

Athlete Interrupted: Exploration of Athletes' Personal Brand Management in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

Times of crisis impact the careers and brand management of athletes. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as the research context as we explore how athletes react, cope with, and respond to external disturbances through modifications in their personal brand management. We employed a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with elite athletes ($N=15$). The themes were verified by reviewing participants' Instagram posts. The findings show that the COVID-19 context has created unique challenges for athletes' careers and personal branding, including emotional distress, interruptions of athletic labor, and a void in the sports-related content they rely upon in their branding. Through emotional capital, coping, and identification of marketing opportunities, the athletes addressed the challenges, increasingly leveraging digital channels to preserve and expand their brand and remain relevant in the market. Findings have implications for athletes experiencing temporary career and brand-related interruptions such as during external disturbances, illness, pregnancy, or injury.

Keywords: athlete entrepreneurship, strategic change, crisis management, social media, COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative research

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"I encourage [athletes] to use the time to work on their personal development, public speaking, social media, and bond with the family. Even to work on some DIY around the home which might need attention." (Commentary on how to cope with being away from sport during the COVID-19 pandemic by Norman Peart, former manager to Usain Bolt; Landells, 2020)

On-field performance is a core component of elite athletes' personal brands and business models, as athletes profit from selling their athletic labor (Rosen & Sanderson, 2001) as well as building their personal branding

narratives around their athletic identity (Doyle et al., 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, associated lockdowns, and pauses in professional sports have presented an opportunity to examine how athletes manage their careers when their ability to engage in athletic labor becomes infeasible. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant external disturbance for elite athletes; it has resulted in the cancellation, postponement, or drastic alteration of sporting events and leagues. Public health risks, inability to adhere to a normal training routine, and uncertainty have threatened athletes' physical form, health, careers, and brands (e.g., Mohr et al., 2020; Muriel et al., 2020; Su et

al., 2020). This has placed unprecedented pressure on the elite athlete business model and created an environmental impetus for athletes to adjust and evolve. Athletes' careers are highly unpredictable (Hasaan et al., 2019), and life events (e.g., injuries, parental leave) and external disturbances (e.g., prolonged contract negotiations) can keep athletes off the field or force them to career transitions. Therefore, examining how athletes adjust their personal branding strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic has implications for other times when athletes need to innovate their business models.

The purpose of the current study is to examine how elite athletes respond to external disturbances and adjust their career and brand management in times of crisis. Scholars' early reactions to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis suggest that the pandemic served as a driver of organizational transformation across business contexts (e.g., He & Harris, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic represented an optimal context for examining athletes' operations in times of disruption. We explore athletes' adjustments based on the framework of organizational change (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991), which indicates that to understand strategic change, one needs to discern why the change is taking place (context), the essence of change (content), and how the change occurs (process). We investigate 1) why athletes experienced pressure in times of the COVID-19 crisis, 2) how they coped with the crisis circumstances, and 3) what aspects of their personal brand management they changed in response to a crisis. Specifically, we draw on qualitative data from interviews with 15 elite athletes of diverse backgrounds and verify the emerging themes by examining participants' Instagram posts ($N = 399$) over a six-month period during the pandemic. By exploring athletes' experiences, coping strategies, and changes in career and brand management through the lens of organizational theory on strategic change, we contribute to marketing and sport management research by providing a theoretical understanding of athletes' change in operations in times of a career interruption crisis. We offer insights to industry practitioners by discussing how athletes can be supported in such times.

Theoretical Background

Athletes as Business Entities

The notion of a modern elite athlete is multifunctional and crosses multiple platforms because athletes' influence extends from the sports field to culture and the business world (Arai et al., 2014). Historically, athletes have emerged as athletic laborers (Kalman-Lamb, 2019; Rosen & Sanderson, 2001) who profited from their "individual prowess on the field" (Gilroy & Madden, 1977,

p. 768). With the evolution of modern media culture, athletes' symbolic and cultural value has increased, affording them the status of human brands (Arai et al., 2014; Carlson & Donavan, 2013) that can affect related brands, such as sponsors and teams (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Kunkel, Biscaia, et al., 2019). Athletes can also be entrepreneurial, innovative, and engage in business opportunities beyond sports (Ratten, 2015). Athletes monetize their carefully crafted reputation and public images through endorsement marketing (Kunkel, Walker, & Hodge, 2019), the production of media or personal product lines (Ratten, 2015), coaching services, and crowdfunding (Johanson, 2016). Further, they leverage their exposure and platforms to support social causes and engage in charitable behaviors, thus bearing a high cultural and societal importance (Babiak et al., 2012). Relatedly, scholarly literature suggests that athletes should be viewed as business entities holding responsibilities to other stakeholders within and outside the sport industry (Agyemang & Singer, 2011).

Branding on digital and social media platforms represents an important component of athletes' operations. A popular medium for athlete following, it serves as a means of obtaining additional financial support through sponsorship activation, facilitating athletes' connection with fans, networking within the sporting community (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2019, 2020), and promotion of athletes' off-the-field endeavors such as philanthropic activities (Kunkel et al., 2020). Athletes' communications on social media typically represent an interplay of athletic and personal content as athletes provide fans an opportunity to learn more about them without the mediation of traditional media (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Athletes' social media routines are constructed within the flow of their athletic careers (Hayes et al., 2019, 2020), and thus, an inquiry into athletes' personal brand management needs to integrate a perspective on their social media communications.

Crises and Interruptions in Athletes' Careers

Professional sport is a precarious short-lived occupation, and its sustainability can be threatened by a variety of athlete-related or external factors (Hasaan et al., 2019). In prior brand research, a crisis has traditionally been positioned as negative brand publicity that challenges brand image and authenticity (Dahlén & Lange, 2006). Relatedly, in the context of athlete branding, crisis management literature has focused on the issues of transgressions and reputational crises such as Tiger Woods' sex scandal or Lance Armstrong's doping violations (Finsterwalder et al., 2017). It was found that athlete transgressions can negatively impact athlete brands, including diminished consumer trust

(Lee & Kwak, 2017) and increased negative evaluations of athlete endorsers (Sato et al., 2015). Manageable branding activities are important for restoring an athlete's image after a transgression. Namely, strategic PR communications place emphasis on the accidental nature of transgressions as well as "rebuild" and "corrective action" strategies that highlight athlete apology and involvement in positive behaviors to help repair athlete reputation (Sato et al., 2015).

Additionally, brand crises can be thought of as temporary interruptions in athlete careers threatening their brand sustainability since athletes are workers in an entertainment industry who generally need to actively compete to stay relevant (Hasaan et al., 2019). These interruptions can be a byproduct of various life events, including failure to be drafted to a team, illness or injury, pregnancy, or—in the context of the early 2020s—a global pandemic. However, there is a gap in the literature in relation to understanding how athletes manage their brands through career interruption crises. A stream of literature has focused on the psychosocial issues related to athletes' career interruptions. For example, scholars studied athletes' transition to the post-career stage, showing that the salience of athlete identity, levels of preparedness, and social and organizational environments affect athletes' ability to transition successfully to retirement (Andrijiw, 2020; Hong & Coffee, 2018; Knights et al., 2019; Patatas et al., 2020). Further, scholars have investigated athletes' psychosocial experiences with combining motherhood and athletic careers, including the issues of having a career put on hold during pregnancy and postpartum (e.g., Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Tekavc et al., 2020). Although investigating career disturbances, the above-mentioned literature did not focus on the strategic business and branding aspects of managing an athlete's career through an interruption.

Exploring athletes' experiences with personal brand management in times when their career is put on hold is important because the strategies for managing reputational crises (e.g., Lee & Kwak, 2017; Sato et al., 2015) might not be relevant in this case. A negative reputation tends to increase publicity (Dahlén & Lange, 2006); in contrast, managing an athlete's brand through career interruptions requires maintaining relevance creatively and innovatively. Whereas negative brand publicity must be addressed through image repair (Sato et al., 2015), career interruption crises suggest athletes should search for new business opportunities. Investigating how athletes manage their brand during career interruptions is interesting theoretically because prior literature has primarily explored operations through a crisis in the organizational context (e.g., Johansen

et al., 2012; König et al., 2020) and how this occurs in the context of human brands is unclear. Practically, such investigation lays out the groundwork for designing tactics to make athletes' careers more sustainable emotionally and financially, both of which have been repeatedly named among major challenges for athletes (e.g., AP, 2020; Constantinou, 2019). To investigate athletes' experiences with brand management in times when their career is temporarily interrupted, we draw on the framework of organizational change and conduct a qualitative inquiry.

Organizational Change Framework

Consistent with a view of athletes as business entities, sport management scholars have previously applied organizational and business strategy frameworks to study the nuances of athlete brand management and its impact on affiliated parties (cf. Agyemang & Singer, 2011; Babiak et al., 2012; Kunkel et al., 2020). To understand the change in athlete operations in response to the COVID-19 crisis, we employ the *context, content, and process* (CCP) framework (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). The CCP framework recognizes the importance of contextualization, as the change processes do not exist independently of history, context, and procedures (Pettigrew, 1987; Skirstad, 2009; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Considering the "why" (context of change), the "how" (changing processes), and the "what" (content of change) is imperative to understand change (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). This approach also acknowledges the interconnection between these three analytical aspects for a comprehensive assessment of change (Pettigrew, 1987). *Context* refers to the environment where changes have taken place and includes exploration of internal and external resources, capabilities, culture, and politics (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). *Process* refers to the actions and interactions of various stakeholders involved in the change process (Pettigrew, 1987). Lastly, *content* refers to the sphere of transformation, including tangible aspects (e.g., people or products) or intangible benefits and risks (Stockdale & Standing, 2006).

Multiple sport scholars have adopted the CCP framework to examine organizational change relative to corporate sponsorships (e.g., Cousens et al., 2006) and national sport organizations and systems (e.g., Girginov & Sandanski, 2008; Skirstad, 2009; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). However, work has yet to explore the contextualization of strategic change in operations of human brands, and more specifically elite athletes, during a time of crisis. The CCP framework provides guidance on gaining clarity around how change occurs, reinforcing the historical and contextual importance of change, and exposing the complexity of

change processes (Girginov & Sandanski, 2008; Skirstad, 2009; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). For the purpose of this article, we employ three research questions based on the CCP framework to highlight a strategic change in the elite athlete's personal brand management during a crisis.

The first research question is focused on the context of change. The sport industry has seen cases of changes to athletes' modes of operation in times of career interruption crises, such as after sustaining injuries. For example, when Australian freestyle skier and Olympic gold medalist Lydia Lassila took a temporary leave from sport due to a severe knee injury, she leveraged that moment in her career to launch a line of recovery products named BodyICE (Athlete 365, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic represents a highly relevant instance of adverse conditions that have influenced many athletes' careers. An inquiry into athletes' experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects lays a foundation for understanding the premise behind entrepreneurial change and athlete innovation. Therefore:

RQ 1. Why do athletes experience pressure in times of crisis?

The second research question is focused on the process of change. Adverse conditions encountered during athletic careers require athletes to develop coping skills (Stambulova, 2017) and to adjust their operations and maintenance as brands (Sato et al., 2015). When faced with uncertainty and limited performance options, athletes are unable to create business value on the field as they conventionally would. Considering how athletes cope with crisis situations is crucial to understanding the change process as it pertains to athletes' personal brand management. Therefore:

RQ 2. How do athletes cope with a crisis?

The third research question is focused on the content of change. Innovation is critical to enhancing organizational performance and generating competitive advantages (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012). However, insights into how athletes change their approaches to career and brand management because of life events or external changes in the environment are missing in the sport marketing and management literature. An early wave of scholarship focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on athletes has revealed symptoms of changes in athletes' behavior. For instance, in relation to athlete branding, researchers have found that athletes have become more active in their content creation on social media (Feder, 2020), exploring new branding opportunities (Su et al., 2020). These findings serve as a springboard for a structured examination of the experiences and strategies influencing changes from an athlete's perspective. Thus:

RQ 3. What aspects of their personal brand management do athletes change in times of crisis?

Methods

Research Design

We used qualitative research design to examine how elite athletes react to external disturbances, cope with crises, and adjust their operations in times of crisis. Through this approach, we recognize the social construction of the organizational realm and view professional athletes as knowledgeable agents in their personal brand management decisions (Gioia et al., 2013). Therefore, we conducted semi-structured interviews to elevate participants' voices. Prior studies have shown that athletes employ social media to connect with their fans and give followers a glimpse into their athletic careers and personal lives (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). Thus, we reviewed athletes' social media content to verify the emerging themes from the analysis of the interview data and increase the rigor of our findings (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

Data Collection

The study features semi-structured interviews with 15 elite athletes to explore the phenomenon of interest while allowing for unique experiences and meanings to be unveiled. The data collection occurred within the framework of an ongoing project that focused on athlete branding. The interviews took place between May 12, 2020, and June 25, 2020. This was a window of time when athletes had experienced the disruption of the pandemic for several months after the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic (i.e., March 11, 2020) and before the sports action restarted in the summer of 2020. At the time of their respective interviews, none of the participants engaged in a competition. The unique timing of our research enabled us to gain access to athletes during unprecedented circumstances that have uniquely affected their lifestyles, careers, and self-branding experiences, which resonated in athletes' responses. The first author interviewed participants and asked questions that revolved around how athletes had been affected by COVID-19 and lockdowns (e.g., "How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact you as a person and as an athlete?"; "What changes, if any, did you observe in your personal branding during this time?"). All interviews were conducted in English via video conferencing software (i.e., Skype and Zoom) and recorded with the participants' permission. Interviews ranged from 21 to 38 minutes, with an average length of 32.4 minutes.

To verify the codes and themes emerging from the interviews, we reviewed content published on

Table 1. Overview of Participants

Respondent	Gender	Age	Country of Residence	Sport	Level	Instagram Followers*
Athlete 1	F	18–24	UK	Athletics	National team	14,000–15,000
Athlete 2	M	30+	India	Tennis	Olympian	2,000–3,000
Athlete 3	F	30+	Canada	Curling	Olympian	1,000–2,000
Athlete 4	M	25–30	USA	MMA	Elite national level	1,000–2,000
Athlete 5	F	18–24	Greece	Basketball	National team	9,000–10,000
Athlete 6	F	30+	USA	Soccer	National team	15,000–16,000
Athlete 7	F	18–24	UK	Triathlon	Elite international level	8,000–9,000
Athlete 8	M	25–30	Australia	Triathlon	National team	2,000–3,000
Athlete 9	M	25–30	Slovakia	Basketball	National team	11,000–12,000
Athlete 10	M	25–30	USA	Soccer	Professional league	5,000–6,000
Athlete 11	M	30+	USA	Weightlifting	Elite international level	1,000–2,000
Athlete 12	F	25–30	USA	Wheelchair tennis	Paralympian	12,000–13,000
Athlete 13	F	25–30	Portugal	Soccer	Professional league	2,000–3,000
Athlete 14	F	25–30	USA	Karate	National team	11,000–12,000
Athlete 15	F	30+	USA	Wheelchair tennis	Paralympian	2,000–3,000

Note. *The number of followers was approximated for anonymity considerations.

participants' official Instagram accounts. We reviewed athletes' Instagram feed in their entirety, which was crucial for verifying what content was novel in the light of the pandemic. Further, for verification of the coding of the interview data, we collected all posts that were created by athletes specifically during the initial six months of the pandemic, from March to August 2020. This six-month period was chosen because March 2020 marked the beginning of the pandemic, whereas the return of sports action (at least partially) for many global sports, including participants in this study, happened approximately in July–August 2020 (e.g., Blasi, 2020). During that six-month period, participants published 399 Instagram posts, which individually varied from five to 96 posts ($M = 26.6$, $SD = 24.83$). Instagram was deemed the optimal social media platform in our research because interview data revealed Instagram to be participants' preferred social media platform for public communication due to its visual nature and popularity. Industry insights support that Instagram is the top available branding platform (Robinson, 2020).

Participants

Study participants were elite athletes ($N = 15$) of diverse identities, including gender, age, nationality, sport, and athletic level (which was assessed through reviewing official team and league webpages), as well as different levels of personal brand development (which was judged based on social media followership and engagement with sponsors). Through purposive sampling via contacts with a marketing agency or business inquiries, we recruited current elite athletes who were

interested in participating in academic research on personal branding. Athletes resided in eight countries: Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Greece, India, Portugal, Slovakia, and the United States. We employed maximum variation sampling to reveal common tendencies across sports and international contexts (Patton, 1990). Participants were active athletes competing at national and international levels. Ten individuals had experience competing on national teams, and four had participated in Olympic and Paralympic Games or World Championships. Two participants had won a World Championship title. In addition, all elite athletes were active social media users and had a public Instagram page, where they actively engaged with their sport communities and fans. Participants' follower counts ranged from approximately 1,000 to 16,000, with an average audience size of roughly 6,100 followers. Six of 15 participants had a "verified" badge on their profile, a check that serves to confirm "the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity, or global brand" that the account represents (Instagram, 2020). Athletes were directly involved in the management of their careers and brands, including their social media presence, which made them optimal study participants. Information about the sample is presented in Table 1.

Researchers' Positionality

We recognize that researchers' backgrounds influence data interpretations and, consequently, research outcomes (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Therefore, we situate ourselves in relation to this study. The first author, who acted as an interviewer, is a former athlete who

competed at the NCAA college level, which impacted the understanding of how athletes may experience distress and cope emotionally and socially with the inability to compete. The third author consults athletes on their personal brand monetization, which influenced the perception of how athletes changed their business models. Further, all three authors are avid sports and/or fitness participants who value physical activity as a foundation for well-being, which affected our understanding of the consequences of sports stoppage and facility closures on the well-being of athletes and the general population. While we recognize our positionality in this research, we did not look for data that supported our assumptions but rather followed an inductive analytical approach to disentangle how the participants constructed their reality (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Gioia et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive analytical approach recommended by Gioia et al. (2013). Interviews were the primary data source. Initially, we transcribed the interviews verbatim and coded the data using ATLAS.ti 8. Specifically, we used an inductive open data coding process that resulted in a list of raw codes. Based on the similarities and differences between open codes, we then distilled the codes into first-order categories conceptualizing participant-central terms. Further, the codes were verified through a review of the collected Instagram posts. We consulted literature and engaged in debrief meetings and discussions to classify the data into theoretically driven second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013). Shifting back-and-forth between analysis of the interview data, verification of the themes using Instagram posts, and consultation of literature, we refined the themes. For example, in her interview, Athlete 1 discussed partnering with brands during the COVID-19 lockdown to offer at-home workouts for her followers. A review of Instagram posts suggested Athlete 1 created video posts in which she demonstrated at-home exercises. These videos were accompanied by music, encouraging textual messages, hashtags, and company tags for sponsors and brands; the posts thus allowed the participant to engage with her audience and co-promote partner brands. Such content was novel compared with Athlete 1's typical Instagram feed and did not appear before the pandemic. A review of extant literature suggested that athletes generally exhibited novel brand behaviors during the pandemic as they explored new platforms (Su et al., 2020) or types of content (Sharpe et al., 2020). These brand behaviors exemplified by Athlete 1 and verified against her posting practices and trends in literature were among the codes forming the higher-order theme of *Brand Expansion*. Finally, based on

relationships between second-order themes, we abstracted at a higher level and aggregated the themes into second-order aggregate dimensions. The relationships between first-order codes and second-order themes and theoretical dimensions are visualized through data structure (Gioia et al., 2013) in Figure 1.

Findings

Results indicated that athletes' experiences and reactions to external disturbances associated with the COVID-19 crisis occurred at both personal and professional levels. Our analysis revealed three aggregate theoretical dimensions depicting athletes' responses to the crisis: (1) participants' *experiences with COVID-19 impacts*, reflected by two themes; (2) *coping*, reflected by three themes; and (3) *changes in athlete branding*, reflected by two themes. Figure 1 provides a data structure (Gioia et al., 2013) with an overview of the findings, including exemplary quotations as well as relationships between first- and second-order concepts and theoretical dimensions.

Experiences of COVID-19 Impacts

The first theoretical dimension captured athletes' experiences of COVID-19 impacts and was reflected in two second-order themes: *emotional distress* and *interrupted athletic labor*.

Emotional Distress

The first theme concerned the emotional distress athletes experienced during the pandemic. Disease outbreaks often take a heavy toll on psychological well-being, and COVID-19 has evoked feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and depression for many (Kwon & Kwak, 2022; Su et al., 2021). Consistent with this view, athletes discussed how the circumstances of the pandemic were a source of stress and uncertainty: participants mentioned being "shocked," "depressed," or uncertain about the future because of the "new normal." Although the pandemic deeply affected these athletes' emotional states, they also realized that their feelings of negativity and uncertainty were universal. As an example, Athlete 4 stated, "A lot of people are dealing with a lot of mental issues right now and going crazy... I am going crazy myself." In a similar vein, Athlete 3 mentioned being overwhelmed by the constant presence of the pandemic, stating, "There's so much negativity going on in the world. You open up your Facebook feed, and it's COVID."

Athletes were highly committed to their profession on an emotional level. As such, being away from sport resulted in distress, including missing their usual lifestyle and the sport community. This stress was exacerbated for athletes who were already facing ongoing

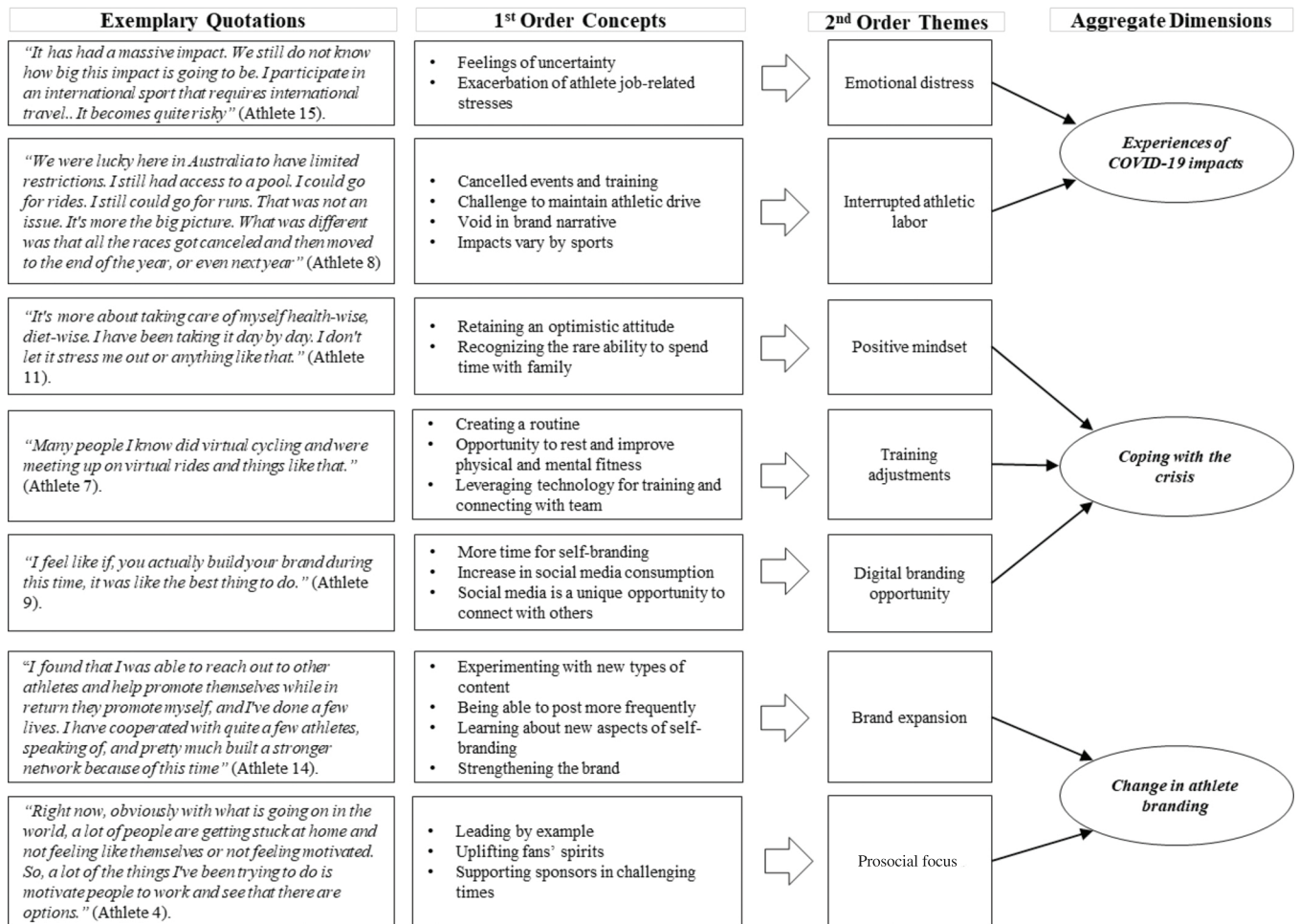


Figure 1. Data structure

issues. For instance, Athlete 12 had lost funding due to government cuts to Paralympic programs in her country, which made her “stay a little bit away from tennis because I didn’t have the funds for it.” The lack of funding combined with the lockdown, which meant she “couldn’t practice or travel or anything like that,” made her feel “really down.” Furthermore, Athlete 5 discussed her stress related to returning to professional sport from a serious injury because her recovery had been compromised by the pandemic:

Especially as an athlete who is coming back from an injury, and a very serious injury like an ACL injury, I found it extremely difficult, this COVID. I was depressed because I could not practice... It was hard for me that I did not have access to gyms, or I could not meet with my coach, and I was trying to do everything on my own.

Interrupted Athletic Labor

The second theme—*interrupted athletic labor*—revealed how COVID-19 lockdowns had influenced athletes’ professional lives because the pandemic had

altered their regular lifestyle and personal branding routines. Naturally, in a high-performance spectator sport, athletic labor is the central component of sport organizations while the athlete is the laborer (Kallman-Lamb, 2019). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns made it difficult for athletes to train and impossible for them to perform at events. Athlete 14 described her experiences with the stoppage of sports:

I was gearing [up] towards the Olympic qualification tournament. Just like that, it disappeared. I went back home from the training camp where I was supposed to be on the road for three-four months until that tournament. [The lockdown] shut down everything. The first month was a shock... Our head coach gave us a daily training program that I was able to maintain pretty much until July, but now all competitions are canceled.

Canceled competition schedules, intermittent training due to athletic facility closures, and an inability to train with coaches and teams were common points of

discussion, consistent with sentiments illustrated in an earlier commentary by Whales et al. (2020), who interviewed two professional netball athletes in Australia. These external disturbances challenged athletes' athletic drive and motivation. For instance, Athlete 4 explained,

Some days I doubted, "Do I still love this? Do I still want to do this?" And all it takes is just taking away the ability of doing it... It is crazy. This is the longest time I have not been allowed to grapple, or wrestle, or do anything with someone else.

Other participants, such as Athlete 6, expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused one of the longest breaks from sport they had experienced in their careers:

I think it was the first time where I did not have the game really on a daily basis... And had to train on my own. I live by myself, so I cannot train with other people. So that was another challenge. Just, I think, the mental component and the drive every single day to stay on top of it [was challenging], stay disciplined, and stay focused because you did not know: Do I have two weeks? Do I have two months? Do I have a season? Do I not have a season?

Participants frequently mentioned an inability to train and perform as usual, along with their experiences and feelings associated with these issues, in Instagram posts. For instance, Athlete 4 used phrasing such as "hungry" and "dying to get back" in one of his posts when reflecting on his inability to perform, whereas Athlete 11 conveyed to his audience that he was "itching" to return to sport. Participants also kept their Instagram audiences up to date on event cancellations and their impatience to return to their normal routines. At the same time, it appeared that the seriousness and burden of COVID-19 differentially affected athletes across different sports. The training regimens of athletes in individual sports that could be practiced outdoors, such as athletics or triathlon, were less affected by disturbances associated with lockdowns, whereas the impacts were stronger among athletes in team and contact sports or in sports requiring special equipment (e.g., weightlifting).

Finally, participants stated that COVID-19 introduced unforeseen self-branding challenges. Content that features athletes during sports action is a major part of athletes' brand narratives (Doyle et al., 2020). Yet, with the stoppage of regular sporting activities, participants encountered an unexpected void in their brand narratives, given an inability to deliver typical content about competition and training: "As opposed to using social media to report results at tournaments, you end up reporting how you're dealing with the

impact of this virus" (Athlete 15). Athletes thus had to create content "off the cuff" (Athlete 1) and were challenged to create new types of content to keep followers engaged because the traditional narrative about an athlete's lifestyle had changed: "I feel like no one was playing, not basketball, not NHL... So, if you want to stay in touch with your audience, you got to do something, you got to find a way" (Athlete 9). Athletes' experiences dealing with emotional stress and interrupted athletic labor affected how they coped with the crisis.

Coping with the Crisis

The second theoretical dimension captured athletes' coping strategies and was reflected in the three second-order themes of a *positive mindset*, *training adjustments*, and *digital branding opportunity*. These coping strategies refer to thoughts and behavior that help athletes manage the external demands of the crisis and are discussed together, given their interaction.

Positive Mindset

High-performance sports put individuals in high-pressure mental and physical situations, enticing them to develop coping skills (Stambulova, 2017). Off the field, these coping skills translate into emotional capital in the forms of confidence, self-efficacy, persistence, and determination, which athletes can leverage in other domains of life, such as business ventures and entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, athletes relied on their emotional capital by retaining a positive mindset in the face of adversity as they coped and adjusted to the crisis:

I love the saying: "Tough times do not last; tough people do." And that is what I have been telling everybody during this quarantine. Every day in life, man, if it [is not challenging], it is probably not going to make you better... I think COVID-19, in some ways, was a blessing because I got to change things for my business. I got to change things in my life, and I got to change my mindset. And I am still ready to go. (Athlete 4)

Recognizing the importance of staying positive, athletes tried encouraging positivity in others. For example, when discussing the motivation behind a recent Instagram post where she asked followers to reply in the comments about what they were grateful for at the moment, Athlete 6 said,

Just to kind of engage fans and see what they are grateful for at this time because we are all going through these unprecedented times, things we have never been through. So, I am just trying to look on the positive side and be more positive about it.

In a similar vein, Athlete 3 discussed creating posts that would invoke positive and patriotic feelings in her followers: “I’m really big on spreading positivity, especially now... So I’m constantly on the warpath to try to show positivity, creating that positive spirit and showing how I’m proud of being a Canadian.” Other athletes also discussed practicing gratitude for the new opportunities they could enjoy due to the lockdown. For example, Athlete 5 explained

It is hard for everybody, but priority is our health now. I want always to feel blessed and see glass half full. And for the first time in many, many years, we have the time to be around our families and to relax and to rest.

As mentioned by Athlete 5, the pandemic allowed athletes, many of whom spend long blocks of time away from home, to compensate for the lack of a work/family time balance. Similar feelings were echoed by Athlete 13:

As an athlete, my season was canceled. [laughs] That was not fun. As a person, I had to come home early, which was great to be around family at this time. I think COVID has strengthened my friendships a lot more because I am always overseas, and timing is different, but now it is like nothing to do. I am able to connect with people via FaceTime and actually focus on texting people. Now I’m back in the correct time zone. That is also easier. To me, it has actually been a blessing to have this quality time with friends and family now that I’m home.

The glimpses of athletes’ time at home were included in their social media narratives, including celebrating holidays with family, relaxing, or working out with family members, representing episodes of the behind-the-scenes backstage narratives in their content (cf., Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

Adjustments to Training

The lockdown also gave athletes a chance to adjust their approaches to training, addressing areas of their regimen that tended to be overlooked during busy regular seasons. Thus, some athletes discussed that with competition put on pause, they could take care of their health to rest and recover physically and mentally: “Usually, as athletes, we never rest. So, it was a good time from [this] perspective that we got the opportunity to rest” (Athlete 5). For others, the circumstances provided a chance to improve their physical and mental fitness, which involved adapting to a new lifestyle by creating a training routine and staying disciplined. Athlete 8 mentioned he was able to improve his form through more training:

That was a great time just to build the better base, training a little bit more. Some of the other professionals even had downtime or free time just to recover and get themselves in a better mental shape. So yeah, different strategies. But for me, training has been the main goal in my head.

Similarly, Athlete 15 recognized that the lockdown had given her time to work on fitness and incorporate video analysis components into her training, which she otherwise would not have done:

Never in a tennis person’s career do you generally get a 10-week, 12-week, could be a few months, training block at home... I feel like I am getting better; I am getting fitter; I am getting faster. I have also got time to watch matches and do video analysis. My approach has become a much better, wider approach, although initially, it was quite narrow. The negative part of COVID has been a massive positive part for me as well. [...] Initially, when the Paralympics were postponed, there was a lot of “How are you feeling about that?” There were constant interviews about the postponement of the Paralympics and how that is affecting me. Actually, like I said, it has given me an extra year to get better in many ways. I am using it as a positive thing. Some people might feel that their chance to compete at Paralympic Games due to their disability might be taken away from them because of the delay. Hopefully, fingers crossed, that will not be the case for me.

The lockdown also boosted athletes’ usage of virtual approaches to training and team interaction (Whales et al., 2020). Participants mentioned leveraging technology to connect with their team and coaches and engage in new forms of training by setting aside time for virtual team meetings, online training, virtual rides, and group chats with teammates to report their progress. These changes in athletes’ routines and training informed the content they shared on Instagram. They posted photos and videos of at-home training and thanked individuals and brands for assisting them with at-home equipment and routines. For instance, Athlete 15 created a post thanking her sports federation for supplying her with at-home training equipment, whereas other athletes expressed gratitude for support from their sponsors. Athletes complemented their Instagram posts with encouraging textual messages urging followers to stay positive and look for options to remain physically active.

Digital Branding Opportunity

Finally, most athletes recognized that the disturbances associated with COVID-19 lockdowns provided

an opportunity to work on branding aspects of their careers. Notably, during COVID-19, social media has emerged as a primary channel for sports organizations and athletes to interact with fans (Hayes, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020). For example, Athlete 4 observed: “Social media was just the only thing I could do for a while.” The chance to leverage the brand component of the athlete business model came with increased free time as well as observed changes in fans’ behavior, particularly within the digital space. This “extra time” allowed many participants to engage in projects they had put off due to their schedules, such as brand building on social media: “I just became more active on social media because I have the whole time to do it” (Athlete 2).

Furthermore, athletes’ growing attention to personal branding in the digital space was explained by their understanding that the pandemic has invoked changes and new trends on social media. Participants’ observations of change were based on their own social media consumption practices as well as their followers’ behavior: “This is how people are sharing information right now, on social media. I know it’s how I consume a lot of things, too” (Athlete 3). To highlight changes in users’ behavior on social media, Athlete 1 stated that before the pandemic, she paid attention to the peak times when her followers were engaged; during the pandemic, however, “people are at home and... their lunch break, so to speak, is whenever. So, you can kind of dictate [posting times] whenever.” In relation to changes in social media engagement, Athlete 7 remarked an increase in followers on her account:

On social media, my following went up hugely, which is really interesting. It literally went up like a thousand followers during the lockdown. Because people are more engaged, I guess... I think it is a real opportunity to learn new things on social media. When everyone is online, you get really good feedback. What works and what does not is very clear.

Participants also realized that social media provided a diversion for fans during lockdowns. An increase in people’s social media use therefore represented a potent marketing opportunity: “If you actually build your brand during this time, it was like the best thing to do” (Athlete 9). Athletes’ coping strategies of opportunity search formed the foundation for strategic actions related to brand innovation.

Changes in Athlete Branding

The third theoretical dimension reflected how athletes strategically innovated their personal brand management on two second-order themes: *brand expansion* and *prosocial focus*.

Brand Expansion

Findings revealed that athletes responded to COVID-19 with an entrepreneurial mindset, bringing strategic changes to their operations: “If I cannot really train as an athlete, then let me go ahead and work more on my marketing aspect” (Athlete 11). To innovate their personal brands in the absence of sport action, athletes focused on the marketing aspects of their careers. Examples of changes that athletes introduced to self-branding included virtual personal training offerings, paid advertising, and collaborations with other athletes to co-promote their personal brands.

As athletes sought to stay engaged with their audiences, many experimented with creative types of content and used it to strategically build their personal brands. For example, several athletes took part in social media challenges to stay connected with their fan bases and regular users seeking entertainment. Athlete 12 participated in Andy Murray’s “100 volley challenge,” which required completing 100 volleys with a partner (ATP Tour, 2020). Relatedly, Athlete 7 joined a bike ride challenge and used the occasion to organize a fundraiser among her followers for a charity she supports. Though athletes could no longer create their usual content centered around athletic endeavors, sports-related content was now integrated primarily through at-home workouts or motivational, reflective, and throwback posts featuring athletic photographs from before the pandemic. These additions created a new space for the promotion of participants’ sponsors.

Athletes also experimented with non-sports-related content. For instance, Athlete 2 launched a weekly podcast in collaboration with his national sports federation, which he actively promoted on social media. Athlete 5 attempted to interact with fans through a series of personal gear giveaways. Athletes 7 and 14 began marketing virtual personal training sessions as a form of social media self-branding promotion:

Really, before the pandemic, I was just working for myself and in the moment. During the pandemic, I had to think ahead. I know the world was shut down, but I had to think, once the world goes back to normal, I need to be ahead of everyone. It goes for everything. But I would like to say that I was pretty much ahead of all the karate athletes, as far as I know, with utilizing social media to promote myself. [In relation] to virtual classes, I think I was one of the first few in the country to be able to offer that opportunity and do it professionally and market it correctly.

Moreover, Athlete 1 discussed launching a weekly video series on Instagram during lockdown:

I created this little thing where I do videos every Wednesday, and people were like, “Oh my gosh, it’s so nice to hear or see you, getting to know you more in this way.” I did not really do many videos before. And so, it has just been a nice way for me to convey my personality in a different way. So yes, COVID has helped my social media convey more of a personality.

Similarly, Athlete 9 used time in lockdown to expand his social media brand by developing a cooking project on YouTube and Instagram:

I always wanted to do something with food... And now, because of the coronavirus, I had a lot of time... so I did it, and I think it was one of the best things I did in my life!

As participants discussed their efforts to grow their personal brands, some spoke about laying the groundwork for the future once the pandemic subsides and their sports resume.

Athlete 4 remarked that COVID-19 pushed him “to evolve,” especially with respect to adopting technology. Athlete 11 spoke about connecting with relevant stakeholders, such as followers and partner brands, to solicit feedback and reflect on the next steps in building his brand:

It is being able to touch base with any companies, any demographics that have been addressing me in the past, being able to actually have more sit-down, in-depth conversations during this time of COVID-19. You have all the time in the world to really think of what you can do on your next steps, especially after we get out of this pandemic. I just want to make sure that I cross all areas of what I need to do before I get back to business.

Prosocial Focus

Beyond brand expansion, a major component of athletes’ activities and strategies on social media involved strategically displaying *prosocial focus*. Prior studies have indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic generated an altruistic tone in athlete branding and heightened athletes’ level of involvement with the community (Sharpe et al., 2020). Relatedly, the participants in our study used various avenues to engage with their community as they felt that visibility afforded them the chance to exercise their “role model” qualities and lead by example:

I think athletes are good role models because they are disciplined... Athletes gave instructions and helped people... When you see your role model follow the instructions, then you will follow them

too... So during quarantine, I changed the way I was posting. I was posting more about the [public] health problem. I was posting about some work that I was doing at home. I wanted to inspire people and find ways to tell them that we can work from home. (Athlete 5)

Most participants took the initiative to help others during these trying times:

I think staying involved and connected with the community was huge. ... I put myself out there because we are all struggling, and it is a really hard time for people. ... As an athlete, it’s not always about me. There is a lot more to the game than just us, and we need our fans. We need that engagement... If I can help people in the process and bring a smile to some kids or fans, that is what matters. (Athlete 6)

In their pursuit to serve as positive role models during a challenging period, participants published posts intended to educate their audience about pandemic-related issues. They also urged followers to stay home and follow health professionals’ advice. For instance, Athlete 1 created a video post in which she emphasized the importance of mental health during the public health crisis and summarized several techniques professional athletes commonly use to cope with stress and maintain their mental health. Athlete 10 also created a video for his followers in which he implored them to stay home and adhere to medical experts’ guidance. Additionally, he posted a creative video reminder about handwashing that featured a scoring attack by his team that lasted 20 seconds (i.e., the recommended time for handwashing). Participants posted instructions for at-home workouts they created individually or in partnership with other brands and organizations. For instance, Athlete 1 partnered with her clothing sponsors to create a series of video workouts on Instagram, whereas Athlete 6 collaborated with a youth sports organization. Athletes shared ideas and advice on ways to stay active and aspirational quotes. Finally, participants mentioned wanting to help others through donations and community involvement, either individually or with their teams, to mitigate the adverse effects of public health and social crises in their communities.

Discussion and Contributions

The purpose of the current study was to examine how elite athletes respond to external disturbances and adjust their career and brand management in times of crisis. Our results provide a strategic management perspective on research related to athletes (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Carlson & Donovan, 2013). The CCP

framework (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991) helped to guide our investigation of how athletes as business entities change their brand development and monetization through on- and off-the-field activities (Agyemang & Singer, 2011). By doing so, we highlight how in the era of proliferation of brand culture, influencer economies, and self-enterprises, the CCP framework that has been previously applied in organizational contexts provides a potential to understand the processes of change in the management of human brands, such as professional athletes. The current study builds on previous work involving athletes' experiences with personal branding in traditional contexts (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020) and addresses a research gap in understanding an athlete-level perspective in crisis management (Ratten, 2020).

The first research question focused on athletes' experiences with crisis impacts, addressing the context dimension of the CCP framework. Findings indicated that athletes' experiences of *emotional distress* and the challenges following *interrupted athletic labor* reflect the "why" of strategic change in athletes' personal brand management, representing a unique context that spurred innovation (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). Uncertainty and anxieties related to the crisis, together with unanticipated modifications to athletes' lifestyle and branding routines, contextualize the process of change in the elite athlete's personal brand management within the broader environment of the pandemic and the stoppage of professional sports. Further, as individuals whose brand is built around their athletic talent, athletes struggled during the lockdown not only because they were held back from competition and needed to alter their training but also because, without athletic content, they encountered a void in their branding narratives (cf., Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). These contextual factors threatened athletes' brands and spurred change in their branding strategies. These themes represent an important finding because they indicate that the pandemic served as a striking external disturbance to the elite athlete business model, halting athletes' traditional operations as brand entities. Overall, the crisis represented an external stimulus that threatened athletes' profession and spurred organizational change (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

The second research question investigated how athletes coped with the effects of the pandemic and the associated stoppage of sports, addressing the process dimension of the CCP framework. Insight into athletes' responses to the crisis showed that athletes developed coping strategies that manifested through a *positive mindset*, *training adjustments*, and identification of an emerging *digital branding opportunity*. A positive

mindset and psychological capital are deemed essential for entrepreneurial success (Baluku et al., 2018). Whereas prior literature has suggested that athletes' emotional capital accumulated through involvement in sports benefits them in entrepreneurial activities (Ratten, 2015), we find that a similar mechanism helps them cope in a crisis situation. Athletes' resolution to look at the "bright side" of the situation inspired adjustments to life and career, such as re-instilling a work-family balance, modifying recovery, training routines, and team communication, as well as driving a search for new business opportunities. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the latter was manifested by identifying social media as a promising space for personal brand maintenance and expansion (cf. Hayes, 2020; Su et al., 2020). The deliberate attempts to look for emotional support and positively reframe the situation resonate with the notion of emotion-focused coping (Schellenberg et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, emotion-focused coping has also been observed in other contexts: for instance, in how fans coped with the suspension of the sports action (Kwon & Kwak, 2022). Thus, athletes' response strategies reflect the "how" of organizational change in athletes' personal brand management and correspond to the process dimension of the CCP framework (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991).

This change process is examined by exploring the actions and interactions of various stakeholders (Pettigrew, 1987), which often include athletes, their coaches, sport federations, and partner brands through virtual collaboration over training programs, supply of athletes with resources for home training, and social media co-creation. Athletes' coping processes point to their capacity to assess their external environment, understand trends in consumer behavior, and respond with internal changes intended to maintain coherence in their operations as brands and businesses. For example, the process of change in athletes' careers included a shift from competing to honing their fitness and athletic talents via recovery programs and restructured training regimens as implemented by their coaches. In this case, athletes built their personal brand by allowing followers to get a 'behind-the-scenes' look at their day-to-day training requirements. As athletes saw a spike in follower engagement on social media associated with the general population's confinement at home due to social distancing measures (Nielsen, 2020), they recognized the potential of social media for building and strengthening their brand in the absence of sport action. Relatedly, athletes sought to expand into new digital spaces where they can provide new services, such as podcasts and virtual training programs, and

new internet platforms (e.g., YouTube). This process also included activating brand relationships to co-produce new types of content on social media and provide evidence of brand development innovation triggered through a crisis.

The third research question asked how athletes innovate their operations in times of crisis, addressing the content dimension of the CCP framework. Results show that athletes increased emphasis on *brand expansion* and *prosocial focus* in their branding, which reflects the “what” of strategic change in athletes’ personal brand management (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). When COVID-19 brought professional sports action to a halt and barred athletes from engaging in athletic labor, the ratio of the “human” and “brand” (cf., Carlson & Donovan, 2013) components in athletes’ business models began to shift. The role of the “human” component, representing a sports performer on the field, naturally diminished, whereas athletes paid renewed attention to their online marketing channels for branding (cf. Doyle et al., 2020). In recognizing how the change process occurred with training regimens and adapting to new interactions with followers, the athletes transformed their personal brands with new types of content, including interactive “challenges,” throwback posts, behind-the-scenes chronicles, new creative projects, and encouraging posts for followers. Overall, this highlights how athletes learned to push themselves to become more knowledgeable about how personal brands can be built creatively and strategically (cf., Geurin, 2017; Hodge & Walker, 2015) and tried new avenues for self-promotion (Su et al., 2020). These changes make athletes less dependent on their on-field performance (cf., Arai et al., 2014), making athlete brands more shock-proof in relation to potential on-field failures or future disruptions.

In acknowledging the emotional pain and societal scars caused by COVID-19, athletes retained their positions as role models contributing to society (cf. Kunkel et al., 2020) by emphasizing the prosocial aspect of self-branding. This approach provided an “altruistic tone” to their communication (Sharpe et al., 2020). Further, athletes exhibited their ‘civic duty’ through motivational posts, posts promoting adherence to social distancing norms and advice of the authorities, and recommendations on healthy lifestyle and exercise at home. By leaning into the human brand by showing their adjustment and positive mindset in times of crisis on social media, athletes sought to inspire their audiences to persevere through the crisis.

Overall, by combining existing conceptualizations of athlete brands (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), athletes as businesses

(Agyemang & Singer, 2011), and athletes’ emotional capital (Ratten, 2015), this research extends prior work conducted in traditional contexts that suggested athletes may see branding as a secondary component of their profession, compromised by athletes’ busy schedules (e.g., Hayes et al., 2020; Hodge & Walker, 2015). We show that when athletic labor is infeasible, athletes should (and some do) turn their attention to active brand building, given its potential to continuously engage relevant stakeholders in times of career interruptions such as those due to injury, doping suspension, or parental leave.

Managerial Implications

The current research has implications for sport industry stakeholders. This study offers meaningful insight for personnel and organizations involved in managing elite athletes’ careers and brands. Specifically, we have highlighted the nuances of athletes’ experiences as they adjusted their routines and brand development strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding these experiences can be instrumental in determining how sports organizations can effectively support athletes through the change processes invoked by a crisis (Whales et al., 2020). Our findings also revealed that when athletes are unable to engage in their normal training and competition routines, they may grapple with gaps in their branding narratives, which can push them to transform their self-branding practices. Results further imply that athletes are open to learning and willing to invest time in self-branding. Therefore, managers should educate athletes on effective alternative branding strategies (Hayes et al., 2021); for instance, teams and leagues could implement training sessions to familiarize athletes with creative approaches and branding techniques that could benefit athletes when their careers are put on hold.

This research also holds implications for athletes’ sponsors. Sponsorship support for athletes generally tends to decline when sports are put on hold and athletes cannot compete (Landells, 2020). However, instead of withdrawing their support, sponsors should explore alternative means of athlete sponsorship (Hickman, 2020). Our study points to changes in athletes’ self-branding behavior in times of crisis as athletes become more active within the digital space and seek new ways to provide value to stakeholders and related entities (Kunkel, Biscaia, et al., 2019). Therefore, despite athletes’ reduced ability to market sponsors while performing on the field, sponsor brands are encouraged to explore opportunities to collaborate with athletes in the digital space, such as through promotional campaigns on social media.

Limitations and Future Research

In contextualizing organizational change, we recognize that each participant can be affected differently based on their funding, sport, geographic location, and years of experience. Though we did not examine individual differences among athletes, our goal was to understand how they engaged in innovative and strategic changes in personal branding. Future work could involve multiple interviews as athletes engage in these changes to delineate perceptions of their successes and struggles. Further, we interviewed athletes who expressed an interest in personal branding. Therefore, subsequent work could explore how athletes who are less involved in personal branding are affected during a career interruption crisis along with consequent changes to their business models.

We spoke exclusively to athletes but recognized that their business models entail interaction among multiple stakeholders (Kunkel, Biscaia, et al., 2019). Future research could recruit consumers, sponsors, and managers to determine how they perceive and are influenced by these changes. Developing a deeper understanding of how crisis-related changes can be addressed through athlete-practitioner collaboration could enhance knowledge of athletes' personal brand management and business model evolution during times of crisis. Thus, future research is encouraged to evaluate changes in the elite athlete business model in other contexts, such as during career transitions or parental leave.

Conclusion

This study took the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to explore strategic changes in the elite athlete's personal brand management. Findings demonstrate that athletes have been affected by crises on emotional and brand levels. They have coped with the pandemic by maintaining a positive mindset, adjusting their training routines, and seeking opportunities to modify their branding approaches. These courses of action have, in turn, altered how athletes approach their brand building when their career is put on hold, launching brand expansions and displaying prosocial behavior. This study contributes to our understanding of brand management in times of crisis in the sport industry, among athletes in particular. While the COVID-19 pandemic served as a unique research setting, our findings should apply to other career crisis situations that call for athletes to innovate their personal brand management to create and enhance value.

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