critical for the international marketing of professional sports leagues, as the global value of the league is intrinsically tied to the perceived quality and citizenship of its constituent athlete brands (7).

Furthermore, the direct effects of personal brand dimensions on brand love were found to be highly significant, with personal brand attractiveness yielding the highest direct coefficient ($\beta = 0.85$, $T = 16.35$), followed by congruence ($\beta = 0.83$, $T = 15.17$) and expertise ($\beta = 0.76$, $T = 15.80$). These direct pathways underscore the psychological reality that modern sports consumers form deep, parasocial emotional attachments directly with the athlete's persona (12). In the digital era, where platforms like Instagram dominate communication strategies, athletes actively cultivate these emotional bonds by “centering the self” and sharing highly curated, intimate aspects of their lives, which fosters a profound sense of psychological intimacy and brand love (22). The ability to generate this emotional resonance is paramount for monetizing the athlete brand image, as fans who “love” the brand exhibit higher engagement rates, greater loyalty, and increased purchase intentions (6, 8). The magnitude of these direct effects highlights that athletes are no longer merely endorsers; they are self-contained cultural phenomena capable of generating immense emotional capital and brand equity (1, 14).

Crucially, the study's results confirmed the second and third hypotheses, demonstrating that global brand value (product quality and global brand citizenship) positively influences brand love ($\beta = 0.79$ and $\beta = 0.73$, respectively) and successfully mediates the relationship between personal branding and brand love. This mediation indicates a sophisticated psychological mechanism: sports stars enhance brand love not only through direct emotional appeal but by elevating the fan's psychological sense of belonging to a global community and their perception of acquiring elite quality. When athletes engage in strategic philanthropy or activist behaviors, they enhance their “global brand citizenship,” positioning themselves as global role models (19, 20). This civic alignment deeply resonates with modern consumers who seek socially responsible brands, thereby transforming basic consumer preference into profound brand love (21). The mediation model proves that the commercial aspects of personal branding on social networks transcend simple transactional advertising, evolving into the co-creation of global social value (2, 3).

The necessity for high “expertise” and “congruence” is not limited to physical prowess but extends to the psychological resilience and authenticity the athlete demonstrates. Athletes frequently face severe physiological setbacks, such as devastating anterior cruciate ligament injuries, or debilitating psychological challenges, such as chronic competitive anxiety (16, 17). How an athlete publicly navigates recovery, potentially utilizing clinical interventions like EMDR for athletic trauma, deeply humanizes their brand (18). When fans perceive an athlete overcoming such profound adversity, the athlete's “expertise” in resilience and their “congruence” with the universal

human struggle are magnified, heavily reinforcing the mediating path of global brand value and ultimately cementing brand love.

The contextual and sociological boundaries of these findings must also be interpreted through the lens of diverse demographics and distinct cultural ecosystems. For example, the ways in which student-athletes perceive and utilize social media for personal branding involve unique cognitive behavioral modifications as they transition into the professional sphere, especially in a post-pandemic landscape that demands heightened digital fan interaction (23, 24). Similarly, the psychological strategies for cultivating brand love differ significantly for marginalized or intersectional identities. Women professional athletes, particularly Muslim female athletes, face systemic cultural obstacles in brand development, requiring highly specific self-presentation strategies to establish authoritative digital identities and cultivate fan bases in culturally conservative regions (25-27). Furthermore, in emerging digital arenas such as esports, or when dealing with the commercial mediation of Paralympic athletes, the traditional metrics of physical “expertise” are reconfigured, heavily relying on the athlete’s digital fan culture, visual aesthetic rebrands, and national identity to drive brand love (11, 28, 29).

Particularly within specific localized markets, such as Iran, the theoretical models of personal brand development must be meticulously adapted to reflect unique socio-cultural and regulatory environments. Exploring the personal branding of Iranian professional athletes on platforms like Instagram reveals that cultural congruence is an absolutely vital predictor of brand love (30). Designing grounded models for Iranian athletes confirms that local fans process “global brand citizenship” through a highly specific cultural lens, blending global market aspirations with localized ethical and social norms (31, 32). The ability of an athlete to seamlessly integrate their local cultural identity with the universal appeal of their sport—perhaps aided in the future by emerging technologies and generative AI in sports governance—is the ultimate catalyst for sustained social media following, brand equity, and enduring brand love (5, 9, 10).

Despite the robust statistical findings and the comprehensive theoretical framework utilized in this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data collection restricts the ability to make absolute causal inferences regarding the psychological development of brand love over time. Consumer sentiment and emotional attachment are highly dynamic psychological constructs that fluctuate based on an athlete’s ongoing career performance, public behavior, and shifting market trends. Second, the reliance on self-report questionnaires may introduce social desirability bias, where respondents might overstate their “love” for a brand or their perceptions of an athlete’s “global citizenship” to align with perceived social norms. Third, the study primarily focused on the positive dimensions of athlete branding, inadvertently omitting the potential moderating effects of brand transgressions, public scandals, or highly polarizing activist behaviors, which can rapidly erode perceived congruence and product quality. Finally, the demographic characteristics of the sample may limit the generalizability of the findings across entirely different sporting contexts, such as niche extreme sports versus mainstream team sports, or across drastically different socio-political geographic regions where the conceptualization of “global citizenship” may drastically vary.

To address these limitations and further advance the field of sports marketing and psychology, future research should prioritize longitudinal study designs. Tracking the trajectory of brand love and global brand value across different phases of an athlete’s career—from their rookie debut through their peak performance years, and critically, into their post-retirement transition—would provide invaluable insights into the temporal stability of personal branding. Additionally, future scholars should investigate the psychological mechanisms of brand recovery following

an athlete's public transgression or scandal, examining how pre-existing brand love acts as either a psychological buffer or an exacerbating factor in consumer forgiveness. Cross-cultural comparative studies are also highly recommended to contrast how fans in Western, individualistic societies versus Eastern, collectivistic societies differentially process athlete attractiveness, expertise, and congruence. Finally, given the rapid technological advancements in digital marketing, future research must urgently explore the impact of virtual influencers, augmented reality experiences, and artificial intelligence on the parasocial relationships between fans and athlete brands, assessing whether these digital mediums authentically replicate or artificially dilute the generation of brand love.

From a practical and managerial perspective, the findings of this study offer vital strategic guidance for sports marketers, athlete agents, and corporate sponsors. Practitioners must move beyond traditional endorsement models that solely highlight an athlete's physical prowess or competitive statistics. Instead, brand managers should meticulously craft authentic narratives that emphasize the athlete's "congruence" with the target audience's core values and the overarching ethos of the endorsed corporate brand. To actively stimulate the critical mediating variable of "global brand citizenship," athletes should be strategically aligned with socially responsible initiatives, global philanthropic campaigns, and community development programs. This positions the athlete not just as a competitor, but as a moral leader, thereby elevating the perceived global value of any associated product. Furthermore, digital communication strategies should heavily leverage behind-the-scenes content to highlight the athlete's "expertise" in overcoming adversity, maintaining discipline, and navigating psychological pressures, as this vulnerability fosters deep parasocial interaction. Ultimately, marketing campaigns should be designed not merely to sell a product, but to architect a psychological environment where the fan feels a sense of global belonging and deep emotional affection—true brand love—toward the athlete's overarching persona.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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