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How does athlete branding impact the career development of an MMA athlete?

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INTRODUCTION

The birth of this thesis could not have happened if its subject was not related to sport. Indeed, from a very young age I have been immersed in sport as an enthusiast, initially with Zinédine Zidane who transmitted to me the first emotions that I remember: the World Cup final in 2006 (Fort & Philippe, 2013) with the famous headbutt and the defeat of France which caused some tears on my side... Subsequently, the passion for Real Madrid was born and this relationship to emotions multiplied every week; the result of the Merengues match would condition my emotional state (you shouldn't have talked to me if Real Madrid had just lost a game, let alone against FC Barcelona...) My relationship with sport evolved when I started to be interested in sports business, more precisely in football business. I realized that what pleased me beyond emotions was to understand how football clubs were structured: from shareholding to the transfer market through sponsorship. My vision of sport changed when I understood that a football club was not necessarily going to buy a player for their level on the pitch, but also for their level off the field... What better way to expose this than the transfer of David Beckham to Real Madrid in 2003 (Beckham, 2013).

The context of this transfer is the will of the president of Casa Blanca, Florentino Perez to make a Galactic transfer (Mandis, 2016). Florentino quickly understood that to maximize the revenue of his club, it was necessary to invest in marketing because that's what would allow the club to: fill its stadium, sell jerseys, to have more significant television rights revenue and to have negotiating power vis-à-vis its sponsors. The president of Real Madrid (Mandis, 2016) later admitted that he had not recruited English for his football level but only for what he represented outside the fields. It should be noted that at that time, Beckham was a global superstar, and he was the perfect representation of what a 'marketing player' could bring to a club: selling jerseys, filling the stadium and negotiating power with sponsors. Nevertheless, football remains a sport and sooner or later, the reality of the field catches up with you, and it didn't take much time before catching up with Real Madrid because the season that followed the galactic transfer market ended in a white season (=without major trophy won) (Mandis, 2016).

These strategic issues have transformed the way I follow football. Indeed, the emotions that a club could provide me were no longer the only reason why I was going to follow them, there is also: the identity of the club but especially the way in which the club would be managed. I have always had an admiration for clubs capable of working well outside the grass. What I have always appreciated is that some great historical clubs could rest on their laurels by maintaining sporting results up to their standings. Nevertheless, one day or the other, these clubs were going to be caught up by less prestigious clubs, having less budget but making more

efforts because they are aware of the delay they have. From then on, I understood that the love I have for a sport is linked to the emotions it gives me and to understanding the business model...

It is therefore logical that in 2015, I fall in love with mixed martial arts, dominated by the American organization chaired by Dana White: the UFC (Stellpflug et al., 2020). And the timing of this new romance is not trivial: this year 2015 marks the birth of a superstar, Conor McGregor (Sharar, 2023).

The Irishman had already stood out within the organization because of his personality that stands out, his ease in trash-talk with his opponents, hyper a show and filling rooms. Moreover, this one is not just a smooth talker, he also excels in the octagon, being able to finish (by KO or submission) his opponents, which is a quality more than appreciated in the UFC. This ascension led him to the most important fight of his young career: the title shot against José Aldo (Ollikka, 2018): world champion in his category, unbeaten for 10 years and considered one of the greatest fighters that his category has known. This fight for the title will not be a fight among many others, it will literally change the course of this sport.

Indeed, everything opposes the two fighters, Aldo being the champion embodying humility while McGregor embodied arrogance to excess (Ollikka, 2018). And these differences are not kept waiting to be noticed. The UFC quickly understood that this fight had something special and worked hard to promote it: by increasing press conferences around the world, contributing to the rise of tension between the two protagonists. Conor McGregor with his aggressive trash talk began to enter the head of José Aldo who seemed increasingly tense during the press conferences. The Irishman was convinced that he would knock out the Brazilian in the first round, and this contributed to the rise of the hype because for a large part of the audience, it was inconceivable to see the one who dominated his category for a decade end up with the native of Dublin (Kavanagh, 2016).

All his speculations led us to December 13, 2015, the date of the fight. I remember it as if it were yesterday, I was 14 years old and I set my alarm clock at 4 o'clock in the morning to not miss the fight. As soon as the two protagonists made their entrance, I felt a tension within my body that I had rarely felt. Months of promotions, trash-talk, insults that were going to end with a 5-round fight of 5 minutes, or 25 minutes. It took McGregor only 13 seconds to knock out ALDO... 13 seconds to annihilate 10 years of invincibility. 13 seconds to dethrone the king of his category. 13 seconds to enter History. This fight definitively changed the course of the History of this sport, because since then, Conor McGregor became known beyond the borders of the MMA what no fighter had succeeded in doing (Sharar, 2023). The UFC has become the reference for combat sports to such an extent that non-connoisseurs confuse the MMA and the UFC, which testifies to the dominance of the Ultimate Fighting Championship in its sector (Stellpflug et al., 2020).

The impact of Conor McGregor on MMA has drastically changed my vision on this sport. Indeed, having grown up with Chechens, my vision of MMA was that of a sport largely practiced by people coming from the Caucasus, that of a sport that advocates values such as humility or respect. A vision where the practice of this sport takes place in the shadows, far from the cameras and show business. However, for instance with Khabib Nurmagomedov (Yazid et al., 2024), these people have a very high level and could dominate the UFC categories. Nevertheless, there are many boxes that they do not tick in the eyes of the number 1 organization: they do not communicate on social networks, do not trash talk their opponents, are Muslims... One might think that despite these obstacles, if the Caucasian fighters have the level to get a fight for the title, they will have it. But the reality is quite different. Conor and Khabib's respective careers illustrate this truth: the Dagestani had to wait for his 10th fight before having the opportunity to fight for the title while the Irishman had this opportunity at the end of his 6th fight. One might wonder if this is only related to sporting merit or marketing issues, but it is clear that the UFC is a business above all and that they do not hesitate to evolve more quickly the profiles that will allow them to reach a higher break-even point, what can be debatable... And it was in October 2018 at UFC 229 that this fight between Conor McGregor and Khabib Nurmagomedov will mark a real turning point in the history of the MMA, both economically, media and strategically (Hussain, 2021).

With approximately 2.4 million pay-per-view (PPV) purchases, UFC 229 became the most watched event in UFC history. Ticketing alone generated over \$17 million in revenue, while the overall economic impact in Las Vegas was estimated at \$86.4 million. This record demonstrated that the MMA could compete with the largest professional sports leagues commercially (Hussain, 2021). This fight exceeded the strictly sporting framework. He represented a clash of cultures and personalities: on one side McGregor, a charismatic Irish provocateur; of the other Nurmagomedov, Russian champion with a reserved profile but unbeaten. This clash of identities, fueled by pre-fight tensions (such as the bus attack by McGregor) and post-fight spills (the fight after the fight), propelled the event into all global media spheres (Septiana, 2019).

This fight demonstrated that the value of a fighter lies not only in their athletic performance, but also in their power to capture media. McGregor, notably, competed in 8 of the 10 biggest PPV events in UFC history, which shows how "star power" has become essential for generating revenue (Hussain, 2021). This fight, which at first glance seemed to benefit only McGregor in terms of storytelling, has been a catalyst for global notoriety for Khabib Nurmagomedov, who until then remained a respected but relatively confidential figure outside the circle of purists. With this indisputable victory, the Russian fighter has become a global star, reaching popularity peaks especially in the Muslim world, in Russia and in Central Asia (Septiana, 2019). His posture of humility and rigor contrasting with McGregor's provocations have strengthened his image as a respectful champion, creating a polarization that has mobilized fans worldwide.

Paradoxically, the media exposure offered by McGregor allowed Khabib to develop a strong personal brand, although unusual for the standards of the UFC star system (Hussain, 2021). He is today one of the most followed athletes on social networks with more than 36 million followers on Instagram, which testifies to the radical transformation of his image. This fight also influenced the role of branding in the career of an MMA athlete. Through this rivalry, McGregor demonstrated that the ability to "sell a fight" could bring in more than just the sports record itself. This paradigm forces fighters to develop a strong and differentiating image, often with the help of managers, content creators, or marketing agents (Hussain, 2021). For organizations, this has changed the promotion and visibility criteria: fighters who know how to create buzz or generate engagement are often favored in 'matchmaking', regardless of their sports ranking.

It is also important to know that I am part of a generation that has been deeply shaped by digital culture: Generation Z. Born into a hyper-connected world. I grew up surrounded by the internet, constant connectivity, and the rapid rise of social media platforms. Unlike previous generations, my generation has never experienced a world without digital access (Dimock, 2019). Since childhood, I have been immersed in a digital ecosystem that included television, online videos, gaming, and the early stages of social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. This continuous exposure to the digital environment developed in me an instinct for recognizing trends and understanding digital audiences. As a child and teenager, I spent countless hours observing how people communicated, how trends emerged online, and how certain content could gain massive visibility while others failed. Platforms like YouTube were my daily classroom, allowing me to understand the mechanics of engagement and storytelling without ever realizing that I was building the foundation for my future professional activity (Montag et al., 2021). My experience on social media and within pop culture communities served as an informal but highly impactful education. It equipped me with a "trend-watcher" mindset the ability to identify emerging trends and understand what captures public attention.

When I began managing Patrick Haborra, I had no technical or sporting background. None of the skills I initially brought to the role came from academic study; instead, they were the result of years of digital immersion and cultural observation. This early stage was essential. I realized that my natural familiarity with digital tools, algorithms, and online behaviors was an asset. My ability to analyze trends on TikTok and Instagram allowed me to anticipate shifts in content visibility. For instance, I noticed very early that TikTok's algorithm favored organic reach and that Instagram would soon replicate this through its Reels feature, offering unprecedented opportunities for exposure (Montag et al., 2021). These observations helped Patrick grow his digital presence rapidly, creating the foundations of his personal brand.

Reflecting on this experience, I now understand that my initial instinct was not innate talent but rather the product of a lifetime immersed in digital culture. Combining this digital intuition

with my passion for sports and sport business created the perfect foundation to start my journey as an athlete manager. This digital literacy, rooted in my Gen Z upbringing, has been a decisive factor in the success of my collaboration with Patrick Habirora and in my motivation to dedicate my master's thesis to exploring the impact of athlete branding on the career development of MMA fighters. All this led me to my current professional activity: image and communication management by Patrick Habirora.

This story began in Namur, more than 10 years ago when we met. We became friends before becoming brothers. Our relationship has experienced different developments:

Initially, when we were 16 years old, Patrick started MMA and we directly felt the difference: when we used to see each other on Friday after school, Patrick was no longer present, he was at training, every week. I remember a discussion we had at that age when the latter was telling me that he had found his way: he wanted to become UFC World Champion. From the moment he made this confession to me, I told myself that as a friend, it was my duty to support him in this quest by coming to his fights. The second phase of the evolution of this relationship took place in 2020. I had just settled in Brussels because I had just started my studies while he had just arrived in the capital because it was imperative for his career development to leave Namur. During this period, also marked by the advent of COVID-19, we were always all together. Every day, we saw each other and discussed about our respective careers. In my head, the path was drawn: I finish my master's at ICHEC and I start a corporate job. In Patrick's head, things were different. Patrick has always had the desire to build his career with a team that would evolve at the same time as him. He wanted to surround himself with people who, even without having all the skills from the start, had predispositions and would grow with him. It was about being in the same boat, making the same path together. When Patrick offered me to become his manager, I initially refused. At that moment, I saw myself more as a friend who helped him in his project, I just gave him some advice on his social media during the COVID period, when he couldn't fight. I have always been someone very active on social networks and had a certain intuition about what worked, but I had neither the will nor the pretension to become his manager. It was only at the third request that I finally accepted. I was going through a period of questioning myself, after a first year of study during which my view of the world had deeply changed. I needed meaning, and this opportunity gave me the opportunity to work on a meaningful, exciting, and concrete project. That's how it all started, in 2020. It's been almost five years now.

Everything started with this simple desire: to improve one's videos. I had no training in sports management. I was just a seasoned social media observer, a trend watcher capable of spotting emerging trends. In 2020, TikTok was starting to explode, but was still perceived as a children's network. Very few people were there. I spent several months analyzing it and I quickly understood that its algorithm allowed for unprecedented visibility, even with few resources. When Instagram launched the Reels, I immediately felt that there was an opportunity to seize.

Therefore, we started to produce content with Patrick, and it is from there that the adventure really began.

Over time, we have understood one essential thing: in the MMA, fighters are not rewarded only for their sports performance, but for their ability to be marketing tools for organizations. The latter are above all companies, whose objective is to sell tickets, attract sponsors, sign television contracts. And for that, they need fighters capable of making the organization shine, of telling a story. Many fighters do not take this reality into account. With Patrick, we made another choice. From his beginnings as an amateur, we decided to work seriously on his image. We learned what branding was, the image we want to project, the codes it involves, the levers on which to capitalize. We understood that Patrick was going to become a public figure. We have also learned the importance of media: without media relay, even good sports performances can go unnoticed. We highlighted his strengths: his oral fluency, his vision, his ability to convey messages. We multiplied interviews, worked on a coherent narrative, and built a solid brand image. Thus, when he became a professional in January 2024, we were ready to capitalize on the upcoming media exposure.

One of the biggest turning points was the fight between Baki (Baysangur Chamsoudinov) versus Cédric Doumbè, the most mediatized in the history of the French MMA (Paris Normandie, 2024). We have activated our community to request a spot on this map. Through perseverance, and after having contacted several times the matchmaker, via our fans, of the PFL (the second largest world organization), we have won this opportunity. Since Patrick Habirora had the opportunity to fight at PFL Paris, during the event "Baki vs Doumbè" held on March 7, 2024, there was truly a before and after in his journey (Fraisie, 2024). This fight, broadcast as part of the largest evening in the history of the Francophone MMA, was an extraordinary springboard. Patrick won his match against Claudio Pacella at the end of the three rounds, in a masterful fight against a strong opponent. However, it is especially outside the cage that the impact was felt. In just 24 hours, Patrick gained more than 100,000 followers on social networks, marking a meteoric explosion of notoriety. He thus went from being a popular prospect for MMA fans to becoming the star of French-speaking MMA. This change was decisive for his career, but also for me, as a young manager, because it was necessary to learn to evolve in a new dimension, that of the star system.

Managing the image of a known athlete is totally different from that of a developing athlete. Each choice, each publication, each partnership must be carefully thought out because every detail counts. This transition forced me to adapt quickly: understanding the codes of the media world, the expectations of sponsors, managing the exhibition and new requests. Where previously we were in an active prospecting posture, we were now solicited by brands, sometimes major ones, wishing to associate with Patrick's image. This period was particularly demanding for me because I was still alone to manage everything. Not only the image and communication, but also the sponsorship and logistics aspects that were becoming increasingly important. That is why, a few months ago, we took the initiative to structure a

team around Patrick. Two other managers joined us: one for logistics, the other for sponsorship. This organization allowed me to devote myself 100% to image and communication, which had become essential. The objective was to build a team of 'Avengers', where everyone would evolve in their area of engineering, serving the overall project. Through this new phase, a deeper personal reflection has also emerged. As a student at ICHEC, the natural path would have been to guide me towards a corporate career. However, the more I progressed in the project with Patrick, the more I realized how much I thrived in what I was doing. Even in more operational tasks, I had fun. This is how I made the decision to fully commit to this adventure, despite the uncertainties.

Being a manager in the world of MMA is a risky choice. Everything can stop overnight: an injury, a bad buzz, a bad strategic decision, and all the work can collapse. This requires great adaptability, constant resilience, and above all faith in the process. It is with this mindset that I fully committed myself to this path, and the months that followed were rich in learning. The 2024-2025 season was a turning point in Patrick's career, but also in my professional journey. It concluded in apotheosis on July 5, 2025, when we organized and filled the ING Arena in Brussels for a PFL event. It was a first: the PFL was making its debut in Belgium, thanks to our work. Despite a difficult date (start of the holidays, competition with the Ardentes, one of the biggest Festival in Europe), we gathered more than 7000 spectators in just two months of promotion. During this event, Patrick faced Danny Roberts, a former UFC fighter with more than 14 fights to his name. It was the biggest fight of his career, with an immense image stake. Patrick was able to respond by knocking him out in the first round, on a spectacular high kick (Monbaillu, 2025). This moment marked a new stage in his career but also in mine. We have moved to a higher level, with new ambitions for the upcoming season, while keeping in mind where we come from, and the path accomplished since 2020. We are aware that work is not everything. There is a share of unknown, timing, risks to take, but also long-term vision. Branding is not a luxury for an athlete: in MMA more than in any other sport, it is a fundamental lever to build a sustainable career, beyond sports performance. That's what this adventure has taught me, and that's what this thesis seeks to analyze.

As highlighted throughout this introduction, the exponential growth of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has gone hand in hand with the increasing importance of personal branding for athletes. The evolution of the sport, illustrated by major events such as the super-fight between Conor McGregor and Khabib Nurmagomedov, has demonstrated how branding can transcend mere sporting performance and shape an athlete's entire career trajectory. These cases show that success in the cage is no longer the only factor in achieving visibility and long-term opportunities. Instead, the ability to develop and maintain a strong personal brand has become a critical driver of professional advancement in the modern MMA ecosystem (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017; Singleton & Green, 2021).

From this observation emerges the central research problem of this dissertation:

How does athlete branding impact the career development of an MMA fighter?

The aim is not simply to determine whether branding has an effect, but rather to explore how it influences a fighter's career, both directly and indirectly, by identifying the key dimensions that shape this relationship. These dimensions include sporting opportunities, economic growth, social dimensions and long-term career sustainability.

A crucial aspect of this research lies in the integration of my practical experience as a manager of a professional MMA athlete, Patrick Habirora. Over the last five years, I have observed firsthand the dynamics of athlete branding, moving from the early amateur stages to the rise of a recognized professional career. While I already have a perspective shaped by this experience, the purpose of this dissertation is to confront these practical insights with the existing academic literature and the perspectives of industry experts interviewed for this study. This confrontation will allow me to validate, nuance, or challenge my own assumptions and generate a more robust understanding of branding in MMA.

Ultimately, the objective of this research is to contribute to both theory and practice by providing a structured framework for understanding athlete branding in MMA. This framework can serve as a reference for future generations of fighters, managers, and sports business professionals, offering foundational insights to guide strategic decision-making and career development in a sport where branding has become as decisive as performance itself.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to cover the main concepts related to the research question of this thesis, which is: “How does athlete branding impact the career development of an MMA athlete?”.

It is essential, before getting to the heart of the matter, to understand the various concepts related to the research question such as: athlete career development, sport marketing, athlete branding, the business of mixed martial arts...

1.2 FOUNDATION OF SPORTS AND ATHLETE CAREER DEVELOPMENT

1.2.1 DEFINITION OF SPORT & ITS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Definition of sport

Sport can be defined as the physical activities carried out by people to improve themselves in various areas such as well-being, health or physical condition (Barbu et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, depending on our motivations, the definition may be totally different. Indeed, doing sport purely for your health and doing sport as a profession are two completely different practices. Although there are similarities, such as good health and well-being, the stakes are completely different when it comes to performance (Barbu et al., 2020).

That is why it is important for a better understanding of sport to also analyze it from a social and economic perspective.

Therefore, the definition of sport is related to a physical activity but can change regarding our incentives.

The economic and social dimensions of sport

Whether you play sport for all or you're a professional athlete, there's one dimension that's common to both practices: socialization.

“Starting from the premise that socialization is the process by which people acquire skills, attitudes, values and behaviors that make them able to participate as members of the society in which they live, through its educational and cultural dimensions, sport is recognized as a strong socializing factor.” (Barbu et al., 2020, p. 29).

As a matter of fact, in all its forms (sport for all or performance sport), sport is a unique opportunity to meet people (from different backgrounds), learn values such as respect and

fair play, experience emotions and go beyond your limits. The flexibility that sports offers means that it can be seen as a vehicle for social development. (Barbu et al., 2020)

The economic dimension of sport seems as obvious as the social dimension. Sport may be considered as a social phenomenon with notable economic implications. (Barbu et al., 2020)

The commercialization of sport contributes to economic activity, job creation and is a powerful tool for local and regional development.

Furthermore, sport has important connections with other industries: tourism, infrastructure, and finance. (Barbu et al., 2020)

1.2.2 DEFINITION OF AN ATHLETE (ROLE, CHALLENGES AND CAREER PATH)

Definition of an athlete

The appellation "athlete" comes from the Greek "Athlos" meaning "achievement" or "contest". From an historical perspective, the athlete represents great human virtues (Campa et al., 2021).

Maron and Zipes' research shows us that an athlete is someone who takes part in organized team or individual sports, with frequent competition as a central element, rating excellence and achievement, and requiring intense training. (paraphrased by Campa et al., 2021)

Pelliccia and other researchers define an athlete as "an individual or young or adult, amateur or professional, who is engaged in regular physical training and participating in official competitions" (quoted by Campa et al., 2021, para. 2).

Therefore, an athlete is someone who engages in physical activity with the primary goal of improving performance to achieve athletic excellence and/or success.

Role of an athlete

The role/objective of an athlete is to seek performance and victory in competitions, unlike those practicing a sport whose primary objective is to stay healthy (Araujo & Scharhag, 2016).

As soon as we refer to the economic dimension of sport (cf. above p.9), we can consider athletes as entertainers. Indeed, entertainment is the primary objective of decision-makers. For this reason, the correlation between an athlete's health and their primary objective (performance) is not perfect, on the contrary (Araujo & Scharhag, 2016). Their role is not to be in perfect health, but to perform at a level that comes close to perfection (Araujo & Scharhag, 2016).

Athlete's career path

It is difficult to define an athlete's path, as it can vary so much from one individual to another (depending on their environment or history).

Nevertheless, before finding themselves in a so-called 'professional' environment, an athlete's early years are characterized by spontaneous participation in sport (Lima et al., 2022).

As the athlete's career develops, new components such as training intensity and the emphasis on technique and tactics will appear in their daily routine. There's also the relationship with their coach, which can be a real 'game changer' for their career in terms of technique, tactics, and emotion (Lima et al., 2022).

The athlete's environment and history will play a major role in the path they take. Indeed, if you want to reach the top, the need for a suitable training environment and financial requirements will be paramount. Athletes from developing countries will be the first to face this problem, which they will often resolve by moving abroad (Lima et al., 2022).

Challenges faced by the athlete

Athletes face many challenges in their careers. Certain challenges such as injuries, health problems or financial problems may be common to everyone (Lima et., 2022).

Relationship problems with their coach or team-mates, which refer to the social dimension of sport (see above p.9), can threaten the development of an athlete's career.

Other challenges such as racism, xenophobia and sexism will affect some athletes during their careers (Lima et al., 2023).

1.2.3 CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN SPORTS

Theories on the development of an athlete's career have evolved considerably, moving from an increased focus on sporting retirement to a holistic view of athlete development, analyzing both sporting and non-sporting dimensions (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

New concepts have therefore emerged in the analysis of an athlete's career development. From research into career transitions to career assistance (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

Athlete Career Phases

The different phases of an athlete's career are often structured according to the Wylleman & Lavallee (2004) model, which arranges the progression of an athlete's career into several key stages. These different phases incorporate psychological, sporting, academic and socio-economic dimensions.

1. Initiation Phase

The initiation phase generally runs from childhood to early adolescence. This stage focuses on the acquisition of the basics of sport and the development of fundamental skills (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

During this period, the young athlete takes his or her first steps in a recreational setting with an emphasis on fun and skill development (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The influence of parents, coaches and role models is very important during this stage of an athlete's career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

2. Development Phase

The development phase takes place from adolescence to early adulthood.

It will focus on two new areas: specialization and structured training (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Taking part in competitions at regional and national level will enable the athlete to develop his or her identity as a competitor (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Another important dimension to take into account is education. On the other side of the Atlantic, universities and high schools play a major role in a young athlete's balance between sport and studies (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

3. Career at elite level

A career at elite level occurs when an athlete (usually already an adult) makes a successful transition from junior to elite level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

It is characterized by intensive training, potential media exposure, commercial commitments (sponsorship in particular) and participation in the biggest sporting competitions (professional leagues, World Championships and the Olympic Games) (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

It is also important to note that professional athletes are subject to psychological and physical pressure due to competition (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The financial dimension becomes crucial and should depend solely on the sources of income linked to the sporting activity (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

4. End of career and retirement from sport

During this period, the athlete's physical performance begins to decline.

In addition, the athlete is facing a decline in his income, which makes post-career planning crucial (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Once an athlete's career has come to an end, he or she is officially retired.

Some athletes opt for a transition into the sports industry, as coaches, analysts or sports directors (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

This period is challenging for a variety of reasons: financial uncertainties or a loss of identity (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Career Transition

Career transition can be defined by the different phases an athlete may face in his or her career involving the evaluation and management of transition, leading to more or less successful outcomes and relevant changes in an individual's career (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

Several types of career transitions have been identified (Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020):

- Athletic transitions (for example, from junior to senior level).
- Non-athletic transitions (e.g. related to education or family).
- Dual career transitions (simultaneously in sport and education or work).
- Normative transitions (relatively predictable, such as retirement from sport).
- Non-normative transitions (less predictable, such as injury).
- Quasi-normative transitions (predictable for a specific category of athletes, such as cultural transitions).

A considerable number of athletes are forced to have dual careers, combining sport with education or work (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

Several studies on dual careers focus on the different transitions, such as entry into an elite sports school, university or even the post-sport and/or academic career, exploring the different challenges, factors and adaptation strategies (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020).

It goes without saying that a dual career requires the acquisition of skills that are essential for reconciling sport and other activities.

The transition to employment after a sporting career (normative transition) is often a complicated stage for athletes, even though some have the right level of education (Robnik et al., 2021).

Although the transition to employment after a sporting career is complicated even for degree holders, it should be emphasised that the level of education and financial support have a considerable influence on the quality of the post-sport career transition (Robnik et al., 2021).

1.3 BRANDING

1.3.1 DEFINITION OF A BRAND

The concept of a brand has evolved considerably over time, transitioning from a simple identifier to a complex and multidimensional construct. Initially defined by the American Marketing Association (1960) as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors,” this definition has often been criticized for being too product oriented.

Later definitions adopt a more consumer-centered perspective. Ambler (1992) defines a brand as “the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and provides satisfaction,” emphasizing both real and perceived, rational, and emotional attributes. De Chernatony and McDonald (2001) propose that a brand is “an identifiable product, service, person, or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely.” From this standpoint, a brand’s success depends on its ability to sustain these added values over time and in competitive environments.

Konecnik and Gartner (2007) view the brand through multiple lenses: as a legal instrument, logo, identity system, image, personality, relationship, and a vehicle for added value. Similarly, Styles and Ambler (1996) differentiate between two approaches: the “product-plus” approach, where branding is the final stage of product development, and the holistic approach, which positions the brand at the center, tailoring the marketing mix to specific target audiences.

Historically, the term “brand” derives from the Old Germanic word *brinn-an* (“to burn”), highlighting its origins in physical marking, and reflecting both positive notions of ownership and negative connotations of shame or stigma.

1.3.2 COMPONENT OF A BRAND

Brands are composed of both tangible and intangible elements. These include names, symbols, designs, and legal identifiers, as well as abstract attributes real or imagined that form the foundation of consumer expectations (Ambler, 1992; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Tangible components include logos, visual and verbal elements, and legal protections. Intangible components often involve emotional associations, symbolic meanings, or personality traits that are communicated through various media.

A brand may also be perceived as a “network of associations” built in the consumer’s mind, shaped by repeated visual, verbal, and behavioral cues (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). These associations can include functional benefits, symbolic values, or experiential promises. In certain contexts, like destination branding, elements such as logo, wordmark, or slogan convey not only differentiation but also a promise of a memorable and unique experience.

1.3.3 BRAND IDENTITY VS BRAND IMAGE

Brand identity refers to what the brand aims to represent. It is defined as the deliberate projection of the organization's values, mission, and personality through consistent visual, verbal, and behavioral expressions (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2001). It includes design, tone of communication, brand purpose, and core values. In specific branding domains such as city or place branding, identity also serves the function of differentiating a location and establishing a clear and recognizable market position (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

In contrast, brand image is the perception held by the public. It is a mental construct formed through consumer experiences, expectations, and emotional associations with the brand. Mayer (1958) defined brand image as the impression of a product in the consumer's mind. Later literature characterizes it as a psychological or affective interpretation of the brand's meanings (Keller, 1993). It includes consumer interpretations of brand personality, values, cultural representations, and physical design elements such as logos or advertisements.

The effectiveness of branding relies on aligning *brand identity* with *brand image*, ensuring a consistent and positive perception that resonates with the intended audience (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2001).

1.4 PERSONAL BRANDING

1.4.1 PERSONAL BRANDING CONCEPT

Personal branding is the strategic process of shaping and managing the perception others have of an individual. Unlike traditional branding, which focuses on promoting products or services, personal branding centers on individuals positioning themselves as unique, valuable, and credible in a competitive environment (Zabojnik, 2018; Khedher, 2014).

The concept was popularized by Tom Peters (1997), who famously stated that each person is the CEO of "Me Inc.", responsible for marketing their personal brand (as cited in Khedher, 2014). Personal branding encourages individuals to highlight their strengths and define a coherent public image (Pawar, 2016). Montoya (2009, as cited in Zabojnik, 2018) defines a personal brand as "a clear, strong, and convincing public image," while Kaputa (2011, as cited in Zabojnik, 2018) frames it as a strategy for differentiating oneself and promoting a message to a target audience.

One key distinction from traditional branding is that personal branding incorporates the individual's values, life purpose, and authenticity. Whereas reputation develops organically through actions and social consensus, personal branding is a planned, intentional effort to create an impactful professional image (Banet-Weiser, 2012, as cited in Zabojnik, 2018).

1.4.2 MAIN STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A PERSONAL BRAND

According to Khedher (2014) and Zabochnik (2018), building a personal brand is a long-term process involving three phases: identity creation, brand positioning, and brand evaluation.

1. **Identity Phase:** This involves self-assessment and the articulation of one's core values, vision, and mission. The individual must understand what makes them unique and how they want to be perceived by others (McNally & Speak, 2002, as cited in Khedher, 2014).
2. **Positioning Phase:** Here, the brand is communicated through verbal and non-verbal cues, online profiles, social behaviors, and storytelling (Roberts, 2005, as cited in Khedher, 2014).
3. **Evaluation Phase:** This involves assessing how well the personal brand is perceived by others and whether it aligns with the individual's goals (Khedher, 2014).

Patel and Agius (as cited in Zabochnik, 2018) propose a five-step methodology:

1. **Define vision, mission, and values:** Grounded in self-awareness and real-world market opportunities.
2. **Analyze target audience:** Segment audiences and conduct SWOT analysis.
3. **Develop brand assets:** These include usernames, websites, business cards, and visual consistency across platforms.
4. **Implement content marketing:** Share valuable, relevant content consistently.
5. **Build relationships and monitor impact:** This includes mentoring, reputation management, and maintaining professional relationships.

Credibility, memorability, creativity, and consistency are critical attributes of a strong brand (Zabochnik, 2018; Pawar, 2016).

1.4.3 THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN PERSONAL BRANDING

Digital media, especially social media is a powerful engine for personal branding (Pawar, 2016; Petrucă, 2016). It offers a cost-effective and scalable way to share content, build reputation, and connect with audiences.

Key platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allow users to display professional achievements, values, and personality (Zabochnik, 2018).

Social media enables the creation of virtual identities that may differ from one's true self, raising questions of authenticity (Petrucă, 2016). Despite this, it offers unparalleled reach and

democratizes access to visibility and influence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, as cited in Petrucă, 2016).

Best practices include:

- Maintaining consistent branding (profile picture, tone, color palette).
- Posting regularly and engaging with communities.
- Ensuring rapid response to audience interactions.

Today, employers actively screen candidates via social media, making a strong, professional online presence more important than ever (Pawar, 2016; Petrucă, 2016).

1.4.4 THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL BRANDING ON AUDIENCES, MEDIA AND SPONSORS

Personal branding influences how individuals are perceived across professional and public spheres.

- **Audiences and Consumers:** Personal branding shapes the external perception of an individual. People's associations with a brand are built through behavior, tone, and interaction (Khedher, 2014). This extends to relationships in both personal and professional settings.
- **Employers and Recruiters:** A well-managed personal brand enhances employability and reveals soft skills, leadership potential, and values (Pawar, 2016).
- **Media:** The rise of social media has made personal branding more accessible. Online personas become monetizable "brands" for celebrities, influencers, and athletes. This visibility can be leveraged for exposure and credibility (Zabojnik, 2018).
- **Sponsors:** While not directly addressed in the core literature, it is implied that sponsors are drawn to individuals with high visibility, authenticity, and a clear value proposition. Collaborations with credible figures and organizations add legitimacy and appeal to a personal brand (Zabojnik, 2018).

1.5 ATHLETE BRANDING

1.5.1 THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ATHLETE BRANDING AND PERSONAL BRANDING

Athlete branding is a specialized form of personal branding tailored to the unique demands of professional sports.

While **personal branding** focuses on capturing and promoting an individual's strengths to a target audience (Labrecque et al., 2011, as cited in Zabochnik, 2018), **athlete branding** extends this concept by leveraging athletic performance, persona, and symbolic value to establish distinct market identity (Arai et al., 2014; Linsner et al., 2021). Simply put, when an athlete's name, image, and personality are strategically used to differentiate them in the market, they become a recognizable "brand" (Arai et al., 2014).

Athlete branding encompasses a set of functional and emotional associations linked to an athlete, influencing how fans engage emotionally (Williams et al., 2015, as cited in Linsner et al., 2021) and ensuring their presence is activated from the first consumer interaction (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012, as cited in Hodge & Walker, 2015).

1.5.2 THE PILLARS OF A STRONG ATHLETE BRAND

The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) outlines three primary pillars (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2020; Linsner et al., 2021; Zabochnik, 2018):

1. **Athletic Performance:** Success, skill, and sportsmanship are foundational athletic achievements generate the highest engagement on social media (Doyle et al., 2020; Hasan et al., 2020) and remain the strongest indicator of brand strength (Bauer et al., 2005, as cited in Hodge & Walker, 2015).
2. **Attractive Appearance:** Physical attractiveness and fitness serve as visual identifiers that contribute to branding (Arai et al., 2014).
3. **Marketable Lifestyle:** An athlete's life story, role modeling behavior, and off-field persona enhance brand appeal (Arai et al., 2014).

1.5.3 THE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OF ATHLETES

Athletes communicate their brand via online and offline channels (Zabochnik, 2018; Doyle et al., 2020):

- **Online (Social Media & Digital Assets):** Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn are vital. Consistency in visuals and tone, along with regular content whether athletic or personal enhances brand presence (Zabochnik, 2018; Petrucă, 2016). Digital tools, such as verified accounts and personal websites, increase credibility (Zabochnik, 2018).

- **Content Marketing:** Sharing valuable and engaging content, blogs, videos, quotes build audience connection (Pullizzi, 2012, as cited in Zabochnik, 2018). Even offstage content (e.g., personal anecdotes) can boost engagement (Doyle et al., 2020).
- **Offline Engagement:** Activities like in-person networking, brand presence at events, and public appearances remain important for establishing relationships (Zabochnik, 2018).
- **Relationship & Engagement Tactics:** Collaborations with teammates, authentic storytelling, and transparent sponsored posts help foster genuine engagement. Hashtags can backfire if they seem overly transactional (Doyle et al., 2020).

1.5.4 THE MAIN ROLE OF SPORT PERFORMANCE IN ATHLETE BRANDING

High-level athletic performance is the cornerstone of brand perception and value. It not only drives fan engagement and media attention but also directly influences sponsorship interest and contract negotiations (Bauer et al., 2005) demonstrated that social media content centered on athletic performance receives the most interaction, reinforcing the correlation between sporting success and brand equity.

1.5.5 ATHLETE BRANDING INFLUENCE ON MARKETABILITY AND OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND SPORT

Athlete branding is crucial for long-term career resilience and marketability:

- **Competitive Advantage & Career Opportunities:** A strong brand differentiates athletes in a fierce job market and supports their transition into post-athletic ventures (Zabochnik, 2018; Arai et al., 2014).
- **Risk Management & Longevity:** Athletes are volatile assets, injury and performance dips are common. Branding cushions these risks and maintains fan loyalty (Arai et al., 2014).
- **Economic Profitability:** Strong athlete brands drive higher wages, endorsements, and market deals (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020; Khedher, 2014).
- **Social Capital & Visibility:** Effective branding builds networks that enhance credibility and media exposure (Khedher, 2014).
- **Audience Engagement:** Fans' perceptions are shaped by athletes' self-presentation and how transparently they interact online (Pawar, 2016; Walsh & Williams, 2017, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020).

1.5.6 THE STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS OF ATHLETE BRAND DEVELOPMENT

Developing an athlete's brand is a strategic, ongoing process (Zabojnik, 2018):

1. **Clarity & Consistency:** Athletes must consistently convey clear visions, values, and missions across all expressions (Zabojnik, 2018).
2. **Audience Targeting & SWOT Analysis:** Effective branding requires knowing your audience and analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Zabojnik, 2018).
3. **Bi-Channel Strategy:** Combine robust digital strategy (e.g., verified social media) with offline presence through events and networking (Zabojnik, 2018; Su et al., 2020).
4. **Content Marketing:** Regularly share multimedia content that resonates with followers (Pullizzi, 2012, as cited in Zabojnik, 2018).
5. **Relationship Building:** Share relatable content, highlight meaningful relationships, and prioritize organic engagement over transactional tactics (Doyle et al., 2020; Zabojnik, 2018).
6. **Reputation Management & Credibility:** Authenticity, consistency, and alignment between words and actions foster trust and credibility among audiences and potential sponsors (Erdem & Swait, 2004, as cited in Arai et al., 2014).

1.5.7 CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Athletes, particularly in less-publicized sports, may face obstacles such as lack of branding expertise, limited time, and agent support focused primarily on contracts (Hasan et al., 2020; Hodge & Walker, 2015).

Organizations can support athletes by offering:

- Branding education and mentorship programs
- Structured sponsorship deals aligned with athletes' images.
- Guidance to enhance brand congruence, ensuring alignment between **brand identity** and **consumer perception** to avoid reputational risks (Linsner et al., 2021; Nandan, 2005).

1.6 MMA HISTORY AND BUSINESS MODEL

1.6.1 HISTORY OF MMA

Athletes, particularly in less-publicized sports, may face obstacles such as lack of branding expertise, limited time, and agent support focused primarily on contracts (Hasan et al., 2020; Hodge & Walker, 2015).

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) traces its modern roots to the Brazilian "Vale Tudo" events of the early 1990s, which themselves were inspired by ancient combat traditions such as pankration from the Greek Olympic Games, an early form of mixed-style fighting combining striking and grappling (Jennings, 2021).

The global launch of modern MMA is commonly associated with the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) on November 12, 1993, in Denver, Colorado, by Rorion Gracie and other promoters. The early UFC events aimed to determine which martial art was most effective in a no-rules environment, famously showcasing Royce Gracie, a smaller athlete who defeated larger opponents using Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (Stan, 2019).

Despite its appeal, early MMA faced significant backlash. U.S. Senator John McCain labeled it "human cockfighting," leading to bans in over 30 U.S. states (King, 2024). To gain legitimacy, the UFC adopted the Unified Rules of MMA in 2000, initially sanctioned in New Jersey, introducing standardized regulations, weight classes, and time limits (King, 2024). A pivotal moment in MMA's institutional development came in 2001 when Zuffa LLC, owned by the Fertitta brothers, purchased the UFC for \$2 million. This acquisition enabled a commercial and structural transformation of the sport. In 2016, the UFC was sold to Endeavor for \$4 billion at the time, the largest transaction in sports entertainment history (King, 2024).

MMA's mainstream ascent was further fueled by broadcast partnerships, including a 7-year deal with Fox in 2011 and a subsequent Pay-Per-View (PPV) agreement with ESPN in 2019. As of 2024, the UFC generates over \$1 billion annually (King, 2024), illustrating the sport's transition from fringe spectacle to global entertainment juggernaut.

1.6.2 MMA VERSUS OTHER COMBAT SPORTS

MMA distinguishes itself through its hybrid nature, combining techniques from various combat disciplines such as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, boxing, Muay Thai, wrestling, and judo (Stan, 2019). Unlike single-discipline sports, MMA requires athletes to master striking and grappling across multiple dimensions, demanding constant adaptation and situational awareness (Stan, 2019).

Key characteristics of modern MMA include (King, 2024):

Unified Rules and Weight Classes: Fighters are grouped by body weight and experience level under the Unified Rules adopted in 2009.

Match Structure: Standard non-title bouts consist of three 5-minute rounds, while championship bouts last five rounds.

Protective Equipment: Fighters wear 4 oz gloves (fingerless gloves specially required for MMA, much lighter than traditional boxing gloves), groin protection, and mouthguards.

Victory Conditions: Matches can end via knockout (KO), technical knockout (TKO), submission, disqualification, or judges' decision.

- Knockout (KO): A knockout occurs when a competitor fails to rise from the canvas.
- Technical Knockout (TKO): A technical knockout happens when the referee stops the contest.
- Submission: A submission is declared when a competitor signals either physically or verbally that does not wish to continue.
- Judge's decision: A decision occurs where the contest has gone the full number of rounds, and the winner is determined by totals on the panel of judges' scorecards.
- Disqualification: A disqualification can happen for breaking competition rules. Additionally, a referee may stop a contest if one of the competitors is deemed not to be honestly competing.

Physiological Demands: MMA requires high-intensity intermittent effort, combining anaerobic and aerobic energy systems. Athletes must maintain strength, endurance, and technical versatility.

MMA's multidimensional format and need for constant adaptation set it apart from more rigid combat sports like boxing or wrestling.

1.6.3 THE INFLUENCE OF MMA CULTURE ON ATHLETE BEHAVIOR AND IMAGE

MMA culture, particularly as cultivated by the UFC, emphasizes individuality, dominance, and entertainment value. Athletes are not only evaluated based on performance but also on their ability to craft compelling personas. Fighters are encouraged to engage in self-promotion through dramatic narratives, showmanship, and sometimes provocative behavior elements that deeply affect how they are perceived by fans and media (King, 2024).

A notable byproduct of this culture is the normalization of "trash talk" and public rivalries. The infamous feud between Conor McGregor and Khabib Nurmagomedov illustrates the blurred line between promotion and personal attacks. This dynamic can lead to fines, suspensions, and regulatory concerns (Hussain, 2021). The UFC has leveraged these rivalries for marketing purposes, as seen when it used footage from McGregor's bus incident to promote his fight against Khabib (Septiana, 2019).

Moreover, the UFC classifies fighters as independent contractors, not employees. This classification limits their access to benefits such as health insurance and gives the promotion significant control over sponsorships and career progression. For instance, the UFC's exclusive partnership with Reebok in 2015 limited fighters' ability to wear custom gear, cutting off revenue from personal sponsors (King, 2024).

Thus, while the MMA ecosystem promotes personal branding and spectacle, it simultaneously imposes systemic constraints that can challenge athlete autonomy and welfare.

1.6.4 THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN MMA PROMOTION

Narrative and identity play a central role in the promotional machinery of MMA. The UFC's branding strategy hinges on framing athletes as more than just fighters, they are portrayed as heroes, rebels, national icons, or redemption stories. These narratives foster deep emotional connections with fans (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Promotion often emphasizes the athlete's background, values, lifestyle, and personal journey. Fighters' identities are constructed through curated content, interviews, social media, and visuals showcasing their families, training routines, and daily lives (King, 2024). This multi-layered storytelling transforms fighters into icons, much like Michael Jordan in basketball or Cristiano Ronaldo in football.

Additionally, the UFC strategically controls public narratives. Dana White's leadership and media presence have been instrumental in shaping public perception of the organization and the sport. By positioning the UFC as the definitive global MMA promotion, the brand reinforces its cultural dominance (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Rivalries and controversies are also used as narrative devices. For example, even confrontational episodes are repurposed for promotional content, feeding into the UFC's sportainment model (the merger of entertainment and sport) (Richelieu, 2021). Moreover, the UFC has championed MMA as the most "complete" combat discipline, often leveraging inter-sport comparisons like McGregor vs. Mayweather to assert its superiority over traditional boxing (King, 2024).

In the digital age, these narratives are amplified through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where the UFC tailors content to resonate with younger audiences and global markets.

1.6.5 THE MAJOR MMA ORGANIZATIONS

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is structured around several key organizations, each adopting distinct business models, promotional strategies, and international positioning. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) remains the dominant player in the global MMA market, with an estimated 90% market share in the United States and 80% in the Eastern Hemisphere (Nash, 2022). Its closest competitors include Bellator, the Professional Fighters League (PFL), and ONE Championship (King, 2024).

Bellator, once UFC's main rival, was acquired by the PFL in 2023. The PFL distinguishes itself through a regular season and playoff format like traditional team sports. ONE Championship,

based in Singapore, leads the Asian market, and operates a free digital streaming model, generating revenue primarily through advertising and live events (King, 2024).

These organizations vary in their approach to visibility and monetization. While the UFC secures premium broadcasting deals for instance with ESPN (major sports broadcaster) for \$150M/year, competitors like PFL and ONE offer free streaming to build their global reach (King, 2024). The UFC's acquisition of WWE in 2023 through Endeavor, valued at \$21 billion, further strengthens its monopoly and synergy between entertainment and combat sports.

1.6.5 MMA ORGANIZATIONS REVENUE

MMA organizations, particularly the UFC, rely on a diverse set of revenue streams. These include (Nash, 2022):

- **Pay-Per-View (PPV) Sales** (a broadcasting method where consumers purchase access to watch specific events): The primary revenue generator for the UFC, PPV contributes over 50% of content revenue, with standard pricing applied regardless of the fight card
- **Broadcasting & Media Rights:** High-value media deals have been crucial to UFC's success. The partnership with ESPN, initiated in 2019, guarantees \$150M annually for exclusive broadcast and PPV rights.
- **Live Events & Ticketing:** Account for approximately 12% of UFC revenues, driven by location and athlete popularity.
- **Sponsorships:** Represent around 9% of revenue. Historic deals include a \$70M contract with Reebok and a three-year deal with Venum, which significantly restrict fighter-level sponsorship.
- **Merchandise & Digital Platforms:** The UFC monetizes through its "Fight Pass" streaming service and consumer products, contributing about 3% of overall revenue.

This multifaceted model reflects the UFC's ability to commercialize nearly every aspect of its product and brand.

1.6.6 MMA FIGHTERS REVENUE

UFC athletes do not receive a fixed salary from the organization; instead, their compensation follows a per-fight payment model (Conklin, 2020). Under this structure, fighters are paid a guaranteed "show" amount for appearing and competing in a bout, with the possibility of earning an equivalent "win bonus" should they emerge victorious. For example, in 2017, forty-seven fighters earned between \$9,500 and \$12,500 for their sole appearance that year, while the majority received more than \$12,500 per fight. Notably, the winner of UFC 1 in 1993 was awarded \$50,000 an amount exceeding what some fighters received for participating in events in 2019 despite the substantial growth in the UFC's profitability over the intervening decades.

Fighters bear significant personal costs, including training expenses ranging from \$8,000 to \$12,000 per training camp, as well as mandatory medical examinations to be cleared for competition (Conklin, 2020). The UFC covers only limited logistical expenses specifically, travel, accommodation, and meals for the fighter and one associate while many athletes travel with larger entourages, increasing their out-of-pocket costs. Consequently, entry-level fighters may incur net losses for a bout, particularly if they lose or if the fight is cancelled without compensation.

Additional income streams include discretionary bonuses granted by the UFC and, for elite fighters, a share of pay-per-view (PPV) revenues. The organization characterizes this structure as “eat what you kill,” meaning earnings are directly tied to competitive outcomes and marketability (Conklin, 2020). However, critics argue that the rapid growth in UFC revenues has not translated into proportionate increases in fighter pay. For instance, in 2017, Georges St-Pierre the highest-paid UFC athlete that year earned only 0.36% of the organization’s total revenue, a figure markedly lower than the revenue share of athletes in unionized leagues such as the NFL, MLB, NBA, or NHL. Compared to other individual sports, UFC fighters appear undercompensated, with estimates indicating that they receive approximately 10% of total event revenue, whereas professional boxers often secure around 70% (Conklin, 2020).

1.6.7 CONTRACTUAL CONSTRAINTS FOR MMA FIGHTERS

UFC fighters are subject to restrictive contractual conditions that limit their autonomy. Contracts are often long-term (previously five years) and include clauses that allow the UFC to terminate or freeze agreements under specific conditions (Mahjouri, 2021). Key constraints include:

Image Rights & Exclusivity: Athletes must wear UFC-approved gear, preventing them from leveraging their personal image during events (Nag, 2021).

Arbitration Clauses: Fighters must resolve disputes via arbitration, limiting their legal recourse.

Independent Contractor Status: This status disqualifies them from benefits like health insurance, despite UFC-enforced compliance standards akin to employer-employee relationships (Fowlkes, 2017).

Anti-Unionization Practices: Fighters attempting to unionize often face retaliation, such as contract termination. This suppresses collective bargaining efforts (King, 2024).

The UFC’s control over contract terms exemplifies its monopoly power, which is central to ongoing antitrust lawsuits alleging anti-competitive practices.

1.6.8 ORGANIZATION’S DOMINANCE OVER ATHLETE BRANDING AND PROMOTION

Athlete branding in MMA is closely tied to the promotional strategies of organizations like the UFC. The organization uses fighters’ personalities and stories as central elements in its marketing yet retains tight control over branding opportunities. Key aspects include:

- **Narrative Construction:** Fighters are promoted through curated narratives about their lifestyle, beliefs, and personal journeys, which enhance fan engagement (King, 2024).
- **Sponsorship Control:** Exclusive apparel deals limit personal sponsorships, ensuring all promotional value centers around the UFC brand.
- **PPV Incentives:** Only a handful of fighters benefit from direct financial incentives to promote their fights, as lower-tier athletes rarely receive PPV points.
- **Trash Talk and Storylines:** Rivalries and personal conflicts are often amplified for commercial purposes. The UFC used incidents like McGregor's attack on Khabib's team bus to build promotional hype, despite the ethical concerns it raises (King, 2024).

This balance between exploiting and restricting fighter branding opportunities is a core tension in the MMA business model.

1.6.9 THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPING A PERSONAL BRAND WITHIN THE CURRENT MMA ECOSYSTEM

Developing a personal brand in MMA presents several challenges, primarily due to the UFC's dominant control over athlete visibility and income opportunities:

- **Lack of Visibility for Non-Main Event Fighters:** Only main-card fighters receive widespread promotion. Preliminary fighters often lack visibility despite competing at a high level.
- **Short Career Cycles and Roster Turnover:** UFC contracts allow for easy dismissal after consecutive losses, hindering long-term brand development.
- **Limited Financial Autonomy:** Fighters cannot monetize their personal brand through sponsorship or independent merchandise during official event.
- **Fear of Retaliation:** Unionization or public criticism of the UFC has historically led to contract cancellations, discouraging athletes from speaking out (King, 2024).
- **Narrative Control:** The UFC actively shapes the public image of its fighters. Those whose narratives do not align with the organization's goals may be marginalized.

While the UFC offers unmatched visibility, it also imposes systemic constraints that hinder independent personal brand growth.

1.7 BRANDING AND MMA

1.7.1 ATHLETE BRANDING IN MMA: A SPORT UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) offers a distinct environment for athlete branding due to its deep reliance on storytelling, personal narratives, and fighter persona development. Unlike traditional sports where performance often dominates perception, MMA places significant value on spectacle, persona, and narrative buildup before and beyond the fight (Ollikka, 2018). Fighters are often expected to self-promote aggressively through verbal confrontations and public controversies, with "trash talk" becoming a marketing asset rather than a detriment (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Moreover, the cultural values celebrated in MMA such as toughness, the "warrior spirit", and overcoming adversity shape the branding identity of the sport (Singleton & Green, 2021). The UFC's decision to continue events during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies the sport's unique defiant and heroic identity construction (Singleton & Green, 2021). MMA fighters are also often portrayed with national or cultural pride, using nicknames or titles that amplify their identity and create emotional connections with fans (Aryowiloto, 2024). Unlike many team sports, MMA fighters individually embody their brand, which provides both freedom and pressure to develop a compelling, consistent image.

1.7.2 THE CURRENT BRANDING PRACTICES IN MMA

Branding practices in MMA are characterized by a hybrid approach that blends traditional marketing with personality-driven content. Promotions like UFC and local gyms such as Impact MMA utilize Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), including digital advertising, public relations, sponsorships, and social media marketing (Perdana, 2024). Social platforms, especially Instagram and YouTube are critical for fighter promotion and audience engagement (Perdana, 2024).

Athlete branding involves persona development, often through "stage names" and storytelling strategies that highlight unique cultural or personal backgrounds (Aryowiloto, 2024). Fighters are not just athletes; they are entertainers expected to maintain a compelling "front stage" image (fight performance) and "backstage" presence (personal life) (Priscillia & Setiawan, 2024). Additionally, the rhetorical nature of fighter promotion—popularized by figures like Conor McGregor utilizes devices such as repetition, metaphor, and exemplum to dominate the public narrative (Ollikka, 2018).

Brand narratives are often supported by promotions themselves, who glorify or amplify aspects of fighters' lives to boost marketability. In crisis situations, such as the pandemic, the UFC leveraged branding narratives portraying the organization and its leadership as heroic and anti-establishment (Singleton & Green, 2021).

1.7.3 STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING AND MANAGING AN ATHLETE BRAND IN MMA

Leading MMA athletes manage their brands by blending athletic success with compelling narratives, verbal flair, and authenticity. Conor McGregor is the archetype of branding mastery in MMA. He utilizes rhetorical tools such as apostrophe, exemplum, and metaphor to control narratives, assert dominance, and increase entertainment value (Ollikka, 2018). McGregor's Irish identity is central to his image, appealing to national pride while also framing himself as an international star (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Suwardi "Becak Lawu" offers a contrasting but equally effective branding strategy, emphasizing authenticity, humility, and relatability. He merges "sportainment" (sport & entertainment) with personal life content like family interactions and daily routines to create a well-rounded and accessible public image (Priscillia & Setiawan, 2024). Both athletes demonstrate the importance of controlling one's narrative both in and out of competition, leveraging digital media to shape perception.

1.7.4 BARRIERS TO ESTABLISHING A SUSTAINABLE ATHLETE BRAND IN MMA

Despite the potential for fame and wealth, building a sustainable brand in MMA is fraught with challenges. One major obstacle is the overemphasis on celebrity status over fighting skill. Fighters like Demetrious Johnson have been overlooked despite dominance in their weight classes due to their less flamboyant personas (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Another challenge lies in the fragile nature of an MMA career, where injuries, short-lived peaks, and fierce competition can abruptly reduce visibility (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017). Additionally, fighters often lack autonomy due to restrictive contracts, financial insecurity, and promotional control over public narratives (Singleton & Green, 2021).

Maintaining authenticity while projecting a consistent persona is a demanding balancing act (Priscillia & Setiawan, 2024). Lastly, there is often a lack of market knowledge among fighters and trainers, which can hinder strategic brand development (Francischetti, 2010).

1.7.5 THE INFLUENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS (UFC, PFL) ON ATHLETE

The MMA business model significantly impacts branding opportunities, especially through centralized control and emphasis on PPV revenue. In organizations like the UFC, a fighter's compensation and visibility are tightly linked to their ability to attract viewers, not just win fights (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017). Promotions actively "manufacture" celebrity fighters by amplifying personalities and backstories, thereby incentivizing entertainment-driven branding.

These promotions offer global visibility via extensive media distribution, but this comes with the cost of narrative control. Organizations often override fighter narratives with organizational branding portraying leadership (e.g., Dana White) as heroes and critics as adversaries (Singleton & Green, 2021). Moreover, athletes are sometimes required to sign

waivers that prevent them from speaking negatively about the promotion, reducing authenticity in public messaging (Singleton & Green, 2021).

Events like "Dana White's Contender Series" and reality TV shows also serve as branding incubators, offering newer fighters the chance to showcase personality and skill to wide audiences (Aryowiloto, 2024).

1.7.6 THE IMPACT OF ATHLETE BRANDING ON OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THE CAGE

A strong personal brand significantly enhances opportunities beyond the octagon. Fighters like Conor McGregor and Ronda Rousey have become global media figures, transitioning into boxing, Hollywood, or WWE based on the strength of their brand (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017). McGregor's crossover bout with Floyd Mayweather Jr. earned him over \$100 million far beyond typical UFC purses because of his brand appeal (Aryowiloto, 2024).

Branding also unlocks endorsements, fashion collaborations, and broader entrepreneurship. For example, fighters who embody relatable or entertaining personas such as the "family man" image are better positioned to engage with diverse markets (Priscillia & Setiawan, 2024). Platforms like Instagram serve as personal branding hubs, where fighters can monetize visibility and build communities.

Ultimately, personal branding in MMA is not just an add-on it is central to economic mobility and long-term career development inside and outside the sport (Ollikka, 2018; Raharjo, 2020).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND PARADIGM

In order to answer the research question "*How does athlete branding impact the career development of an MMA athlete?*", it is essential to determine an appropriate philosophical foundation. This foundation will guide the researcher's approach to knowledge creation, interpretation, and validation.

2.1.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: INTERPRETIVISM

This study adopts an **interpretivist research philosophy**. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed, and that understanding human behavior requires interpreting the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Saunders et al., 2019). In the context of this research, athlete branding is not only a strategic or marketing activity, but also a subjective and experiential process that varies significantly depending on the athlete's personality, cultural environment, organizational context (e.g., UFC), and audience perception.

Interpretivism is particularly relevant when exploring phenomena like personal branding, image development, and career trajectories, all of which involve perceptions, identities, and social relationships. The goal is not to generalize findings across all MMA athletes, but rather to offer rich, contextualized insights into how branding influences individual career paths.

2.1.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM: CONSTRUCTIVISM

Aligned with the interpretivist philosophy, this study adopts a **constructivist research paradigm**. Constructivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants, based on interactions, language, and shared meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm is especially suitable for qualitative research relying on interviews, as it acknowledges that multiple realities exist and that each participant may have a unique perception of branding and career progression.

For instance, an athlete may perceive their branding as empowering and central to career success, while another may view it as a constraint imposed by promoters or fans. The constructivist approach allows such narratives to emerge and be valued equally without seeking a singular truth.

2.1.3 JUSTIFICATION

The interpretivist-constructivist foundation is justified by the following:

- The research question is **exploratory** and seeks to **understand** rather than **measure**.
- The subject (branding and career in MMA) is **complex and socially influenced**, requiring attention to context and individual meaning.
- I am **insider knowledge**, being the long-term manager of a professional MMA athlete. This positions me in a unique role where co-construction of knowledge with interviewees is both possible and valuable.

Consequently, a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist and constructivist traditions provides the most coherent and rigorous foundation for the study.

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

2.2.1 RESEARCH APPROACH: INDUCTIVE

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an **inductive research approach** has been selected. Induction involves building theory from observations and patterns found in data, rather than testing a pre-existing hypothesis (Saunders et al., 2019). This is particularly appropriate for topics like athlete branding, where individual cases may offer rich insights and lead to the emergence of new conceptual frameworks.

Rather than beginning with a rigid theoretical model, this study will allow the findings from interviews to shape the understanding of how branding influences MMA athletes' careers. The aim is to identify recurring themes, narratives, and dynamics that may not yet be fully theorized in existing literature, especially within the context of combat sports.

2.2.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY: QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

The chosen research strategy is a **qualitative case study**, focusing on a group of professional MMA athletes and industry stakeholders (e.g., managers, promoters, journalists). The case study approach enables an in-depth exploration of a bounded phenomenon athlete branding within its real-life context (Yin, 2018).

This is particularly relevant because MMA is a niche but globally growing sport, and athlete branding within this context is shaped by the unique cultural and organizational environment of entities like the UFC, PFL, or regional promotions.

One of the central cases considered is that of Patrick Habirora, a professional MMA fighter managed by me since the early stages of his career. My perspective allows for deeper access to contextual information, branding decisions, and career milestones, which enriches the analysis while also requiring critical reflection on researcher bias.

2.2.3 RESEARCH PURPOSE: EXPLORATORY AND DESCRIPTIVE

The study has both **exploratory** and **descriptive** purposes. It seeks to explore:

- How MMA athletes and their teams define and implement personal branding,
- How branding impacts social dimension, sponsorships, and competitive opportunities

At the same time, it will describe specific branding strategies, promotional narratives, and the influence of branding on career progression, thus offering practical insights for athletes, managers, and sports marketers.

2.2.4 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER (ME)

I will play a dual role in this study:

1. As an **insider**, the manager of a professional MMA athlete with direct experience and access to data.
2. As an **academic observer**, responsible for maintaining reflexivity and objectivity in the collection and interpretation of data.

This duality is an asset in terms of access and contextual understanding but requires transparency and ethical rigor to manage potential conflicts of interest. A reflexive journal will be kept throughout the research process to document the researcher's assumptions, decisions, and positionality.

2.3. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

2.3.1 OVERVIEW

To address the research question *"How does athlete branding impact the career development of an MMA athlete?"*, this study adopts **semi-structured qualitative interviews** as its primary data collection method. This format allows for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore specific areas of interest in greater depth based on each participant's background.

Given the niche and emerging nature of personal branding in MMA, qualitative interviews provide rich, contextual insights that go beyond what could be captured through quantitative surveys.

2.3.2 DATA SOURCES AND PARTICIPANTS

The study will draw on two types of respondents:

1. Primary Group: Athletes and Managers
 - Professional MMA fighters at different stages of their careers (early, peak, post-career).
 - Managers and agents responsible for branding and communication strategy.
2. Secondary Group: Industry Stakeholders
 - Representatives of MMA promotions (regional and international)
 - Journalists, social media specialists, and brand consultants working in combat sports.

This diversity of voices ensures a holistic understanding of how athlete branding functions in the ecosystem of MMA.

2.3.3 SAMPLING STRATEGY

The research uses a **purposive sampling strategy**, selecting participants based on their relevance to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). The criteria for inclusion are:

- Direct involvement in MMA (athletes, managers, promoters, etc.).
- Experience or expertise in MMA, athlete branding, marketing, or communications.
- Willingness and availability to participate in a 30–60-minute interview.

Approximately 6 to 8 interviews are targeted, depending on data saturation, the point at which no new insights are emerging.

Key participant: Patrick Habirora, a professional MMA fighter managed by me, whose case will be used for illustrative depth.

2.3.4 INTERVIEW FORMAT AND LANGUAGE

- **Interview Type:** Semi-structured
- **Duration:** 30–60 minutes
- **Format:** In-person or remote (Teams)
- **Language:** English or French depending on participant preference
- **Recording:** With participant consent, interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

An interview guide will be created (see Appendix), covering the following themes:

- Personal career and brand history
- Branding strategy and positioning
- Communication tools and channels
- Perceived effects of branding (visibility, sponsors, career opportunities)
- Challenges faced in developing a personal brand

2.3.5 PILOT INTERVIEW

A **pilot interview** will be conducted to test the interview guide and structure. This pilot will be conducted with a non-target but experienced individual in MMA or sports branding. Feedback from this session will be used to adjust the questions and flow of the interview process if necessary.

2.3.6 DATA MANAGEMENT

- **Transcription:** All interviews will be transcribed verbatim.
- **Language translation:** If interviews are conducted in French, transcripts will be translated to English by the researcher to maintain consistency for analysis.

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

2.4.1 OVERVIEW

Given the qualitative nature of the study and the aim to explore the nuanced relationship between athlete branding and career development in MMA, this research adopts **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the primary method for analyzing interview data.

Thematic analysis is particularly suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across rich, textual datasets like interview transcripts. It offers flexibility while maintaining a clear structure for making sense of participants' experiences and perspectives.

2.4.2 WHY THEMATIC ANALYSIS?

Thematic analysis was chosen because:

- It aligns with an interpretivist epistemology, suitable for understanding personal and professional perceptions.
- It enables the exploration of both explicit and latent meanings in discourse.
- It is appropriate for studies with small-to-moderate sample sizes, typical of qualitative research.
- It allows the researcher (me) to link individual experiences to broader themes around branding, visibility, and career development in the MMA industry.

2.4.3 BRAUN & CLARKE'S SIX-PHASE FRAMEWORK

The analysis will follow the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data

The researcher will read and re-read the transcripts, make initial notes, and gain a holistic sense of each interview.

2. Generating initial codes

Using NVivo or a manual coding system, interesting features of the data will be systematically coded across the entire dataset. Codes may include terms like *"visibility boost"*, *"branding confusion"*, or *"lack of resources"*.

3. Searching for themes

Codes will be grouped into potential themes for example, "Social media as leverage", "Perception of sponsors", "Career pivots after visibility".

4. Reviewing themes

Candidate themes will be checked against the data to ensure they accurately represent participants' accounts and are coherent internally and distinct from each other.

5. Defining and naming themes

Themes will be clearly defined and refined, ensuring they capture the essence of the insights being expressed and relate back to the research question.

6. Producing the report

The final stage involves weaving the themes into a compelling narrative supported by direct quotations from participants, linking findings to existing literature and theory.

2.4.4 USE OF SOFTWARE

Although the dataset will be relatively small, qualitative data analysis software may be used to support the organization of codes and themes. This software will facilitate transparency, traceability of codes, and thematic consistency.

2.4.5 RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

Since I am also personally involved in athlete management (as the manager of one of the interviewees), a **reflexive journal** will be maintained throughout the research process. This

will allow the researcher to document potential biases, reflections, and positionality to ensure that personal involvement does not unduly influence the analysis.

2.4.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

To ensure the rigor of the qualitative analysis, the study will apply the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework:

- **Credibility:** Ensured through triangulation of perspectives (athletes, managers, brand experts).
- **Transferability:** Achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the MMA context.
- **Dependability:** Enhanced through clear documentation of research processes and audit trails.
- **Confirmability:** Maintained via reflexive journaling and peer review of coding.

2.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.5.1 ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the human-centered nature of this qualitative research, ethical considerations are crucial throughout the process. This study adheres to the ethical principles outlined by the Belgian Code of Ethics for Research Involving Humans as well as the ICHEC Research Ethics Guidelines, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, dignity, and well-being.

2.5.2 INFORMED CONSENT

All interview participants will be required to sign a written informed consent form before participating in the study. This form will include:

- A clear explanation of the research purpose
- The expected duration of the interview
- The voluntary nature of participation
- The right to withdraw at any time without consequence.
- How data will be collected, stored, and used

Consent will be obtained in writing via email or signed in person depending on the interview format.

2.5.3 ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

- **Anonymity:** Participants' not wishing to disclose their identities will be anonymized using pseudonyms or participant codes (e.g., Athlete A, Manager B).
- **Confidentiality:** All data collected will be securely stored on a password-protected drive accessible only by the researcher. Audio recordings and transcripts will be deleted after the completion of the dissertation and final evaluation.

2.5.4 VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

Participation is strictly voluntary, and participants will be informed that they can withdraw at any time without providing justification. If a participant chooses to withdraw, all data provided by them will be immediately destroyed and excluded from analysis.

2.5.5 MINIMIZING HARM

Although the study poses minimal risk, some topics may evoke sensitive reflections (e.g., career-ending injuries, brand rejections, or missed opportunities). I will ensure a supportive and respectful environment, pausing or stopping the interview at any sign of discomfort.

Participants will be reminded that:

- They can skip any question they are uncomfortable answering.
- Their emotional well-being is prioritized above data collection.

2.5.6 RESEARCHER'S DUAL ROLE

As I am personally involved in the MMA industry and manage one of the participating athletes, ethical safeguards will be applied to minimize conflict of interest:

- The manager-athlete relationship will be clearly disclosed to the reader.
- Data from the managed athlete will be treated with the same analytical rigor as other participants.
- Reflexive journaling and peer validation will be used to ensure objectivity.

2.5.7 ETHICAL APPROVAL

An official request for ethical approval will be submitted to the ICHEC Research Ethics Committee prior to conducting interviews. Interviews will only begin once approval has been granted.

2.5.8 USE OF DATA

The data collected will be used exclusively for academic purposes related to the completion of this master's dissertation. No data will be published externally or used commercially without the explicit consent of participants.

2.6. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Despite the rigorous structure of the research design, certain limitations are acknowledged. These limitations do not invalidate the study but are important to consider when interpreting the findings.

2.6.1 GENERALIZABILITY

This research uses a qualitative, exploratory approach, focusing on a relatively small and specific sample of stakeholders in the MMA industry. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of professional athletes, or even all MMA fighters. Instead, the study provides in-depth insights that are context-dependent and may serve as a basis for further research or more generalizable quantitative studies in the future.

2.6.2 SUBJECTIVITY AND RESEARCHER BIAS

As I am actively involved in the MMA ecosystem, including managing one of the participating athletes, there is a risk of subjectivity or bias in:

- The interpretation of participant responses
- The selection of interview questions or themes
- The representation of the MMA industry

To address this, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and external feedback will be used throughout the research process to increase transparency and reduce personal bias.

2.6.3 PARTICIPANT SELECTION BIAS

Due to the reliance on purposive sampling and personal networks to access MMA professionals, the participant group may be skewed toward individuals with more developed personal brands or stronger industry visibility. This may lead to overrepresentation of fighters who are more active on social media or who already have a strategic mindset regarding their image.

2.6.4 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION LIMITATIONS

All interviews will be conducted in either English or French, depending on the preference of the participant. In some cases, language barriers or cultural differences could influence:

- How branding concepts are understood
- How openly participants communicate about their strategies and experiences

Efforts will be made to ensure clear and accurate communication, including the possibility of translating transcripts if needed.

2.6.5 DYNAMIC NATURE OF MMA CAREERS

Athlete branding and career development are influenced by real-time dynamics such as fight results, injuries, contracts, and sudden changes in public perception. These variables evolve quickly in combat sports and may affect how athletes and stakeholders perceive branding at the time of the interview. The research captures a snapshot rather than a longitudinal evolution.

2.6.6 LIMITATIONS OF SELF-REPORTED DATA

The study relies on self-reported narratives, which can be subject to:

- Social desirability bias
- Memory lapses
- Selective storytelling

To mitigate this, triangulation through multiple perspectives (athletes, managers, media) is used to cross-check and balance insights.

2.6.7 TIME AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Given the academic timeline and scope of a master's dissertation, certain advanced methods such as:

- Longitudinal tracking of athlete brands
- Larger sample sizes
- Cross-continental comparisons

... are beyond the current research capacity. However, these limitations are acknowledged and discussed in the final section of the dissertation as areas for future research.

2.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the credibility, reliability, and ethical soundness of the findings. Unlike quantitative research, where validity and reliability are often based on numerical measurements, qualitative rigor is assessed through a set of criteria introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study employs several strategies to enhance trustworthiness and ensure the integrity of the data and conclusions.

2.7.1 CREDIBILITY

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the research findings. Several steps will be taken to ensure that the data collected, and the interpretations made are credible and reflect the experiences of the participants:

- **Triangulation:** By gathering insights from different types of stakeholders (MMA athletes, managers, and branding professionals), the study cross-validates perspectives and minimizes one-sided interpretations.
- **Member Checking:** Participants will be given the opportunity to review and validate their interview transcripts and the interpretations derived from their contributions. This increases transparency and participant validation.
- **Prolonged Engagement:** My prior and ongoing involvement in the MMA industry specifically through managing an athlete allows for a deep contextual understanding and prolonged interaction with the environment studied.

2.7.2 TRANSFERABILITY

While the findings of this study are not statistically generalizable, they may offer transferable insights to other athletes or sports disciplines facing similar branding challenges.

Thick Description: Detailed accounts of the participants' contexts, branding strategies, and career experiences will be provided. This helps readers determine whether the findings could be applicable to similar settings or athletes in other combat sports or professional environments.

2.7.3 DEPENDABILITY

Dependability focuses on the consistency of the research process over time and under different conditions. To strengthen dependability:

- A transparent research protocol is maintained, including:

- The development of the interview guide
- The rationale behind participant selection
- The coding and thematic analysis process
- An audit trail will be kept, documenting all decisions made during data collection and analysis. This ensures that another researcher could trace the logic and procedures used throughout the study.

2.7.4 CONFIRMABILITY

Confirmability ensures that the findings are based on the participants' responses and not the researcher's personal biases or assumptions.

- A reflexive journal will be kept throughout the research process to log thoughts, assumptions, and emotional reactions. This promotes researcher self-awareness and reduces unconscious bias in data interpretation.
- Peer debriefing will be conducted with other researchers or professionals in the field of sport management or branding to challenge and refine interpretations.

2.7.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Ethics is a fundamental component of qualitative rigor. The following ethical safeguards will be implemented:
- **Informed Consent:** All participants will be fully informed of the purpose of the research, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants' identities will be protected through anonymization. Any identifying information will be removed from transcripts and pseudonyms will be used in reporting.
- **Data Protection:** All interview recordings, transcripts, and analysis files will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Data will be deleted upon completion of the project as per university guidelines.

2.8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While every effort has been made to ensure the robustness and reliability of this research, several limitations must be acknowledged.

2.8.1 SAMPLE SIZE AND GENERALIZABILITY

Due to the qualitative nature of the research and the specific focus on MMA athletes, the sample size will be relatively small and non-random. Although participants will be selected

based on relevance and experience, the insights drawn from these interviews cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population of MMA fighters. Rather, the goal is to provide rich, contextual, and transferable knowledge that may inform further studies or practical applications in similar settings.

2.8.2 SUBJECTIVITY OF RESPONSES

Qualitative interviews inherently rely on personal perceptions, experiences, and memory. This introduces a degree of subjectivity that may affect the accuracy or completeness of the information provided. Furthermore, athletes may have varying levels of self-awareness regarding their branding or may choose to withhold certain information due to privacy or reputational concerns.

2.8.3 RESEARCHER BIAS

As I am (the researcher) also the manager of an MMA athlete, personal involvement in the subject may introduce an unconscious bias in data interpretation or participant interaction. To minimize this, strategies such as open-ended questioning, transparency in analysis, and triangulation through multiple perspectives will be implemented to uphold research integrity.

2.8.4 TIME CONSTRAINTS

The study is conducted within a limited academic calendar. As a result, the number of interviews and depth of analysis may be affected. Although the research is designed to remain feasible within the given timeframe, more extensive longitudinal or comparative studies could yield deeper insights.

2.8.5 ACCESSIBILITY OF PARTICIPANTS

While access to certain fighters and stakeholders is facilitated by the researcher's industry position, some high-profile individuals may remain unavailable or unwilling to participate, which could limit the diversity of perspectives. This may particularly affect insights on the branding strategies used at the elite level of the sport.

2.8.6 EVOLVING NATURE OF MMA AND BRANDING

Both the sport of MMA and the field of personal branding are rapidly evolving. Trends in media consumption, sponsorship structures, and athlete representation may shift during or after the study, limiting the temporal relevance of certain findings. The study captures a snapshot of current practices rather than fixed rules.

2.9 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDES

2.9.1 FIGHTERS (MMA ATHLETES)

Theme	Semi-Structured Questions
Background and Career Path	Can you tell me about your journey in MMA and what led you to choose this sport?
Personal Image and Branding	When did you first start thinking about the image you project outside the cage?
Personal Image and Branding	How would you describe your current public image as a fighter? Is this something you try to control?
Actions and Tools	What steps have you taken to build or strengthen your image?
Media and Social Media	What role do social media play in your visibility and personal brand?
Impact on Opportunities	Have you ever seen your personal image influence professional opportunities (sponsors, fight cards)? Could you give an example?
Media Exposure	How do you feel about the media coverage and the way you are portrayed?
Teamwork	Do you work with a team or manager to manage your image? If so, what is their role?
Future Vision	How would you like your personal brand to evolve over time, including after your sporting career?

2.9.2 IMAGE MANAGERS

Theme	Semi-Structured Questions
Role Definition	Can you describe your role with the fighter(s) you work with?
Strategy Development	How do you define a personal branding strategy for an athlete?
Initial Steps	What are the first actions you take when starting to work on an athlete's personal brand?
Authenticity vs. Strategy	How do you balance authenticity and strategy when building a personal brand?
Communication Channels	Which channels or formats do you prioritize for athlete branding?
Impact Examples	Can you share a concrete example where a strong image opened opportunities for the athlete?
Challenges	Have you ever faced situations where the athlete disagreed with the image being projected? How did you manage this?
Media Relations	What role do traditional media outlets play in your branding strategy?
Evolution Over Time	How do you adapt the branding strategy as the athlete's career evolves?
Storytelling	What place does storytelling (personal narrative) have in athlete branding?

2.9.3 SPORT MANAGERS

Theme	Semi-Structured Questions
Role	What is your role in managing the career of a fighter?
Career Planning	How do you plan the key stages of a fighter's career progression?
Branding Influence	Do you think an athlete's media visibility or image impacts their opportunities?
Strategic Adjustments	Have you ever had to adapt your strategy due to increased visibility or branding needs?
Organizational Expectations	How do you perceive the expectations of MMA organizations regarding fighter notoriety?
Negotiation and Matchmaking	Can a strong public image influence matchmaking or contract negotiations?
Collaboration	Do you actively collaborate with those managing the athlete's image?
Case Example	Could you share an example where you had to balance sporting priorities with branding considerations?
Branding Importance	How important do you think personal branding is for overall athlete success today?

2.9.4 JOURNALISTS /MEDIA

Theme	Semi-Structured Questions
Selection Criteria	How do you decide which fighters or stories to feature in your media outlet?
Attractiveness of Fighters	What makes a fighter appealing to you beyond sporting performance?
Image Influence	Does an athlete's public image influence the way you cover them in the media?
Storytelling	How important is storytelling in the media exposure of fighters?
Under/Over Exposure	Have you seen cases of fighters being underexposed despite strong performances? Or overexposed because of strong branding?
Artificial Branding	Do you think overly constructed branding can hurt an athlete's credibility?
Evolution	How has the link between personal branding and media coverage evolved in recent years?

2.9.5 MMA ORGANIZATIONS

Theme	Semi-Structured Questions
Selection Criteria	What criteria do you consider when deciding to feature an athlete on an event?
Notoriety	Does public notoriety or image influence your choices?
Attractiveness and Metrics	How do you measure a fighter's commercial appeal?
Social Media and Marketing	How important is social media engagement when evaluating fighters?
Merit vs. Marketing	Can personal branding sometimes outweigh sporting performance in your decisions?
Support to Athletes	Do you support fighters in developing their image and visibility?
Examples	Can you share a case where a fighter's personal brand played a key role in a strategic decision?
Global Communication Strategy	What role does athlete branding play in your organization's overall communication and promotion strategy?

3. FINDINGS

3.1 THE ROLE OF ATHLETE BRANDING IN CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The interviews reveal that athletes, whether at the start of their professional journey or already established, share a similar perception of the importance of personal branding in shaping their careers. Both Patrick Habirora (professional MMA fighter) and Ugo Vidal (amateur MMA fighter) highlighted how crucial their image has been in unlocking opportunities.

Patrick Habirora stressed that without his personal brand, he would not have been able to access the Professional Fighters League (PFL) so early in his professional career (Habirora, 2025). On the other hand, Ugo Vidal, who is in a different position as he is preparing to turn professional in the coming months, already benefits from a certain level of visibility, particularly through Instagram and has built a name for himself within the MMA sphere. He acknowledged that his personal brand has brought him opportunities but also noted a clear gap between athletes who excel at managing their image and those who merely communicate “well.” In today’s context, as Vidal underlined, good communication is no longer enough, athletes need to be among the very best communicators if they want to stand out and secure high-value opportunities, particularly in terms of fight offers (Vidal, 2025).

Ilyes Mekkiat (Journalist) added another dimension to this observation, stressing that the sporting factor alone is no longer sufficient to ensure career advancement. According to him, fighters today must also know how to market themselves, communicate effectively, inspire others, display charisma, and remain authentic. Using the example of Conor McGregor, he explained how these qualities can greatly influence a fighter’s career trajectory. He also pointed out that even highly skilled fighters can face setbacks if they lack a distinctive personality or an entertaining fighting style, citing the case of Taylor Lapillus being released from the UFC despite his abilities. This highlights the fact that branding has become just as important as sporting performance when it comes to shaping a fighter’s career (Mekkiat 2025).

From a sponsorship perspective, Patrick Habirora explained that he is now able to live off sponsorship deals rather than relying solely on fight purses (Habirora, 2025). By contrast, Ugo Vidal admitted that while his image allows him to secure sponsorships that can help him in specific key moments, he is still far from being able to rely on them as a sustainable source of income (Vidal, 2025).

The evidence from the interviews points to personal branding having a crucial impact on career trajectories, often complementing or even amplifying the benefits of sporting

performance. Patrick Habirora reiterated that his brand has been a decisive factor in opening doors and accelerating his progression (Habirora, 2025).

Tarek Bensaidane (Fight Manager), who manages Habirora's fight career, reinforced this point from a managerial perspective. He emphasized that selling a fighter like Patrick who excels in both performance and image is vastly different from promoting an equally talented fighter who lacks that branding impact. In Tarek's view, this difference is not just a matter of perception but a tangible business advantage that can significantly alter a fighter's career path (Bensaidane, 2025).

This aligns closely with Ilyes Mekkiat's comments, which underline that branding today is inseparable from sporting performance in determining a fighter's success. He argued that athletes must combine technical excellence with personal attributes such as charisma, authenticity, and the ability to connect with audiences, as these factors can be decisive in whether a fighter advances or is cut from a major organization. His example of Taylor Lapillus illustrates that without these branding elements, sporting ability alone may not be enough to secure longevity at the highest level (Mekkiat, 2025).

3.2 THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ATHLETE BRANDING

Across the interviews, there is strong consensus that Instagram and TikTok are the most effective platforms for building an athlete's personal brand and generating both visibility and engagement. Patrick Habirora (2025), Ugo Vidal (2025), and Alexandre Coeuret (2025) all pointed to these two platforms as offering the best return on investment in terms of image building.

From a managerial perspective, Alexandre emphasized that while YouTube also holds significant potential, it is now extremely competitive, making it difficult for athletes to stand out without substantial resources. Developing a successful YouTube presence requires significant time, effort, and production capacity. In contrast, Instagram and TikTok allow athletes to build a following with relatively low entry barriers often requiring nothing more than a good-quality smartphone. These platforms also offer faster growth opportunities, especially for athletes who create consistent, engaging content adapted to platform trends (Coeuret, 2025).

The interviews suggest that social media empowers athletes to become their own media outlets, reducing dependence on traditional media for exposure. Alexandre stressed that today, athletes can control their narrative, publish directly to their audience, and showcase their personality without relying on gatekeepers from traditional outlets. However, he also cautioned that traditional media should not be neglected. Appearances on major television networks, such as TF1, can provide a visibility "boom" by reaching an entirely different audience segment that may not be accessible through social media alone (Coeuret, 2025).

Ugo Vidal drew a parallel between an athlete's communication skills and their MMA skillset. Just as an MMA fighter must master various aspects of the sport: grappling, wrestling, and striking, an athlete must also master different aspects of communication. However, each fighter has unique strengths that can become a competitive advantage in branding. For example, Patrick Habirora excels in interviews, making this format a central pillar of his communication strategy. In contrast, Paul Denis Navero thrives in long-form YouTube content, meaning his branding efforts focus heavily on that platform. In both cases, leveraging personal strengths allows athletes to stand out in a crowded marketplace (Vidal, 2025).

The most effective content strategies identified by the interviewees share a common goal: creating an emotional connection with the audience. Alexandre highlighted that for the fighters he manages, lifestyle carousels on Instagram showcasing the athlete's personality and daily life perform particularly well, as they allow fans to connect with the human side of the fighter. In addition, he recommended producing polished promotional videos to build hype before fights and reinforce the athlete's brand identity (Coeuret, 2025).

Ilias also noted the strong impact of interviews, which allow athletes to present their personality in a more authentic and in-depth way. These interviews answer questions fans may already have and build a deeper bond between fighter and audience. Whether through lifestyle content, high-quality promotional videos, or engaging interviews, the underlying objective is the same: fostering emotional investment from the audience, which translates into higher engagement levels (Mekkiat, 2025).

3.3 PROFESSIONALIZATION AND TEAM STRUCTURE

The case of Patrick Habirora offers a clear example of the benefits of having a dedicated image management team from the early stages of an athlete's career. Habirora decided very early, during his amateur career, to work with an image manager: Guy Muco who would not focus on the sporting aspects but on building his personal brand. This strategic choice was made with the understanding that MMA, beyond the sport itself, heavily relies on an athlete's marketability to generate opportunities for fights, sponsorship, and media exposure (Habirora, 2025).

As a result, by the time Habirora turned professional, he had already developed a strong brand identity through four years of consistent work. This allowed them to "provoke" opportunities and create momentum that led to rapid professional growth something few fighters achieve so early in their careers (Habirora 2025).

However, the interviews also revealed that building such a team is far from easy. Ugo Vidal admitted that he is actively seeking competent people to help him with his image management but finds it challenging to identify individuals with the right expertise (Vidal, 2025). Alexandre Coeuret echoed this sentiment, stating that very few professionals in the MMA ecosystem have the necessary skills to manage a fighter's image effectively (Coeuret, 2025). Similarly, Tarek highlighted that while many can manage the sporting side of a fighter's career, only a small number can successfully handle image management (Bensaidane, 2025). According to him, combining a strong fight manager with a capable image manager can produce exceptional results, as demonstrated in Habirora's case (Bensaidane, 2025).

The main benefit of delegation, as illustrated by Habirora's case, lies in allowing each member of the team to operate within their "zone of genius." Habirora's current structure includes three managers: Guy, who handles image, communication, and artistic direction; Sam, who oversees logistics, administration, and internal and external communication; and Ayoub, who manages commercial negotiations. According to Habirora, this division of responsibilities ensures that each manager focuses on tasks they excel at, which significantly boosts efficiency and productivity. He stressed that if a single person were to handle all these functions, they would inevitably lose effectiveness due to task overload (Habirora 2025).

Tarek also pointed out a potential challenge in delegation: maintaining fluid coordination between team members. In Habirora's team, the solution came when Sam took on the role of coordinator, acting as the bridge between the managers and the athlete, as well as between the team and external stakeholders. This clear communication structure allows for streamlined information flow, which is essential for operational efficiency (Bensaidane, 2025).

Ultimately, while having a specialized image manager is highly beneficial, at higher levels of competition this role alone is not enough. If the image manager is also responsible for logistics, administration, commercial tasks, and coordination, their effectiveness will be diminished. Therefore, building a complementary, multidisciplinary team is crucial for sustaining long-term success (Bensaidane, 2025).

Both Patrick Habirora and Ugo Vidal highlighted that human connection is the foundation of everything when building a branding team. For Patrick Habirora, the process of assembling his team was not primarily about finding people who already possessed the technical skills required for sports branding. Instead, he chose individuals he had grown up with, people he trusted completely, and who, in his eyes, had the potential to develop the necessary skills over time. His philosophy was that trust and loyalty came first, the team would grow alongside him, just as he was evolving as a fighter, and they would also evolve in their respective managerial roles (Habirora, 2025).

Ugo Vidal echoed a similar sentiment but framed it slightly differently: for him, the human element serves the skills. In his view, while technical abilities are important, it is the personal connection, trust, and shared values that truly enhance and elevate those abilities. He stressed that without a genuine human bond, professional collaboration in this industry becomes fragile (Vidal, 2025).

Both fighters underscored a key point: in the world of combat sports, the most crucial factor when building a support team is not just technical competence, but the human connection and trust between the athlete and the people around them. This perspective is shaped by the reality that many individuals in the sports industry, whether in MMA, football, or other fields are driven primarily by financial gain. Athletes have witnessed too many situations where sportspeople were not treated with the respect they deserved.

Therefore, the real challenge is not finding people who are competent such individuals exist but finding those who can be trusted unconditionally, with whom the athlete can build a genuine human story before creating a purely professional relationship. This trust-first approach becomes the cornerstone for long-term success in athlete branding.

3.4 BALANCING SPORTING PERFORMANCE AND BRAND DEVELOPMENT

This is a crucial element, and the majority of interviewees emphasized the same point: sporting performance remains the number one priority and the foundation for developing a strong brand. Without consistent performance in competition, an athlete risks shifting into a position where they are perceived more as an influencer than as a fighter.

As all participants noted, the starting point is that the athlete must perform. Sporting performance serves as the core narrative from which one can then build communication around personality, authenticity, and authority. While in the short term, or up to a certain level, it is possible to grow a brand without top-level performance, maintaining momentum at higher levels and over the long term becomes extremely difficult without sporting results (Habirora, 2025; Vidal, 2025; Coeuret, 2025; Bensaidane, 2025).

Alexandre, who manages Morgan Charrière, provided a clear example: Charrière had built a strong personal brand alongside a respectable sporting level, but as soon as his performances declined, the public perception shifted dramatically. Fans quickly became critical, accusing him of over-communicating and underperforming, even if the two factors were not causally linked. This illustrates how the public can be unforgiving, and why maintaining performance is essential to protect credibility (Coeuret, 2025).

Patrick Habirora explained that his team initially developed his image during his amateur career but later shifted focus towards ensuring strong sporting performances to reinforce credibility. Once those results were established, they ramped up their communication strategy (Habirora, 2025). According to Alexandre, over-communicating can also add unnecessary pressure, especially for amateur fighters like Hugo Vidal and Habirora, who began building their brands early (Coeuret, 2025). While communication is important even at the amateur stage to showcase progress and results, trying to communicate at the same level as a UFC fighter can create harmful pressure. The goal in the amateur phase should be gaining experience, developing skills, and building progressively rather than chasing a fully professional media presence from the outset (Coeuret, 2025).

The primary risk is being perceived as an “influencer fighter” rather than a true professional athlete. Multiple interviewees pointed out that credibility as a fighter is non-negotiable; without it, the brand will eventually lose its foundation. Overexposure in the media, without results to back it up, can harm reputation and career prospects.

To avoid this, fighters need people around them who will keep them grounded, ensuring that their communication efforts remain aligned with their current sporting status. The goal is to maintain a healthy balance showcasing personality and marketability without letting it overshadow competitive achievements (Coeuret, 2025).

Balancing athletic performance with branding efforts inevitably brings pressure, public scrutiny, and criticism. From the interviews, several key perspectives emerged on how fighters navigate these challenges.

From a managerial standpoint, Tarek points the importance of taking breaks and stepping away from the sport to maintain mental balance. His recommendation to his fighters is to take vacations not only to rest physically, but also to gain perspective on the situation. By temporarily removing themselves from the constant cycle of training, competition, and content creation, fighters can reset their mindset and avoid becoming overly consumed by the pressures of image management (Bensaidane, 2025).

Patrick Habirora shared a similar approach, explaining that he maintains balance by staying close to the people he grew up with and spending time in his hometown. This keeps him grounded and helps him keep a sense of normalcy outside the fight world. In addition, travelling allows him to fully disconnect from the sport and the associated media pressures. Echoing Alexandre, Patrick believes that fighters should view social media as a tool much like money, it exists to serve the fighter, not to control them. The moment it starts to have a

negative effect, fighters need to step back and reassess their relationship with it (Habirora, 2025).

Ugo Vidal, who is still at an earlier stage of his career, approaches this differently. While he is not yet facing high volumes of criticism or extreme media pressure, he is aware that this will likely change as his visibility increases. For now, he focuses on staying as authentic as possible and maintaining close interaction with his audience, believing that authenticity will set him apart. However, he has already observed from close friends such as Paul Denis Navero and Patrick Habirora that there comes a point where it is no longer possible physically, mentally, or emotionally to give the same level of time and attention to the public. Hugo anticipates that, as his career grows, he too will need to create distance and set boundaries with his audience and social media presence (Vidal, 2025).

Overall, the interviews highlighted that the level of pressure is proportional to the athlete's visibility and hype. Fighters with greater exposure inevitably face more criticism, more public expectations, and more negative feedback. The ability to manage this pressure depends largely on perspective, self-awareness, and the willingness to take intentional steps back from the public eye when necessary.

3.5 AUTHENTICITY AND STORYTELLING

Vidal highlighted a particularly important point: for him, the priority is to remain true to himself when engaging on social media or meeting his audience in person. He explained that this consistency between his online persona and his real-life personality has pleasantly surprised people and strengthened the connection they already had with him through social media (Vidal, 2025).

It is essential to recognize the difference between the image projected online and the impression someone gives in real life. If these two are misaligned, it can lead to dissonance and damage credibility. Meeting someone in person who turns out to be completely different from their online persona can break trust, as it signals a lack of authenticity.

Alexandre also emphasized this point in his approach to managing fighters. He analyses each fighter's profile to ensure they remain as authentic as possible, while channeling that authenticity into a framework that serves both business and personal objectives. His role is not to fabricate a personality but to refine and amplify the genuine traits that can resonate with audiences (Coeuret, 2025).

Similarly, Liam Russel, the social media manager at the PFL, explained that from an organizational standpoint, the fighters who leave the most lasting impression are those who

are the most authentic, those who showcase traits that genuinely reflect who they are. These individuals can form a deeper emotional connection with the audience because authenticity is something people instinctively perceive (Russel, 2025).

Deceiving an audience about authenticity is difficult. While it may be possible to maintain a façade temporarily, the moment a fighter's true character emerges, the public will notice, and the impact can be highly negative. For this reason, authenticity is paramount from the perspective of the fighter, the management team, and the organization.

Alexandre pointed out something essential: everyone whether it's Pierre, Paul, Jacques, or an elderly woman one meets in the street has a story worth telling. His approach involves extracting and shaping elements of an individual's experience into a compelling narrative that creates an emotional connection with the audience (Coeuret, 2025).

Storytelling, when grounded in authenticity, enables fans to feel personally invested in an athlete's journey. This was evident in the case of Patrick Habirora, who has openly shared his path, including both victories and defeats. By embracing the entirety of his journey highlighting not only successes but also setbacks, Habirora has provided the public with relatable and human elements to connect to (Habirora 2025).

Defeats should not be hidden. They are part of the process and can be used to inspire resilience and determination. When an athlete communicates authentically and transparently about their story, they create a narrative that fans can follow, support, and feel emotionally attached to. In this way, storytelling becomes a powerful tool for deepening brand loyalty and fostering long-term engagement.

Alexandre's experience managing Morgan Charrière offers a valuable perspective on this question. Having gone through several challenging moments with Morgan including multiple consecutive losses, Alexandre realized the critical importance of building a connection between the fighter and the audience that goes beyond athletic performance (Coeuret, 2025).

When a fighter succeeds in creating such a bond, fans remain supportive both in victory and in defeat. For Morgan, this connection proved essential: even during losing streaks, he was able to rely on a loyal base of followers who stayed engaged because they felt an emotional link to him as a person, not just as an athlete (Coeuret, 2025).

This loyalty is closely tied to authenticity and storytelling. By sharing genuine aspects of the fighter's personality, background, struggles, and triumphs, managers and fighters can ensure that their public image does not rely solely on sports results. This approach fosters what

Alexandre describes as a “cult” around the fighter, not in the superficial sense of hype, but in the sense of a committed, passionate fanbase that will stand by them regardless of the outcome (Coeuret, 2025).

Ultimately, Alexandre’s strategy focuses on creating emotional moments for the public. Every authentic story, behind-the-scenes glimpse, or heartfelt interaction serves to deepen that bond. When fans feel emotionally invested, they stop being mere spectators and start becoming genuine supporters who are “there no matter what”, the true measure of brand loyalty in combat sports (Coeuret, 2025).

3.6 VISION & BRANDING

When looking at the cases of Habirora (2025), Bensaidane (2025), Coeuret (2025), and Vidal (2025), one clear pattern emerges: everything starts with the vision. Vision is more than just a motivational idea; it serves as the foundation upon which fighters build both their athletic careers and their personal brands.

For these fighters, vision shapes the path, the career plan, and the strategic choices they make in and out of the cage. It ensures coherence between sporting performance and brand development, enabling them to create something that transcends pure athletic achievement.

Both Hugo Vidal (2025) and Patrick Habirora (2025) emphasized during their interviews that their ultimate ambition is not only to win fights, but to be remembered for specific values they stand for. Their goal is for people, at the end of their careers, to say: “He embodied this value, he stood for this principle and I identify with it.”.

This reflects a deeper understanding: personal branding is what endures after the fighting stops. Sporting achievements may fade from memory, but the values, personality, and image the fighter projects can leave a legacy.

For fighters, then, branding is not simply about marketing during their active years, it is also about building an identity and a narrative that will be remembered decades after they retire, potentially creating post-career opportunities and cementing their place in cultural history.

3.7 THE IMPACT OF SPONSORSHIP

When exploring how fighters manage the balance between securing sponsorship deals and maintaining both sporting integrity and personal values, the perspectives of Coeuret (2025) and Patrick Habirora (2025) are particularly insightful.

Alexandre emphasizes a fundamental reality: money is at the center of an athlete's development. At the elite level, fighters need resources to fund proper fight preparation, recovery, nutrition, and travel for training camps. Without sufficient income, they are forced to work outside of their sport, which directly reduces the time and energy available for training. The consequence is a self-perpetuating cycle: less training leads to lower performance, which in turn makes it harder to secure opportunities both competitive and commercial (Coeuret, 2025).

Patrick Habirora illustrates this point clearly. Today, he lives entirely off his sponsorship deals, which allows him to train twice a day, follow a true professional athlete's lifestyle, and cover the substantial costs associated with competing at the highest level. His ability to sustain this lifestyle without relying on side jobs is the direct result of the strong personal brand he has built which in turn attracts and retains sponsors (Habirora, 2025).

This creates a clear chain reaction:

1. Building a strong personal brand →
2. Attracting high-quality sponsorships →
3. Securing stable income →
4. Training and recovering full-time →
5. Improving performance →
6. Strengthening both sporting and commercial value.

From this perspective, brand development is not merely about legacy or post-career opportunities in the short term, it is a purely economic necessity for fighters aiming for the top. As Alexandre points out, without sponsors, most fighters simply cannot afford to fully commit to the sport, which can limit their progression to the highest levels (Coeuret, 2025).

The balance with integrity comes from choosing partnerships that align with the fighter's values and personal image. Accepting deals that clash with their principles may provide short-term gains, but risks damaging the authenticity and credibility that are essential for long-term fan loyalty and sponsor retention.

The Synergy of Theory and Practice in MMA Athlete Branding

Athlete branding in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) represents a dynamic intersection of traditional sports marketing principles and the unique demands of combat sports entertainment. While academic literature provides a foundational understanding of personal and athlete branding, the practical experiences of managers, coaches, and fighters in the MMA ecosystem offer invaluable insights into its real-world application and evolution.

The Foundational Role and Definition of Athlete Branding in MMA

The theoretical definition of athlete branding emphasizes its specialized nature as a form of personal branding, leveraging athletic performance, persona, and symbolic value to establish a distinct market identity (Arai et al., 2014; Linsner et al., 2021). This concept extends to emotional associations that influence fan engagement (Williams et al., 2015, as cited in Linsner et al., 2021). MMA, unlike many traditional sports, uniquely relies on compelling storytelling, personal narratives, and fighter persona development beyond mere athletic performance (Ollikka, 2018).

In practice, this theoretical framework is consistently validated. Alexandre explains his role as encompassing a 360-degree management approach, covering a fighter's image, communication, sports career, and financial development, specifically highlighting the monetization of "image rights" in a sport where athletes often don't realize their value (Coeuret, 2025). Ugo realized that higher pay in MMA often comes not just from being a champion, but from acting as a "businessman" by building a strong following and brand, which ensures demand even after losses (Vidal, 2025). Patrick, quickly grasped this, noting how figures like Conor McGregor transcended the sport to become cultural icons, which inspired him to pursue similar financial independence through branding (Habirora, 2025).

Tarek regards communication as "extremely important" and "hugely underestimated" in a sports career, going beyond the traditional role of fight management (Bensaidne, 2025). From an organizational perspective, Liam of the Professional Fighters League (PFL) explicitly states that the PFL is "heavily invested" in fighter branding because it directly correlates with the league's growth, drawing audiences, boosting ratings, and attracting sponsors (Russel, 2025).

Key Pillars and Strategies for Effective Brand Building

The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) identifies three primary pillars: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2020; Linsner et al., 2021; Zabochnik, 2018).

Building a personal brand theoretically involves an "identity phase" (self-assessment), a "positioning phase" (communication through various cues and storytelling), and an "evaluation phase" (assessing perception) (Khedher, 2014; Zabochnik, 2018). Critical attributes include credibility, memorability, creativity, and consistency (Zabochnik, 2018; Pawar, 2016). Storytelling is paramount, transforming a regular fight into a "must-watch" event by fostering anticipation and emotional investment (Mekkiat, 2025).

Practically, these pillars and strategies are evident. Alexandre believes that storytelling is the starting point for all branding, as every individual possesses a story that can resonate emotionally with an audience (Coeuret, 2025.). He advises fighters to articulate who they are, their background, and the challenges they've overcome to create meaningful content and differentiate themselves (Coeuret, 2025). Patrick, aligning with the "athletic performance" pillar, emphasizes that performances are the "foundation of everything," as credibility is first established in the cage before extending to lifestyle content (Habirora, 2025). Ugo reinforced his image by consistently showing his training process and strategically associating himself with more famous fighters like Benoît Saint-Denis and Greg MMA, using their visibility to build his own recognition (Vidal, 2025). Tarek describes compelling content as "art" and "cinema," highlighting the entertainment aspect and the need for fighters to engage in a form of "roleplay" or transformation that translates into their public image through videos and photos (Bensaidane, 2025). Liam of the PFL confirms their content strategy centers on Fight Hype, Behind-the-Scenes Access, Humanizing Fighters through personal stories, and showcasing Highlight Moments (Russell, 2025).

The Indispensable Role of Digital and Social Media

Digital media, particularly social media, is theoretically described as a "powerful engine for personal branding," offering cost-effective and scalable methods to share content, build reputation, and connect with audiences (Pawar, 2016; Petrucă, 2016). Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn are crucial for showcasing professional achievements and personality (Zabochnik, 2018), enabling unparalleled reach and democratizing visibility (Petrucă, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, as cited in Petrucă, 2016).

In practice, this is a core component of MMA branding. Alexandre, despite initially being unfamiliar with digital platforms, recognized their importance and now actively seeks inspiration from various online presences (Coeuret, 2025). For developing virality and brand presence, he prioritizes Instagram and TikTok (through stories, reels, and videos), and also recommends a Twitter strategy (Coeuret, 2025). Patrick unequivocally states that social media played an "extremely important and crucial role" in developing his image, with Instagram serving as the initial foundation, followed by expansion to TikTok and Snapchat (Habirora, 2025). He highlights how viral clips of his interviews, shared across social media, significantly boosted his visibility and follower growth (Habirora, 2025). Ugo diversified his content across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, understanding that each platform reaches distinct audiences (Vidal, 2025). Liam of the PFL confirms that social media is central to their communication strategy for daily brand narrative, fan engagement, real-time reactions, and sponsor touchpoints (Russell, 2025). He specifically identifies TikTok for "fast, viral growth," Instagram for "brand partnerships," and YouTube for "deep storytelling and longevity" (Russell, 2025).

Navigating Authenticity and Persona in Branding

Theoretically, personal branding must incorporate an individual's values, life purpose, and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012, as cited in Zabochnik, 2018), with consistency and alignment between words and actions fostering trust and credibility (Erdem & Swait, 2004, as cited in Arai et al., 2014)²⁵. However, MMA culture also encourages crafting compelling personas and showmanship, sometimes blurring lines with "trash talk" (King, 2024; Hussain, 2021)²⁶²⁷. Overly constructed or artificial branding can harm credibility and cause public disengagement (Mekkiat, 2025).

In practice, the balance between authenticity and persona is delicate. Alexandre describes his role with Paul Denis Navero as channeling Paul's inherently strong personality rather than creating one from scratch; he acts as a "sculptor" giving form to the athlete's "raw material" (Coeuret, 2025). He also observes that the branding process helped the naturally shy Morgan Charrière to "free who he is" (Coeuret, 2025). Ugo consciously projects a "simple" and "normal" image, avoiding provocation or trash talk, believing that being friendly and approachable fosters positive public perception and followers (Vidal, 2025). Patrick emphasizes creating an "authentic image" that reflects his true self and inspires others by showing his human side (Habirora, 2025). Ilias warns against imitation, citing Ian Garry's perceived attempt to mimic Conor McGregor as a reason for fan animosity (Mekkiat, 2025). Liam explicitly encourages authenticity and permits fighters free expression online, intervening only if content crosses legal, discriminatory, or contractual boundaries (Russell, 2025). He acknowledges the inherent challenge in balancing fighters' "raw personalities" with the league's desired "polished, global image" (Russell, 2025).

Challenges and Constraints in the MMA Branding Ecosystem

The theoretical challenges in athlete branding include a lack of expertise, limited time, and agent support primarily focused on contracts (Hasan et al., 2020; Hodge & Walker, 2015). The MMA ecosystem, particularly the UFC, imposes systemic constraints such as independent contractor status (limiting benefits and sponsorship control), fear of retaliation for speaking out, and organizational control over narratives (King, 2024; Nag, 2021; Fowlkes, 2017). Overemphasis on celebrity over skill can lead to overlooked talent (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017), and the fragile nature of MMA careers (due to injuries, short peaks) can abruptly reduce visibility (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017).

Practically, Alexandre points out that athletes often engage in communication out of "financial necessity," as early career MMA earnings are often insufficient for proper training and living expenses (Coeuret, 2025). Ugo highlights the unsustainability of base UFC contracts, forcing fighters to become "businessmen" to supplement their income (Vidal, 2025). He laments the significant financial disparity between highly branded fighters like Patrick and Paul and others, even with comparable athletic records, attributing it partially to negotiation issues and promoters exploiting this power imbalance (Vidal, 2025). Alexandre also acknowledges that communication plans can quickly collapse with a fighter's loss, demanding rapid adaptation (Coeuret, 2025). Ilias provides examples of talented but "underexposed" fighters like Taylor Lapilus due to reserved personalities, and "overexposed" ones like Paddy Pimblett who gain popularity despite less sporting merit (Mekkiat 2025). Liam of the PFL observes a "significant gap" between fighters who are digitally savvy and those who aren't, underscoring the need for structured support programs (Russell, 2025).

The Impact of Strong Branding on Career Opportunities

Theoretically, athlete branding is vital for long-term career resilience, marketability, and facilitating transitions into post-athletic ventures (Zabojnik, 2018; Arai et al., 2014). Strong brands lead to higher wages, endorsements, and market deals (Khedher, 2014), building social capital and enhancing media exposure (Khedher, 2014). A robust personal brand can unlock opportunities beyond the octagon, propelling fighters into global media figures, endorsements, and entrepreneurship (Robbins & Zemanek, 2017; Aryowiloto, 2024; Priscillia & Setiawan, 2024).

In practice, Alexandre explains that developing personal branding mathematically increases an athlete's market value, enabling them to generate more income and dedicate themselves entirely to their sport (Coeuret, 2025). Tarek uses Patrick as a prime example, asserting that extensive pre-fight content, photos, videos, and appearances transformed Patrick into a "star

before he actually became one," allowing him to sell out large arenas (Bensaidane, 2025). Patrick confirms that his signing with the PFL was a direct result of his community's advocacy, and his ability to sell out the PFL Brussels event was due to his strong image and fan connection (Habirora, 2025). He further states that his image, alongside his results, has allowed him to live entirely from MMA since the start of his professional career, providing ideal training conditions (Habirora, 2025). Ugo also acknowledges that his branding efforts landed him on shortlists for opportunities, as his "human side" and communication skills served as crucial negotiation points beyond his sporting ability (Vidal, 2025).

The Evolving Role of Management and Team in Athlete Branding

Theories on athlete career development have evolved to a holistic view, integrating sporting and non-sporting dimensions, and highlighting the importance of career assistance (Stambulova, Ryba & Henriksen, 2020). Challenges such as relationship problems with coaches or teammates can threaten an athlete's development (Lima, 2022).

In practice, Alexandre's own role evolved significantly from a pure negotiator to a 360-degree manager, learning "on the job" and harmonizing his artistic sensibility with the athlete's vision (Coeuret, 2025). He sees himself as a "catalyst" for athletes who already possess strong personalities (Coeuret, 2025). Tarek, who initially managed all aspects of his fighters' careers, has now structured his team, recognizing that being an "exceptional communications agent" is a specialized skill (Bensaidane, 2025). Patrick formalized his team: Guy Muco for image, communication, and artistic direction; Samuel Ilunga for logistics, administration, and internal/external communications; and Ayoub Bouda for commercial and sponsorship deals (Habirora, 2025). He emphasizes building trust on a human level first (Habirora, 2025). Ugo, while relying on the Bulgarian Top Team for matchmaking and Alexandre for some voluntary image/sponsorship help, plans to invest his fight purse to hire dedicated photographers and videographers for his professional debut, highlighting the critical need for a trusted and specialized team as his career progresses (Vidal, 2025).

Future Outlook for Athlete Branding in MMA

The link between personal branding and media coverage has never been stronger, with personal branding becoming almost as important as athletic performance for visibility and career trajectory (Mekkiat, 2025).

Looking ahead, Liam foresees a shift towards more personalized, interactive, and immersive content in the next 3-5 years, including AI-driven fan engagement, VR/AR fight experiences, and real-time fan-to-fighter interactions (Russell, 2025). He advises aspiring amateur fighters to "start now," consistently post authentic content, identify their unique attributes, and "build your community before you need it," as a strong fanbase can open doors when opportunities arise (Russell, 2025).

Ugo envisions his personal brand evolving to inspire others, leave a legacy of determination and respect, and prepare for a post-career transition into coaching or gym ownership, drawing parallels to figures like Daniel Cormier (Vidal, 2025). Patrick's ultimate goal is to become an icon, remembered not just for his performances but for his values and positive impact, aiming to break barriers and create a legacy that transcends the sport for generations (Habirora, 2025).

In conclusion, the practical application of athlete branding in MMA strongly corroborates the theoretical models, emphasizing the critical interplay of performance, authentic storytelling, strategic social media engagement, and professional team management. The insights from fighters and managers underscore that in the modern MMA landscape, a well-cultivated personal brand is not just an ancillary asset but a fundamental driver of career progression, financial stability, and legacy.

4. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION & MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATION

4.1. DIMENSIONS OF ATHLETE BRANDING OVERLOOKED IN EXISTING LITERATURE

From my own expertise and field experience, I have observed that several fundamental aspects of athlete branding remain largely underrepresented in the academic literature. The first of these is the importance of vision. For both the athlete and their team, vision is the cornerstone that shapes not only the athletic career but also the development of a strong brand. Without a clear vision, it becomes difficult to determine where one is going and why, leading to a lack of coherence in career planning. Vision serves as the foundation upon which objectives are set, strategies are designed, and sporting and media choices are aligned. In my own methodology, vision is always the starting point because it anchors both athletic and communication strategies.

A second neglected dimension is the role of the entourage. In well-established sports such as football, basketball, tennis, or golf, the support structure around the athlete is usually well defined and professionalized. By contrast, in a relatively young sport like MMA, few athletes have the capacity or the awareness to surround themselves with the right people. Yet, a structured entourage plays a decisive role in shaping both career and brand image: managers, communications experts, specialized coaches, and sponsorship professionals. This is an area that deserves far greater attention and emphasis in the literature.

4.2. A NEW LINK BETWEEN ATHLETE BRANDING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

My own experience as a manager has shown me that athlete branding and career development are inseparably linked and should be considered together from the very beginning of a career. When we began working on Patrick Habirora's image, he was still an amateur. We deliberately integrated branding strategies early on, laying the foundations of his public identity and growing his presence on social media. This early work created continuity between his sporting progress and his rise in visibility, smoothing his transition to being recognized as a professional prospect.

Athlete branding, therefore, should never be seen as an external or secondary element. It is an integral part of career development, and it must be built with a long-term vision in mind.

4.3. MMA'S SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES COMPARED TO OTHER SPORTS

The differences between MMA and more traditional sports like football or boxing are profound. In collective sports such as football, players benefit from media exposure and institutional promotion through their club or league. In MMA, however, the athlete must carry their own brand development since exposure depends directly on both performance and their ability to generate interest around their personality.

MMA also suffers from a lack of structural support. While other sports have established systems for athlete management, MMA fighters often must build their professional environment from scratch. This makes them more vulnerable and increases the importance of having a clear, proactive branding and career management strategy from the earliest stages.

Furthermore, MMA sits in a unique position: it can produce global superstars fighters like Conor McGregor or Khabib Nurmagomedov who can be more famous than athletes in other sports, yet its current business model, dominated by the organizations themselves, rarely compensates fighters in proportion to their media and commercial value. Even highly popular fighters can remain financially dependent on fight purses. This economic gap underlines the need for an approach to career development in MMA that is far more proactive than in more institutionalized sports.

4.4. FORMALISING A MODEL: HOW BRANDING INFLUENCES EACH STAGE OF A CAREER

It is possible to formalize a model showing the impact of branding on every dimension of an athlete's career. From a sporting perspective, a strong brand can open doors to better opportunities, such as fights on bigger cards, main event slots, and matchups against higher-ranked opponents. It also gives the athlete more negotiating power with organizations, leading to better conditions whether in fight selection, purse amounts, or promotional positioning.

From an economic standpoint, branding directly influences the ability to generate revenue outside of competition through sponsorships, partnerships, and merchandising. Some fighters with strong branding can even make the majority of their income outside the cage, creating a more independent and sustainable economic model.

Socially, a well-developed brand changes an athlete's status. They become a public figure, which affects both how they are perceived and how they interact with the world. This can lead

to certain privileges, but also to pressures and constant public scrutiny.

Finally, there is the post-career dimension arguably one of the most important. Branding built over time can secure an athlete's livelihood long after they retire from competition. It can open doors to roles as a consultant, entrepreneur, coach, or brand ambassador, allowing them to continue leveraging their name and reputation in the public sphere.

4.5. KEY VARIABLES FOR MEASURING THE IMPACT OF BRANDING

To measure the tangible impact of branding on an athlete's career, certain key performance indicators can be observed. From a sporting angle, one can look at the quality and scale of fight opportunities whether they are featured in main events, on large promotional cards, or in title bouts. Another indicator is the athlete's negotiating leverage with organizations: the number and caliber of offers they receive, and the prominence of their bouts.

From an economic angle, revenue generated through branding is essential to track this includes income from sponsorship deals, merchandising sales, and related ventures. A particularly telling measure is the proportion of an athlete's total income that comes from outside fight purses. These indicators provide a solid foundation for assessing the link between branding and career development.

4.6. FIELD-BASED INSIGHTS: THEORY VS. PRACTICE AND NEW CONTRIBUTIONS

In practice, the role of an athlete extends far beyond the pursuit of sporting performance. Academic literature often frames the athlete's primary role as simply competing and winning. Yet after years managing Patrick Habirora's image, I have seen firsthand that a professional athlete, especially one in the public eye also becomes a symbol, a role model, and an inspiration to thousands, sometimes millions, of people. The emotional and social influence they wield far exceeds the strictly athletic domain. This suggests a need to rethink the academic definition of an athlete's role, incorporating these societal and media dimensions.

Fan and media feedback about Patrick makes this clear: many see him not just as a skilled fighter, but as an inspiring figure. This amplifies the athlete's responsibilities well beyond the octagon.

From my own experience, I can offer several contributions that are rarely, if ever, developed in existing literature. The first is the importance of vision. A strong personal brand must begin with a clear sporting and extra-sporting vision a compass that guides decision-making and adapts to unexpected changes such as injuries, organization switches, or sudden media

opportunities.

A second contribution is the principle of balance. Brand development should be built around the athlete, not the other way around. Athletic performance remains the central pillar, and branding should support it rather than overshadow it. Striking a balance between sporting goals and media management is crucial to ensuring that visibility never undermines performance.

A third contribution lies in the structuring of a team. Even at the amateur stage, there should be at least one competent person responsible for the athlete's image, working in alignment with coaches to ensure that branding and sporting objectives are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, there is the question of adaptability. Analyzing the competitive environment and understanding evolving trends are critical to staying relevant. In MMA a young, constantly shifting ecosystem this skill is particularly vital.

4.7. CONDITIONS FOR BUILDING A SOLID PERSONAL BRAND FROM THE AMATEUR STAGE

Even with limited resources, the right team is indispensable. At a minimum, it should include someone in charge of image management, working in close synergy with the athlete's sporting staff. That staff should also be aware of the importance of branding; if they misunderstand or resist the concept, it can create friction and slow progress.

It is equally important to analyze and understand the surrounding environment both the sport itself and the social media landscape. This awareness allows the athlete and their team to adapt continuously, taking advantage of new trends and audience behaviors.

4.8. RISKS AND LIMITATIONS OF PERSONAL BRANDING

Branding is a powerful tool, but it is not without its dangers. One of the most common is the loss of focus on performance. As visibility grows, the hype and media demands can distract from the ultimate goal: sporting excellence.

Another risk is the loss of authenticity. Branding must remain consistent with the athlete's true personality. Building a completely artificial persona is dangerous; a single inconsistency can damage credibility. The most effective approach is to highlight genuine traits and, where appropriate, amplify them to create a compelling story without ever betraying the athlete's core identity.

Lastly, an overbearing brand presence can create an imbalance between sport and image. Branding should be a lever for career growth, never an obstacle to sporting development.

4.9. MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGERS AND AGENTS

For managers or agents seeking to build a strong personal brand from the very beginning of an athlete's career, training is a non-negotiable starting point. This training should be multifaceted: understanding communication and marketing principles, especially on social media while also developing a deep knowledge of the sport's business model and operational realities.

Observing how other successful managers operate can provide valuable insights, but no observation can replace the importance of cultivating a deep, authentic relationship with the athlete. The better a manager understands the athlete's strengths, weaknesses, values, and aspirations, the more effectively they can design a branding strategy that is personalized and impactful. This bond of trust also makes it easier to anticipate challenges and work proactively on solutions.

When structuring a team around an athlete, trust must be the foundation. One approach is to involve close personal contacts who possess relevant skills in logistics, communication, or sponsorship. This has the advantage of total trust, but it requires a careful separation between personal and professional roles, something that is not always easy to maintain. Another approach is to partner with established managers or agencies that have proven track records and established networks. While this can open many doors, there is also the risk of standardized, one-size-fits-all methods, especially in agencies managing large rosters of athletes. The most effective solutions often combine trust, personalization, and access to high-level resources.

4.10. MANAGING CRISES AND NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

With greater visibility comes the inevitability of public challenges. Crises, whether media-related, reputational, or personal are not a matter of "if" but "when." For this reason, it is essential to prepare a crisis management plan at the very start of the collaboration. The athlete should receive professional media training to ensure they know how to speak clearly, calmly, and strategically when under pressure.

Working with a press officer or a specialized communications agency can help anticipate risks and respond effectively when incidents occur. Above all, responses to crises should never be impulsive. They must be carefully considered, consistent with the athlete's values, and aligned

with the overall branding strategy. The more scenarios have been anticipated in advance, the easier it becomes to navigate difficult moments without long-term damage.

4.11. HOW ORGANISATIONS COULD BETTER SUPPORT ATHLETE BRANDING

Currently, in most MMA organizations, communications teams focus on promoting the organization's own brand, not on individually developing fighters' images. This approach neglects an opportunity to strengthen both the athlete's and the organization's value. I believe there is room for a dedicated role within each organization: a "Personal Brand Manager."

This person would work hand-in-hand with each fighter's personal team to design and execute a tailored branding strategy, specifically aimed at enhancing the fighter's profile within the organization's ecosystem. Their work could include creating targeted media concepts, producing bespoke video content, building storytelling initiatives that reinforce the athlete's identity, and integrating fighters into the organization's institutional marketing campaigns.

The role would require close collaboration with matchmakers. Just as a matchmaker decides bouts based on sporting logic and card structure, the Personal Brand Manager would strategically position fighters to maximize marketing potential, develop compelling narratives, and ensure that sporting decisions and image-building efforts are aligned. This synergy would benefit both the organization and the fighter, creating a mutually reinforcing growth dynamic.

4.12. ADJUSTING THE MMA BUSINESS MODEL TO BALANCE PERFORMANCE AND BRANDING

A rethinking of the business model in major MMA organizations, especially the UFC, is necessary to better align athlete performance with branding opportunities. One key step would be restoring the ability for fighters to display their own sponsors during fights. At present, exclusive apparel sponsorship deals mean athletes can only promote official organization sponsors, cutting them off from potentially significant independent income streams.

If that is deemed too complex or financially disruptive, the alternative is to create a more equitable revenue-sharing model. The UFC, for example, generates enormous income, but distribution remains a contentious issue, often criticized for undervaluing both top stars and lesser-known fighters. Considering the risks to fighters' physical and mental health, a fairer allocation of revenues would reflect their true contribution to the sport.

Two measures stand out as priorities: first, allowing athletes to regain the freedom to promote

personal sponsors during events; second, implementing a fairer share of overall revenues. These steps would not only improve fighters' financial well-being but also make their careers more sustainable by aligning their economic incentives with those of the organization.

4.13. AVOIDING THE SUPPRESSION OF INDIVIDUAL ATHLETE BRANDS BY THE ORGANISATION'S BRANDING

The UFC's marketing dominance is such that many casual viewers think "UFC" is the name of the sport itself. This is a testament to the organization's exceptional branding, but it also reflects a deliberate policy: ensuring no fighter overshadows the UFC brand.

While this approach strengthens the UFC's market position, it also limits the growth of individual athlete brands. In the long run, the success of the UFC still depends on its fighters, and there is room for an approach that maintains institutional dominance while allowing personal brands to flourish.

This could be achieved through targeted media programs highlighting fighters' personal stories, values, and journeys; closer collaboration with fighter management teams to develop joint visibility strategies; and a more flexible approach to media control, enabling fighters to expand their presence outside of the UFC framework. While the UFC currently has little competitive pressure to make such changes, emerging organizations like the PFL are already exploring more athlete-centric branding approaches.

4.14. BEST PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

For an athlete, recognizing the importance of social media is the first step. Online presence is a strategic tool for shaping public perception, building a fanbase, and attracting commercial opportunities. Analyzing how other fighters communicate, whether established global superstars, respected regional names, or promising amateurs provides valuable lessons.

If the athlete lacks the ability to conduct such analysis, working with a skilled communications manager is essential. Once social media is treated as a professional platform, every post becomes part of the brand. Content must reflect the athlete's sport or lifestyle in a way that enhances their image, impulsive or compromising posts should be avoided, and the athlete must understand that they no longer "post like before." Being a public figure, even in the making, demands a professional mindset.

4.15. FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND STRATEGY

At the start of a career, building a brand should be rooted in genuine identity. Constructing an artificial persona too early can create unnecessary pressure and lead to inconsistencies if the image fails to match reality.

A more effective approach is to remain authentic while strategically emphasizing certain traits over time to make the athlete more marketable. Authenticity safeguards credibility and fosters trust with fans, media, and sponsors alike.

4.16. ADVICE FOR YOUNG AMATEUR FIGHTERS ASPIRING TO GO PRO

For amateurs, branding should be developed gradually, without rushing. Their focus must remain on gaining sporting experience, even if it means accepting losses as part of the process. Positioning themselves as professionals too early can backfire, creating pressure and expectations before the foundation is ready.

Choosing amateur organizations that actively promote their fighters can help them learn professional standards early. Communication efforts should evolve alongside sporting progress, never outpacing it. This ensures that the public image rests on genuine sporting achievement.

4.17. BRANDING AS A TOOL FOR SECURING LIFE AFTER SPORT

A carefully developed personal brand is one of the most valuable assets an athlete can carry into retirement. It can open doors to careers as a consultant, influencer, brand ambassador, or even business owner.

Branding diversifies income streams, reducing dependence on athletic performance alone and providing a smoother transition into post-career ventures. Athletes with strong brands maintain relevance and remain attractive to sponsors and media long after they stop competing.

4.18. LESSONS FOR LONG-TERM ATHLETE SUPPORT

From my experience, several lessons are clear. Building a qualified team is essential, even if members develop skills over time. Training the athlete to be effective off the field just as they train for competition is equally important. This includes media skills, image management, and relationship-building with sponsors.

Finally, surrounding the athlete with complementary expertise ensures no aspect of their development is neglected. A manager must be willing to collaborate with legal, marketing, media, and sponsorship specialists to fill knowledge gaps and strengthen the athlete's career trajectory.

4.19. A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PLAN BASED ON FIELD EXPERIENCE

Drawing on my own management journey, I propose a multi-phase plan. The first step is to define the athlete's vision long-term goals, core motivations, and career direction. This vision acts as the compass guiding every decision.

The second step is to build the right team, identifying essential roles such as sporting manager, head coach, and communications manager, and ensuring all members share the athlete's vision.

The third step is to align the team under a common vision, creating unity and cohesion. The fourth is to define the brand identity by clarifying values, strengths, and distinctive traits, and determining how to communicate them effectively.

The fifth step is to develop a communication plan aligned with the sporting calendar, covering both fight-specific strategies and off-season visibility efforts to keep the athlete relevant year-round.

The sixth step is to maintain adaptability responding to injuries, opponent changes, or public controversies while seeking expert advice when needed.

Finally, the seventh step is to set clear objectives each season and measure progress using specific indicators such as social media growth, engagement rates, media visibility, and economic returns. This evaluation process allows for strategic adjustments that ensure the brand and the career evolve in harmony.

CONCLUSION

It is important to recall that the aim of this research was not to establish an absolute truth regarding athlete branding in MMA, but rather to explore how, within the sport's diverse ecosystems, the branding efforts of fighters are perceived in terms of their impact. The focus was on understanding these perceptions from multiple stakeholder perspectives: fighters, managers, organizations, and media representatives through a qualitative research approach.

Before beginning this study, my initial premise was that athlete branding plays a significant role in the career trajectory of MMA athletes. The goal was to test this assumption against empirical data drawn from both literature and interviews. The results from both sources strongly confirmed this initial belief. Across all respondent categories, there was unanimous agreement that athlete branding has a substantial and often decisive influence on career development in MMA.

The conclusion that emerges from this research is that athlete branding impacts a fighter's career across three main dimensions:

Sporting Dimension

As previously discussed, a strong brand can accelerate competitive advancement and create high-level opportunities. For example, Conor McGregor's rapid rise to a UFC title shot in just six fights compared to Khabib Nurmagomedov's ten-fight journey illustrates the leverage of branding in securing premier bouts (Sharar, 2023). Patrick Habirora's own progression, headlining an event against a former UFC fighter by his seventh professional fight further reinforces this pattern (Bensaidane, 2025).

Economic Dimension

Branding enables the development of additional revenue streams, such as sponsorships, that can sustain and enhance a fighter's career. This aligns with the interview findings, where economic benefit was cited as the primary motivation for engaging in brand-building efforts. The literature also supports this view, noting that while a select few fighters generate millions, most UFC athletes earn modest sums and rely heavily on sponsorships to finance training and competition expenses (Conklin, 2019).

Social Dimension

Moreover, branding elevates athletes to public figure status, which comes with opportunities for networking, visibility, and influence, but also introduces pressures linked to public scrutiny. As Patrick Habirora observed, navigating life as a public figure requires adapting to heightened

expectations and the constant potential for reputational impact from even minor public actions (Habirora, 2025).

These findings confirm that my original assumption was correct: athlete branding in MMA is not a peripheral consideration but a central, multi-faceted factor influencing athletic, financial, and social outcomes.

As highlighted in the theoretical contribution and managerial recommendations sections, this research offers several new insights that address existing gaps in the literature. While it is relatively easy to find studies focusing on branding, athlete branding, sports marketing, or the business aspects of MMA individually, it remains challenging to identify scholarly work specifically dedicated to the intersection of athlete branding within MMA. This is even though, as confirmed by the experts interviewed, branding is a crucial factor in the career trajectory of MMA fighters.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the emphasis on the central role of vision in an athlete's career development. Regardless of the scale of the vision, whether modest or highly ambitious, it must be personal to the athlete. From this individual vision, a collective vision can be built through the involvement of coaches, managers, and other stakeholders, whose role is to refine and enhance it, ultimately enabling the athlete to achieve their goals.

The research also underscores the critical importance of entourage. The case study insights, particularly Alexandre's observation during his interview, highlight that in the French-speaking context, very few professionals specialize exclusively in the image development of fighters. In most cases, coaches or sports managers handle branding tasks, even though the skills required: communication, marketing, branding, and creative direction are distinct from those needed for fight management or coaching (Coeuret, 2025).

By emphasizing the need for athletes to surround themselves with the right specialists from the beginning of their careers, even at the amateur level, this work provides practical guidance for both fighters and managers. It argues that a multidisciplinary support system is not a luxury but a necessity for maximizing both sporting and commercial potential.

Practical and Theoretical Perspectives

The conclusions of this study open several avenues for further research and practice:

For Researchers

This work lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive theoretical framework on athlete branding in MMA, encouraging further academic inquiry into the sport-specific dynamics of brand building.

For Athletes

The findings suggest a need for early strategic planning of their brand, integrating vision, entourage, and marketing expertise as core components of career management.

For Managers

The study highlights the benefits of specialized branding professionals in a fighter's team, as well as the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration between sports management and creative industries.

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this research.

First, potential bias is inherent due to my professional involvement in the MMA industry as Image and Communication Manager for Patrick Habirora. Entering this study, I already held certain assumptions and preliminary beliefs that could have influenced the interpretation of both the literature and interview data. Furthermore, some interviewees, such as Tarek Bensaidane, a professional colleague, and Patrick Habirora, my client are directly linked to my professional activities. This proximity may have created an additional layer of bias, as professional relationships can subtly shape the depth, direction, and framing of responses.

Second, the specificity of MMA as a sport presented challenges in securing a wide variety of high-quality participants. Due to the relatively small professional network within MMA especially in the Francophone context, it was necessary to interview individuals within my own circle of work. While this provided rich, insider perspectives, it also limited the diversity of viewpoints.

Third, the novelty of MMA as a modern professional sport restricts the availability of extensive academic literature and longitudinal data. This limitation means that certain insights presented in this study are context-dependent and rooted in the present state of the sport in 2025. As MMA continues its rapid global growth, the industry's economic models, promotional dynamics, and athlete-branding practices are likely to evolve significantly. Consequently, the relevance and accuracy of some findings may diminish over time, and periodic updates to this research will be necessary to maintain its applicability.

For example, it is plausible that by 2030, fighter remuneration models may shift to the extent that personal branding will no longer be a necessity for financial sustainability, but rather a strategic choice for athletes seeking to further differentiate themselves. Such structural changes would require a reassessment of the conclusions drawn here.

Future research could expand on this study in several ways to deepen the understanding of athlete branding in MMA and other sports contexts. First, comparative studies across combat

sports such as boxing, kickboxing, or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu could reveal whether the branding dynamics observed in MMA are unique to its promotional model or consistent across other disciplines. This would allow scholars and practitioners to identify which branding strategies are sport-specific and which are transferable.

Longitudinal studies would also be valuable, tracking fighters over several years to establish stronger causal links between branding efforts and career outcomes. This could include measuring the direct impact of branding initiatives on sponsorship deals, sporting achievements, and post-retirement opportunities. Similarly, cross-cultural research could examine how fighters adapt their branding strategies to resonate with audiences in different geographic markets, which is increasingly relevant in the globalized MMA industry.

Another promising avenue would be to explore the role of digital platforms, especially emerging channels such as TikTok, Twitch, or virtual environments, in shaping athlete brands. These studies could compare their effectiveness in driving fan engagement against more established platforms like Instagram or YouTube. Furthermore, investigating the relationship between branding and athlete mental health is crucial, particularly in a sport like MMA where public scrutiny, performance pressure, and personal authenticity are tightly intertwined.

Gender-specific research, especially focusing on women's MMA, could shed light on whether female fighters face distinct branding challenges or unique opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, studies aiming to quantify the economic return on branding investments could provide practical insights for fighters considering such strategies, allowing them to better assess cost-benefit trade-offs.

Finally, research on the role of specialized brand managers in MMA could evaluate whether having dedicated branding expertise within an athlete's team directly influences the success of their personal brand. At the organizational level, examining how promotions like the UFC or PFL integrate fighter branding into their own marketing strategies could help address the current tension between individual and corporate branding. The concept of brand authenticity also warrants closer examination, particularly to understand how the perceived alignment between a fighter's public image and their true personality impacts fan loyalty, media coverage, and commercial engagement.

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