



# Empowerment of human brands: Brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms

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## ABSTRACT

Digital engagement platforms empower human brands by enabling them to directly interact with various actors. Human brands, especially athlete brands, are about to outperform traditional brands on digital platforms. Drawing on literature from human branding, integrative branding, and performativity theory, this study identifies actors and analyzes their performances based on a case study of a professional athlete brand. We apply a multi-method approach using netnography and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of brand meaning co-creation. We contribute to existing literature by introducing the concept of integrative branding to the management of human brands. Additionally, we reveal three novel performance categories for the co-creation of human brands on digital engagement platforms. Our findings extend the literature by delivering in-depth insights into the brand meaning co-creation of athlete brands as a specific type of human brands. This study marks a starting point for further research on human brands.

## 1. Introduction

Within the last few years, professional athletes have set new benchmarks in terms of brand marketing. Cristiano Ronaldo, a professional football player and one of the most popular human brands worldwide, reached more followers on Instagram in 2021 than all Premier League clubs combined and became the first human brand to amass over 500 million followers across all his social media profiles (ESPN, 2021; Marland, 2021). Although human brands have emerged as a relevant topic in brand management (Levesque & Pons, 2020), research in this area is still in its nascent stage. While the branding literature has addressed brand building and brand management of celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Johns & English, 2016; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), our study focuses on athletes as a specific type of human brands (Osorio et al., 2020). We chose this research context deliberately because by now athlete brands have outperformed traditional brands on digital platforms with regard to followership. Moreover, human brands are backed by a real person, which distinguishes the research subject of this study from traditional corporate brands in terms of branding dynamics and co-creation of brand meaning

on multiple levels.

The development of digital engagement platforms (e.g., social media) empowers athletes by enabling them to interact directly with various actors, such as fans, sponsors, media, and clubs. With the advent of social media, athletes have begun to build, develop, maintain, and expand their brands (Appel et al., 2020; Liu & Suh, 2017). Athletes use their social media profiles, especially on Instagram and Facebook, to communicate publicly and freely accessible as well as to interact directly with their followers on a global basis (Casaló et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021). The top 10 players in FIFA World Cup 2022 accumulate more than 1.3 billion followers with an average follower growth rate of 32.4 % from August 2021 until July 2022 (Nielsen, 2022).

However, according to recent literature on the co-creation of brand meaning, athletes cannot autonomously build and control their brand. Rather, brands are conceptualized as dynamic social processes. Building on the concept of integrative branding, brand owners need to leverage dynamic branding capabilities to develop and communicate their personal brand identity as part of the first sub-process (building brand identity). Within the second sub-process (co-creating brand meaning)

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brand owners need to provide platforms and orchestrate the co-creation of brand meaning by other actors' performances (Brodie et al., 2017; Merz et al., 2009; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). Therefore, this study is the first to apply the concept of integrative branding to human brands and identify performances for the brand meaning co-creation on different social media platforms. This background leads to the following research questions:

1. Which actors co-create the brand meaning of human brands on digital engagement platforms? 2. Which performances are initiated to co-create the brand meaning?

This study is based on a single case study analysis by applying a multi-method approach (Venkatesh et al., 2013). We followed the research proposal of Centeno and Wang (2016) as well as Hasaan et al. (2020) and examined the brand meaning co-creation of a professional female athlete from Germany, who is active in the seasonal niche sport of biathlon. We applied a netnographic approach by observing (Kozinets, 2019) and examining the performances of multiple actors on the athlete's digital engagement platforms within the world cup season 2020/2021. Furthermore, 25 semi-structured interviews with various actors related to the human brand were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding. Through the combination of these two methodological approaches, this study provides in-depth insights into the brand meaning co-creation of athlete brands as specific types of human brands.

Our study provides three main contributions to the field of brand management: (1) we apply the concept of integrative branding for the first time in the specific context of human brands by identifying actors and performances for the co-creation of a human brand's meaning; (2) we contribute to performativity theory by analyzing and comparing the examined performances related to human brands with the current research in brand management (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017); and (3) we mark a starting point for a more comprehensive understanding of human brands and further research by introducing the novel concept of integrative human branding. Moreover, the study enhances brand managers' knowledge of the dynamics of human branding, especially by using three different performance categories to build and maintain a unique and network-orientated human brand. The results can be applied to other human brand types, such as celebrities, entertainers, or influencers.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Personal and human brands

Osorio et al. (2020) provide a systematic conceptualization of personal and human brands within their framework. Using the branding continuum, the authors describe the transformational process from personal brands to human brands. From this perspective, each person engages in individual self-branding activities daily and represents their own personal brand (Moulard et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2005). The objective is to coach or manage oneself, for example, for job interviews or projects, where personal branding can be useful to present unique individual attributes and to convey a specific message or storyline (Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013). Moreover, personal brands act autonomously and without the influence of other actors, allowing the individual to maintain complete control over all branding decisions (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

Human brands are associated with traditional marketing and brand attributes. They do not evolve naturally; rather, they are the result of a strategic process of building, developing, and nurturing the brand over time (Osorio et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Due to increasing self-marketing and significantly raised attention, individual personas are transformed into commercialized brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Osorio et al., 2020). Human brands not only accomplish many of the functions, associations, and characteristics of traditional brands, they also provide enhanced opportunities for identification and emotional engagement (Arai et al., 2014; Thomson, 2006). Regarding source

credibility and self-promotion, current research identified trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as relevant factors for building a distinctive human brand and engaging with various actors (Na et al., 2020; Ohanian, 1990). Therefore, human brands are often referred to as commercialized brands such as entertainers, musicians, or influencers on digital platforms, which pursue the overarching goal of managing a brand that is a real person and strategically enhancing their brand equity (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Thomson, 2006). Contrary to personal brands, human brands do not have complete control over branding decisions as they are co-created by multiple actors in a dynamic branding process (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

### 2.2. Athlete brands as particular types of human brands

Recent publications in brand management literature indicate increased significance as well as changing perceptions of athletes (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2020; Hasaan et al., 2020; Hasaan et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Kunkel, 2020). However, the co-creation of an athletes' brand meaning remains unclear to this point. In general, athlete brands represent a specific type of human brands with unique personalities and characteristics in the field of sports (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Nevertheless, athlete brands are not restricted to this specific segment; they have achieved recognition far beyond the boundaries of sport (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Many athletes have recognized the relevance of branding and have actively begun developing their individual brands (Ratten, 2015), establishing their own symbolic meanings and values by using various unique elements, such as icons or acronyms (Arai et al., 2013). Consequently, professional athletes are currently the most successful human brands in terms of followers on social media. Manchester United superstar Cristiano Ronaldo became the world's first person to reach the milestone of 400 million followers on Instagram. Only one account counts more followers, which is that of Instagram itself. During the last six months alone, Cristiano Ronaldo increased the number of followers on his social media profile by more than 163 million, doubling it in the last two years (Garcia, 2022).

Current research on athlete brand building can be summarized according to Arai et al.'s (2013) Model of Athlete Brand Image. Based on Keller (1993), the authors considered athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle to be the three main dimensions of building an athlete's brand. The model does not consider co-creation of brand meaning in a dynamic branding process. An athlete's brand is autonomously developed and controlled by the athlete (Arai et al., 2013; Keller, 1993).

Due to the digital transformation, the media presence, communication, and engagement of actors in digital ecosystems are changing (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Stegmann et al., 2021). Building on current research findings in the area of athlete branding, social media has become the most important and powerful branding platform (Doyle et al., 2020; Na et al., 2020). Nowadays, athletes use their own social media profiles to interact unfiltered and directly with fans, sponsors, media, or even other athletes (Hofmann et al., 2021; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020). Social media is not only used for communication with various actors but has also emerged as a strategic marketing tool (Green, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015). Recent publications have discussed the creation of athletes' brand identity and the development of a unique and distinctive brand image (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012; Geurin, 2017; Hasaan et al., 2018; Hasaan et al., 2020). However, the role of digital engagement platforms for brand building and a consideration of brand meaning co-creation as dynamic and social process by relevant actors have not been examined. Table 1 provides an overview of human branding literature and its contribution to the concept of integrative branding.

**Table 1**  
Literature review on human brands and its contribution to co-creation of brand meaning.

Author and year	Methodology	Purpose	Findings and main contributions to existing literature
Arai et al., 2013	Quantitative	Testing the conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI)	Scale development and test of the introduced model of athlete brand image (MABI)
Arai et al., 2014	Conceptual	Developing a conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI)	Providing the first comprehensive conceptual framework of athlete brand image
Carlson & Donovan, 2013	Quantitative	Testing how human brands affect consumer's identification	Athletes as unique personalities; effect of athlete prestige and distinctiveness on identification affecting consumer behavior.
Centeno & Wang, 2016	Qualitative; Conceptual	Examining co-creation of human brands in a stakeholder-actor approach	Stakeholder-actors' participation in the co-creation process of celebrity's human brand identity
Doyle et al., 2020	Mixed Methods	Examining consumer engagement with athlete brands on social media	Development and testing of the Model of Athlete Branding via Social Media
Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019	Conceptual	Understanding and managing brands that are also persons	Conceptualization of person-brands; highlighting the interdependent relationship between the person and the brand
Hodge & Walker, 2015	Qualitative	Investigating the branding of professional athletes	Identification of branding challenges faced by professional athletes as well as marketing strategies
Kunkel et al., 2020	Quantitative	Examining athletes promoting philanthropic efforts on social media	Positive effect of athlete's promotion of philanthropic activities on brand image, strengthening the connection between athlete and followers
Osorio et al., 2020	Literature review, Conceptual	Conceptualization and distinction of human and personal brands	Summary of literature on human brands and development of a branding-by-individual continuum
Parmentier & Fischer, 2012	Qualitative	Examining the dynamic processes of personal branding	Conceptualization of professional image and mainstream media persona as two core elements of athlete brands

**Table 1 (continued)**

Author and year	Methodology	Purpose	Findings and main contributions to existing literature
Preece & Kerrigan, 2015	Qualitative	Analyzing the brands of professional artists	Co-creation of human brands (artistic brands) based on a multi-stakeholder approach
Our study	Qualitative, Conceptual	Identifying actors and their performances on digital engagement platforms	Revealing three novel performance categories for the co-creation of human brands from a multi-actor perspective on different digital engagement platforms

2.3. Towards brand meaning co-creation of human brands

Conventional brand approaches build on a management-oriented perspective and perceive brands as static results of strategic management actions. Brand owners autonomously develop and communicate a clear and stable brand identity to create brand meaning (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008; Michel, 2017). Thus, consumers and other external actors are conceptualized as passive receivers of the brand identity conveyed through the brand owner's marketing initiatives. Brand meaning evolves through management-driven processes (Burmam et al., 2009; Keller, 2003). This management-oriented perspective is predominantly adopted in current research on human brands (Arai et al., 2014; Johns & English, 2016). For instance, Kristiansen and Williams (2015, p. 371) detail how athletes endeavor to 'build and manage [their] personal brand equity through organization produced and controlled brand communication'.

The perception on brand development and brand management has evolved from such a management-oriented perspective towards a multi-actor perspective (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017), which emphasizes the active participation of multiple actors in brand meaning co-creation (Iglesias et al., 2020; Ind, 2014; Sarasvuo et al., 2022; Tierney et al., 2016). Brand meaning co-creation 'refers to a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more [actors] that influences a brand' (Sarasvuo et al., 2022, p. 557). Drawing on performativity theory, multiple actors continuously perform brand meaning and thus constitute and co-create the social reality and meaning of a brand within these interactions (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Thus, the brand owner cannot autonomously build and control the brand. Rather, brands are perceived as dynamic and social processes that develop meaning in interactions of multiple actors (Merz et al., 2009; Woratschek et al., 2014). Accordingly, brand meaning cannot be determined by brand management alone but is always co-created by various actors that engage in collaborative brand co-creation performances (Brodie et al., 2017; Loureiro et al., 2020). The role of brand owners shifts from that of a "brand guardian" to that of a "conductor", who supports co-creative processes between multiple actors (Michel, 2017).

The concept of *integrative branding* offers an overarching framework to better capture and structure the dynamics of brands (Brodie et al., 2017; Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016). It conceptualizes brands as dynamic social processes among multiple actors that build on brand identity (Brodie et al., 2017; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). The concept consists of two interrelated processes: (1) building brand identity and (2) co-creating brand meaning (Breibach & Brodie, 2017; Brodie et al., 2017; Brodie, 2017; Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016; Evans et al., 2019). Building brand identity refers to management-oriented approaches to develop and communicate brand identity, which ensures brand awareness and builds the foundation for brand meaning co-creation processes. Brand meaning not only results from the brand owner's branding activities, as argued in current literature on

human brands; rather, brand meaning is always co-created in interactions among multiple actors. Brand owners need to provide platforms to enable, facilitate, and orchestrate interactive brand meaning co-creation processes between multiple actors as well as to achieve brand engagement and brand equity (Pereira et al., 2022). However, co-creating brand meaning also occurs in contexts that are not controlled by brand management (Brodie et al., 2017; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016; Wider et al., 2018). Both sub-processes of integrative branding are interrelated. Although brand identity is typically controlled by the brand owner, based on the brand meanings emerging in interactions it must be constantly evaluated, adjusted, and then reinforced in brand communication. Thus, brand management adheres to an iterative process between building and adapting brand identity as well as co-creating brand meaning (Brodie et al., 2017).

Predominant research on human brands relates only to the first process of integrative branding. There is a lack of research that systematically maps relevant actors and, more importantly, *how* they co-create brand meaning of human brands. As indicated above, brand management literature increasingly builds on the sociological concept of performativity to better understand and explain how multiple actors co-create brand meaning (Da Silveira et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017). *Performativity theory* is concerned with performative constitutions of reality and argues that social objects are constituted by a set of performances (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1990). The fundamental premise for branding is that brand meaning is continuously co-created through the performances of multiple actors (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Brand meaning is – in line with the concept of integrative branding – not developed autonomously by brand management, but evolves through dynamic co-creation performances of multiple actors (Iglesias et al., 2020). So far, only three empirical studies identify specific performances of actors to co-create brand meaning and none of the existing research is carried out in the context of human brands. Initially, von Wallpach et al. (2017) identify seven performances through which the meaning of the brand identities of different actors are co-created. However, the performances identified are unique to the single case investigated. Similar applies to the work of Essamri et al. (2019), which focuses mainly on brand meaning co-creation performances initiated by the brand management. The authors identify three superordinate performances of the brand owner within a single case study in the context of a brand community. They neglect the relevance of other actors highly affecting and co-creating brand meaning by integrating their resources. Lastly, Iglesias et al. (2020) identify four performances of multiple actors to co-create brand meaning in a B2B context. Since Iglesias et al. (2020) identified – in contrast to the work of von Wallpach et al. (2017) and Essamri et al. (2019) – brand meaning co-creation performances across multiple cases and by considering multiple actors, we draw on their work. They consider *communicating* as conveying brand identity within the network of actors. This performance is mainly performed by the brand owner and involves the traditional management-driven approaches. However, also other (external) actors may perform communicating. *Internalizing* is about bringing the brand identity to life by translating it into concrete brand behaviors. Management and employees need to be selected and trained according to the brand identity

to ensure a consistent brand behavior. *Contesting* occurs when internal and external actors compare brand identity with their perceptions of the brand. They either reaffirm or challenge it with their own brand meanings. *Elucidating* refers to a conversational process where brand management, together with multiple actors, discusses and reconciles the diverse brand meanings to create a common understanding of the brand.

The development of digital engagement platforms not only empowers human brands to build their brands through management-driven processes but also entails direct interactions between multiple actors. We therefore emphasize the importance of a performative multi-actor perspective. The concept of integrative branding guides our study as an overarching framework. We thus introduce the notion of *integrative human branding* (cf. Fig. 1), which encompasses management-oriented approaches to build brand identity as well as multi-actor approaches to co-create brand meaning. However, integrative human branding remains inaccurate to explain how multiple actors co-create brand meaning. We thus integrate performativity theory to our conceptualization of integrative human branding. Since brand co-creation performances are yet solely studied in the context of corporate brands, the questions arise whether the performances can be applied to human brands and whether additional performances are relevant to better understand the brand meaning co-creation of human brands. The framework of integrative human branding – as a combination of the three theoretical concepts *integrative branding*, *performativity theory*, and *human branding* – consequently serves as the theoretical background of our study.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

As this study is the first to investigate brand meaning co-creation of human brands on different digital engagement platforms, we selected an exploratory research approach. We conducted a single case study by applying a multi-method approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2013) to gain first empirical insights regarding brand meaning co-creation performances of human brands (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). By systematic combining several qualitative research methods focused on the same human brand, we expand our database and gain deeper and more reliable insights regarding the brand meaning co-creation from a multi-actor perspective (Mingers, 2003; Mingers & Brocklesby, 1997). To obtain unique and novel results, this qualitative research builds on a systematic twofold research process (Creswell, 2014). First, a netnography was applied to a professional female athlete's brand by observing and examining the performances of multiple actors on different digital engagement platforms. By collecting and evaluating empirical data from digital engagement platforms during the survey period, we aimed to validate and strengthen our study. To further enrich our data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with various relevant experts of our actor groups related to the athlete brand, whom we identified in the first step of our methodology.

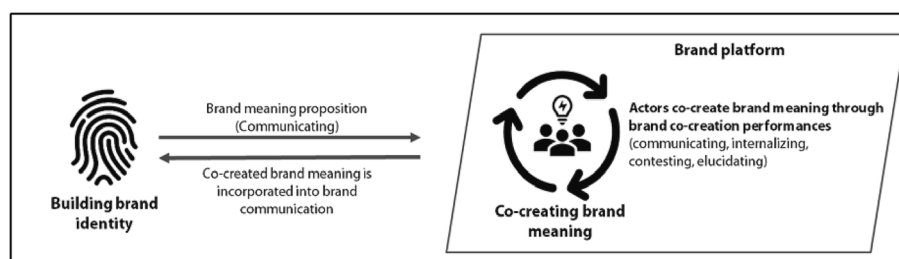


Fig. 1. Integrative Human Branding (adapted from Griebel et al., 2020).



### 3.2. Netnography

We chose a systematic netnographic approach, which has proven its eligibility in the fields of digital engagement platforms and brand management research from a multi-actor perspective (Abeza et al., 2017; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Zaglia, 2013). Netnography refers to an ethnographic approach that enables the observation and investigation of social activities, resource integration, and interactions of multiple actors on digital platforms, such as public social media profiles (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Kozinets, 2019). Thus, it provides unique insights into various brand meaning co-creation performances initiated by multiple actors online (Kozinets, 2002). Recent publications in the fields of human branding, actor engagement and co-creation have proven that netnography is a suitable method for systematic data collection and data analysis on social media platforms (Centeno & Wang, 2016; Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Kozinets, 2021; Pera et al., 2021). Our analysis focuses on the semantic aspects of the brand meaning co-creation process of the athlete brand on five different digital engagement platforms. We selected these five platforms since they are frequently used by the athlete and are furthermore among the most-used social media platforms worldwide (Hootsuite, 2022).

The netnographic approach was applied to a professional female athlete's brand from Germany, who is active in the seasonal niche sport of biathlon, by observing and examining the performances of multiple actors. The athlete brand has been active in the IBU World Cup for many years and has participated in numerous international competitions. Retrospective data collection for the netnography was conducted by recording all posts on the athlete brand's official Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn profiles. A total of  $n_1 = 299$  posts (e.g., images, videos, and text) with more than  $n_2 = 17,800$  comments across all five official profiles were identified and recorded manually. During the research period, the athlete had approximately 60,000 followers on her Instagram channel and approximately 90,000 followers on Facebook, representing the two major digital engagement platforms. We consciously did not select an athlete at an early career stage or with exceptional sporting success with a very large social media reach for our case study and deliberately focused on a more experienced athlete to avoid bias effects in terms of digital affinity and social media behavior among various actors. In addition, we selected a female athlete because she most likely faces various obstacles, such as limited media awareness or prejudices, which restrict her potential to build and maintain her own brand (Mogaji et al., 2020). The data collection period covered the IBU World Cup Season 2020/2021 from November 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021, including the pre-season from May 1, 2020, to October 31, 2020.

### 3.3. Interview study

To understand brand meaning co-creation performances on digital engagement platforms, it is crucial to know which actors are involved. Based on the results of the netnography and the interviews with the athlete herself, eight relevant actor groups related to the athlete brand were identified. They consist of competitors, fans, clubs and associations, equipment suppliers, inner circle (e.g., family and friends, management), media, sponsors, and agencies. To further enrich our understanding of brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of these actor groups. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with 23 experts (Bogner & Menz, 2009), including three consecutive interviews with the athlete herself. Table 2 provides an overview of the sample. The experts for the qualitative interviews were identified from the netnography and from the interviews with the athlete herself. All interviews were conducted online between June and December 2021, using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or phone calls. The duration of the interviews varied between 19 and 62 min, with an average length of 36 min. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed. All respondents voluntarily participated in the study and

**Table 2**  
Sample characteristics interview study.

No.	Date	Actor group	Actor	Length	Profession
1	23.07.2021	Agencies	Media Agency	45 min	Founder & CEO
2	03.08.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	50 min	Senior Vice President
3	11.08.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	56 min	Director
4	07.09.2021	Agencies	Sport Agency	25 min	Managing Director & Partner
5	30.09.2021	Agencies	Media Agency	39 min	Co-Founder
6	10.06.2021	Athlete	Athlete	20 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
7	17.08.2021	Athlete	Athlete	23 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
8	21.10.2021	Athlete	Athlete	30 min	Professional Biathlon Athlete
9	12.07.2021	Club & Associations	National Federation	62 min	Managing Director
10	28.07.2021	Club & Associations	International Federation	32 min	Head of Digital Marketing
11	04.08.2021	Club & Associations	Club	32 min	Executive Board Member
12	05.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	26 min	Digital Marketing
13	13.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	42 min	Marketing Manager
14	18.08.2021	Club & Associations	Foundation	26 min	Marketing Manager
15	07.07.2021	Equipment Supplier	Team Supplier	41 min	Sports Marketing Manager
16	04.12.2021	Fans	Supporters Club	27 min	Founder
17	08.12.2021	Fans	Supporters Club	33 min	Founder
18	14.12.2021	Fans	Athlete Fan	24 min	Student
19	17.12.2021	Fans	Biathlon Fan	27 min	Fan; former Athlete
20	09.08.2021	Inner Circle	Management	61 min	Manager
21	22.12.2021	Inner Circle	Family & Friends	19 min	Friend; former Athlete
22	23.07.2021	Media	Social Media	31 min	Marketing Manager
23	05.07.2021	Sponsors	Individual Sponsor	40 min	Marketing Manager
24	12.07.2021	Sponsors	Individual Sponsor	44 min	Marketing Manager
25	13.07.2021	Sponsors	Team Sponsor	45 min	Marketing Manager
				ø average length	36 min

received no financial compensation or other transactions associated with the interview participation. The respondents were informed transparently about the purpose of the data collection and agreed to its usage for scientific purposes. Personal data were further anonymized during the transcription.

Semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide and were conducted by two experienced researchers, leaving sufficient freedom for additional comments and aspects from the interviewed actors. The interview guide comprised four major parts that were slightly adjusted depending on the questioned actor group and pre-tested. First, actors were asked to describe themselves and how they use digital engagement platforms, followed by questions about the shared content on social

media as well as the expected value and objectives of digital engagement platforms. The second section of the interview focused on the relationship with the human brand. Questions regarding the collaboration with the athlete brand and the perceived values and attributes of the athlete brand were also addressed. The next section included questions about social media channels and the general advantages and disadvantages of these platforms. Furthermore, participants were interviewed about their social interactions with the human brand and about other actors involved. The respondents discussed various types of communication and interaction as well as different formats that they use. In addition, the mutual interaction between other actors and the human brand is discussed, followed by broader questions on current challenges and future opportunities associated with human branding on digital platforms.

Throughout the data collection period, we conducted three semi-structured, guided interviews with the athlete herself, which were built on each other thematically. Interview one related to her general understanding of athlete marketing and self-marketing, perceptions of her athlete brand and her own brand management on digital engagement platforms. The second interview provided a detailed discussion on the use of her social media channels, the concept of integrative human branding, and brand meaning co-creation on digital engagement platforms. In the last interview, the athlete was subsequently confronted with preliminary results and reports from the netnography of her social media posts during the research project. This was followed by a retrospective summary of the study, which left space for open questions.

#### 3.4. Data analysis

We conducted a three-stage research procedure. In the first step, we used an inductive and open coding process in the netnography to identify the relevant actor groups and the performances they initiate on the five digital engagement platforms. The actor groups formed the basis of our interview study in step two (Qu & Dumay, 2011). We used open coding to organize and categorize the collected data from our netnography and our interview study before comparing it to the existing literature (Kozinets, 2019). We examined the existing literature that addresses the co-creation of brand meaning on digital platforms in the context of brand management. In this third step, we focus on performativity theory. This included a deductive data review and a comparative analysis with the pre-existing literature based on the identified performances (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017).

The entire data collection and data analysis were carried out in German, and the relevant quotes were translated into English. To ensure the credibility and quality of the results, all data were coded independently by two researchers using MAXQDA 2020 (Creswell, 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Patton, 1990). The data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Perreault & Leigh (1989), we determined intercoder-reliability for the netnography ( $r = 0.86$ ) as well as the interview study ( $r = 0.86$ ), indicating both good matches. In the case of incoherent coding, the researchers checked for inconsistencies and discussed them.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Brand meaning co-creation performances

With regard to previous literature studying performances in brand management research, we identified the four brand meaning co-creation performances introduced by Iglesias et al. (2020) on the digital engagement platforms of the studied human brand (*communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating*). However, in contrast to corporate brands, we identified additional brand meaning co-creation performances that seem to be unique to the specific research subjects of human brands and digital engagement platforms. These new performances (i.e., *cooperating, reinforcing, individual loving, and individual*

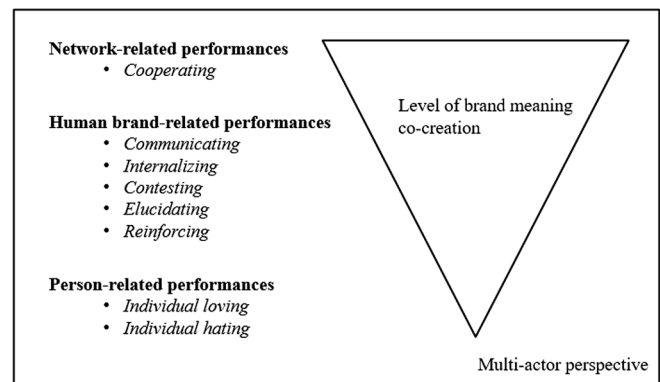


Fig. 2. Brand meaning co-creation performances on human brands.

*hating*) were initiated by various actors within the brand network. Across these eight types of performances, we recognized three generalizable categories that vary regarding the level of its brand-meaning co-creation that is given by the specific context of both theories of brand co-creation (e.g., multi-actor perspective such as co-branding processes) and human brands (e.g., interweaving of the athlete as an individual person and its brand). To be more precise, we differentiated between (1) network-related performances (i.e., *cooperating*) that emphasize the collaboration of actors regarding the co-creation of brand meaning; (2) human brand-related performances (i.e., *reinforcing, communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating*) that describe activities that are considered to directly affect the athlete brand; and (3) person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving, and individual hating*) that mainly target the individual person behind the human brand. A visual summary of the identified categories is shown in Fig. 2.

#### 4.1.1. Network-related performances

In line with the theoretically outlined idea of the multi-actor perspective, we identified performances that reveal the relevance of integrating and collaborating with other actors to co-create the meaning of a human brand:

*Interactions such as likes, comments, but also linking with sponsors, clubs or associations.*

*[...] In their own content, where simply the idea of partnership actually arises everywhere.*

(Sponsor, Team Sponsor, 13.07.2021)

Specifically, we identified *cooperating* performances on the digital engagement platforms of the studied human brand, for example, when the athlete brand was connected with the brand of a sponsor:

*At home, I want to feel good. Natural and healthy materials are the basis. At [Sponsor], the quality of the indoor air is even specially certified by TÜV - perfect indoor air with letter and seal. 🌿🏠 #FollowYourFire #betterbuilding*

(Athlete, Facebook, 06.10.2020)

However, not only *cooperating* performances with sponsors, but also with other actors have been identified to co-create the meaning of the human brand. Especially, we identified various *cooperating* performances with other athletes, clubs or associations, where multiple brands make use of collaborating with each other:

*I think you can picture a network there and meanwhile also more than just that. So work is already being done, also in this direction, to connect athletes, clubs, associations, and sponsors with each other.*

(Association 1, 2021)

Training session in the best company. 🏆 Still fit as ever, bro! 🍷 #Followyourfire #Winterfans #[Friend Athlete] @[FriendAthlete]@[Sponsor] @[Sponsor]

(Athlete, Facebook, 19.09.2020)

Finally, we also revealed *cooperating* performances with fans of the brand, when the athlete requested her fans to search for “a suitable name for my little lucky charm on the drinking belt” and the fans answered:

- Voittaja - Finnish word for winner! 🍀🍀 I think this is fitting for a sporty good luck charm.

(Fan, Instagram, 04.01.2021)

The co-creation of brand meaning occurs without the influence or agreement of the brand owner or other actors involved:

There are no agreements of any kind, it all happens without the involvement of other actors.

(Fans, Supporters Club, 04.12.2021)

#### 4.1.2. Human brand-related performances

First, we identified the performance of *communicating* that describes the transmission of the brand identity within the brand community, for example, when the brand owner writes social media posts on what her brand stands for. Although any actor within the brand network may perform *communicating*, we identified it to be majorly brand owner-led. The athlete communicated several facets of her brand identity, for example, when she described her dissatisfaction with her last competition results, how important family, animal protection, or sustainability is to her, or when she posts about the World Women’s Day:

#followyourfire #winterfans Happy #WorldWomen'sDay to all the wonderful women out there. [...] All you women and girls, no matter whatever your profession, hobby or sport, are a huge inspiration for me as an athlete and help to push my limits! 🍷

(Athlete, Instagram, 08.03.2021)

Additionally, the athlete engaged in the performance of *communicating*, when she advertised a campaign of one of her partners and combined the communication with her own brand identity (e.g., regional food to foster sustainability):

Fresh from the field into my #retterbox 😊🍷 You want to become a vegetable saver too?

(Athlete, Instagram, 14.05.2020)

In summary, almost all 25 experts from the interview study independently described the athlete’s brand identity in the same terms. These included keywords such as *sustainable, environmentally friendly, animal welfare, family and friends, ambitious and determined, athletic, passionate, fair, positive mindset, well balanced, and future-oriented*.

Beyond the transmission of the brand identity by *communicating* the various facets to the athlete brand community, bringing them to life by *internalizing* was a second brand meaning co-creation performance that we identified in this particular case. *Internalizing* describes the translation of communicated words into concrete brand behavior that reflects the brand identity. The athlete co-created the brand meaning, for example, by sharing a post with members of her family, where they enjoyed their joint time or with a thermos bottle, while she recovered

from an illness and posted:

🍷🍷 #followyourfire #winterfans Hot water bottle has always helped! I treat myself to a little rest, a chamomile tea and fingers crossed for the girls now, make it like the boys.

(Athlete, Facebook, 20.12.2020)

*Internalizing* performances, however, are not only limited to being demonstrated by the brand owner, but also by other actors in the brand network. Fans of the athlete, for example, reacted to a vegan food post of the athlete asking for the recipe or when a fan reacted to a post in which the athlete communicated her regeneration regime and shared it with her followers:

Fruits mixed with coconut water and bath with salt from Jentschura 😊

(Fan, Instagram, 01.09.2020)

In addition, *internalizing* performances lead to specific actions performed by the brand owner herself or in collaboration with other actors, such as sponsors, agencies, or associations:

I took my clothes off for an animal welfare company a few years ago. As a person and a brand, I am completely committed to it. I think very few people would do that, but it also has something to do with my conviction.

(Athlete, 10.06.2021)

This is also part of our partnership. The athlete likes to draw attention to animal welfare. And when she started travelling regularly to Romania to the animal shelter, she naturally received our support.

(Sponsor, Team Sponsor, 13.07.2021)

Next to *communicating* and *internalizing* performances, especially by verbalizing and demonstrating behaviors to co-create brand meaning, the results also indicate different forms of reactive behavior of brand community actors towards the brand owner. First, in contrast to the research framework (Iglesias et al., 2020), we inductively identified *reinforcing* performances that occur when actors of the brand community provide support – and therefore co-create brand meaning – in a shared understanding with the athletes’ brand identity. On digital engagement platforms, various actors from the athlete’s network engage in *reinforcing* performances, for example, when a fan reinforced her as a role model in general or even more specifically regarding her engagement with animals:

On my 17th birthday, I wrote a long Instagram post describing of how she [the athlete] influenced me as a role model and idol during the last years.

(Fans, Supporters Club, 08.12.2021)

Hello, I would regret if it would not work [to visit an animal shelter in Rumania]. I admire your commitment to animal welfare! 🍷🍷

(Fan, Instagram, 04.10.2020)

However, not only fans of the athlete engaged in *reinforcing* performances but also other actors from the network. We also identified

sponsors and partners, such as animal rights activists, that reinforced the athlete's brand identity.

*We as animal welfare activists and animal rights activists find your commitment to the street dogs wonderful and important! The terrible misery of these dear fellow creatures must end. [...] Thank you very much for your commitment! ❤️*

(Sponsor, Facebook, 27.01.2021)

A contrasting performance to reinforcing has been identified as *contesting*, which is generally understood as the statement of incongruent perceptions of the brand identity by members of the brand community. In general, two main forms of *contesting* were identified. First, the network of actors *contested* the brand meaning itself and therefore contributed to its co-creation, for example, by criticizing how the brand owner raised her voice to promote the wearing of masks during the pandemic or with regard to the distribution of the athlete's effort:

*If you leave all your energy in the social media, the power is missing on the track and at the shooting range.*

(Fan, Facebook, 03.03.2021)

Second, we also identified engagement in *contesting* performances to co-create the brand meaning that is not directly targeted at the brand but rather to the network of the brand, especially to sponsors:

*[Sponsor] no longer works at all!*

(Fan, Facebook, 07.06.2020)

*Honestly, how can you disfigure yourself as a handsome person like that with advertising ([Sponsor])?*

(Fan, Facebook, 13.10.2020)

Finally, we identified *elucidating* performances that refer to the conversational process of the brand owner and other actors to discuss and reconcile distinct brand meanings to create a shared understanding of the brand meaning. There has been such a conversational process introduced with the athletes' posting of a fully black picture posted on Instagram with the hashtag "#blackouttuesday" to express her support against racism and police violence. An actor from the network commented on the post and stated:

*During the 2015–16 public New Year's Eve's celebrations in Germany, over 1,250 women [...] have been sexually assaulted with 24 of them raped, in most cases by men with non-European background. [...] When black migrants rape white women, this is certainly not racism. Yes?*

(Fan, Instagram, 02.06.2020)

The brand owner has responded to present and explain her perspective and understanding of brand identity with the following comment:

*It is not racism; it is rapping what is just as bad. Black people have to face racism every day. They are confronted that they do not "look right" to other human beings, have it harder to get jobs, are judged and treated badly. [...] Black people are just as worth as everyone else!*

(Athlete, Instagram, 02.06.2020)

#### 4.1.3. Person-related performances

In contrast to previous literature on corporate brands, we identified a special characteristic of human brands represented in two forms of person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving* and *individual hating*). Both types refer to the brand community's activities that are directed towards the person behind the brand, instead of towards the brand itself. *Individual loving*, for example, has been identified when fans express how much they like the physical attractiveness of the athlete; honor their physical performance in competitions, or when they phrase their admiration of the athlete. In addition, *individual loving* or *individual hating* affects actors' engagement in co-creation processes and has an impact on their loyalty towards the brand (Kaufmann et al., 2016):

*You are such a lovely person, sweetie. I keep my fingers crossed for you for the next competitions and wish you continued success and especially good health. Keep your fun in biathlon and have a great time with your sister. 🏔️😊*

(Fan, Facebook, 08.12.2020)

In contrast, fans also express themselves by engaging in negative performances towards the human brand on an individual level. We identified such performances as *individual hating*. Most of the identified comments were related to the athlete's sporting performance:

*The same phrases every time, they are beginning to look untrustworthy, sorry. After the end of the season, ask yourself whether it still makes sense to pursue this beautiful sport in this form.*

(Fan, Facebook, 20.01.2021)

Moreover, the athlete herself increasingly experiences extreme engagement fostered by the characteristics of social media. *Individual loving* and *Individual hating* refer to private and personal comments on her:

*There is a lot of frustration and it becomes very personal. Both positive and negative comments turn out to be very private.*

(Athlete, 21.10.2021)

#### 4.2. Multi-actor perspective on human brands

Our results confirm recent research findings on the multi-actor perspective in brand management literature. Although several authors have already discussed brand meaning co-creation of corporate brands by internal and external actors (Merz et al., 2009; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017; Woratschek et al., 2020), this approach has been neglected in the context of human brands.

According to this study's results, it is evident that a heterogeneous network of actors (cf. Fig. 3 for an overview of digital engagement platforms and relevant actors) co-creates the brand meaning of the athlete under investigation by engaging in different performances (Table 3 summarizes the additional results of the study). Although the athlete is a focal actor within her brand community and thereby contributes to the co-creation of her brand meaning, for example, by engaging in *communicating* performances, the athlete cannot fully control the co-creative processes leading to development and changes in her brand meaning (e.g., Merz et al., 2009; Michel, 2017). Accordingly, this implies that all brand community members (cf. Fig. 3) may be facilitated by the nature of the digital context of social media platforms (cf. Stegmann et al., 2021) and contribute to the co-creation of the human brand meaning by integrating their resources within performances (e.g., by



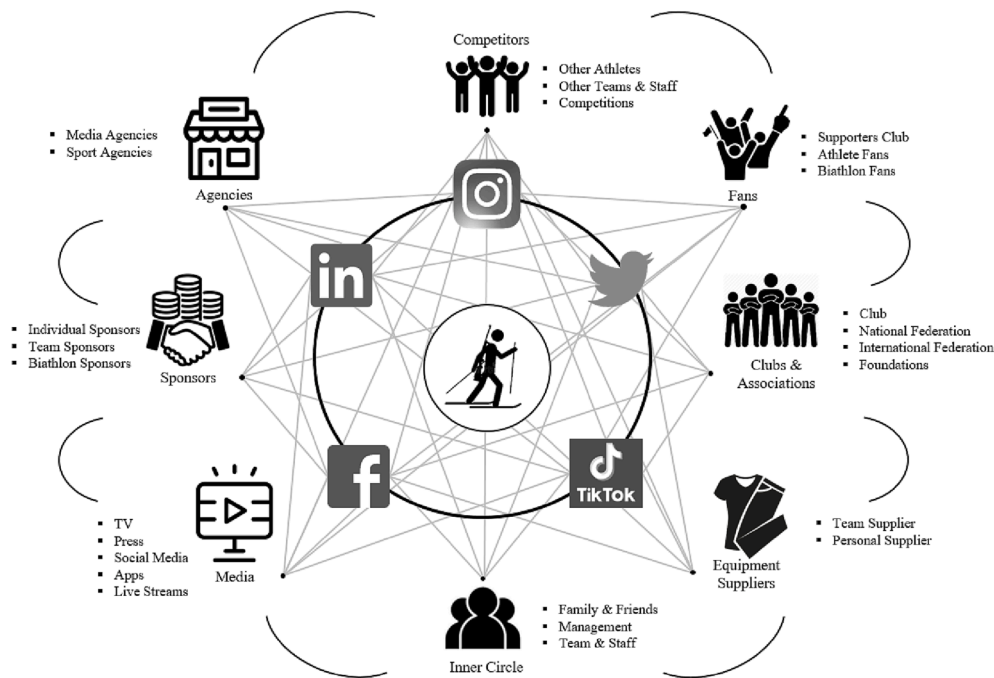


Fig. 3. Digital engagement platforms and relevant actors.

reinforcing or contesting the brand meaning of the athlete). Therefore, the network of actors may participate not only in the collaborative process of brand meaning co-creation in direct interactions with the human brand but also among themselves. Indeed, this study's findings indicate that all actors in the multi-actor network are considered relevant within the process of brand meaning co-creation:

*I don't have the impression that one actor is extremely underrated or perhaps not considered at all. But I wouldn't say that one actor is more important than all the others. So if you really break out one part of this overall construct or one part of this puzzle, then you see the gap.*

(Club & Associations, International Federation, 28.07.2021)

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study makes three important contributions. First, it extends existing research on brand management and human branding literature by conceptually combining human branding, integrative branding, and performativity theory. We expand the concept of integrative branding towards integrative human branding by identifying actors who co-create human brand meaning through their performances. Accordingly, the results of our study especially contribute to the understanding of the second sub-process of integrative human branding and demonstrate how it offers unique propositions for the co-creation of brand meaning. In so doing, studying actors' engagement in performances such as *contesting* shapes the brand meaning of a human brand, which consequently could be incorporated – through the first sub-process of integrative human branding – in the brand identity of the human brand. Similar applies regarding the co-creation of brand meaning undertaken by the engagement in performances on a network-related level (i.e., *cooperating* that may lead to co-branding processes in which the human brands' meaning may be co-created). Finally, the brand meaning of an athlete brand is also co-created through performances on the person-related level (e.g., individual hating as a form of *contesting* that challenges the individual human behind the brand). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically analyze the brand meaning co-creation of

athlete brands, as particular types of human brands, from a multi-actor perspective in brand management through different performances on digital engagement platforms. These platforms enable and empower human brands to build their brands through management-driven processes, but also enable direct interactions between multiple actors relevant to the brand in an integrative human branding process. Our findings are consistent with previous research on the co-creation of corporate brands (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017). However, we were able to identify additional performances on digital engagement platforms in the specific context of human brands. This study can serve as a link between various fields such as brand management, marketing, sports management, and sociology, all of which focus on the different roles of actors involved in the brand-building process of human brands.

Second, our results contribute to the emerging field of human and athlete branding literature, which has so far focused mainly on athlete brand identity and image (Doyle et al., 2020; Hofmann et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2020; Na et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study extends the current state of research by investigating performances that co-create the brand meaning of human brands on digital engagement platforms.

Third, our findings reveal eight relevant actor groups (*competitors, fans, clubs and associations, equipment suppliers, inner circle, media, sponsors, and agencies*) that co-create the brand meaning through several performances on the five social media platforms. In contrast to corporate brands, we identified additional brand meaning co-creation performances that are unique to the specific research subjects of human brands (i.e., cooperating, reinforcing, individual loving, and individual hating). Across these eight types of performances, we recognized three novel and generalizable categories for the brand meaning co-creation of human brands. We differentiated among network-related performances (i.e., *cooperating*) that emphasize the multi-actor perspective of the co-creation of brand meaning, human brand-related performances (i.e., *reinforcing, communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating*) that describe activities considered to directly affect the athlete brand and person-related performances (i.e., *individual loving, and individual hating*) that mainly target the individual person and thus only indirectly affect the human brand. Consequently, it can be argued that the co-creation of brand meaning cannot only be considered on the virtual level of the

**Table 3**  
Brand meaning co-creation performances of human brands.

Category	Performance	Sample post from digital engagement platform
Network-related performances	Cooperating	One round after the other! 🏆 For the classic complex today, I got an expert in this field 🏆 #Followyourfire #Winterfans @[Athlete friend] @[Sponsor]   @[Sponsor]   @[Sponsor]   To Be A sport (Athlete, Facebook, 09.10.2020).
		My shooting today: 🏆 But for that Floggie has cleared everything today. 🏆 I'm very happy for you, @[Athlete friend] 🏆 #followyourfire #winterfans #friends (Athlete, Instagram, 12.03.2021).
		Time for a running session? 🏆 These shoes in the brilliant color are only meant for sun. 🏆 🏆 #followyourfire #winterfans #running #eattrainsleeprepeat #adidas #colorful #smile #thesebootsaremadeforrunning @[Sponsor] @[Sponsor] (Athlete, Instagram, 08.07.2021).
Human brand-related performances	Communicating	It was so nice with you, Twin! ❤️ After 2 weeks at home and in Ruhpolding, it's now on to the next World Cup in Oberhof. I am looking forward to the home World Cup and will miss you fans very much #followyourfire #winterfans (Athlete, Facebook, 05.01.2021).
		A used day! After 2 mistakes in the 1st shooting it was very difficult for me to roll up the field from behind. In addition, I felt very bad physically today. Let's forget the race, put my feet up for the next 2 days and attack again on Friday #followyourfire #winterfans #timetoplay #notmyday #needmoreenergy (Athlete, Instagram, 14.12.2020).
		Mask Ball! 🏆 I wear the mask for my grandma, my parents, for all people who belong to the risk group and to contribute a part to contain Covid-19. It is important that we stick together now and stay consistent ❤️ #StillTogetherAgainstCorona (Athlete, Facebook, 29.08.2020).
Human brand-related performances	Internalizing	Recharge your vitamin D! I'm still enjoying the last moments of summer before the cold season starts again soon. How do you spend the last warm days? #FollowYourFire #Winterfans #sunnyday #summervibes (Athlete, Instagram, 11.09.2020).
		Massage in the sun! 🏆 Could you relax better? #followyourfire #winterfans #timetorelax #seiseralm #thxmichi #legday (Athlete, Instagram, 30.07.2020)
		Family day with our bro. ❤️ #homesweethome #followyourfire (Athlete, Facebook, 24.05.2020).
Human brand-related performances	Reinforcing	First, it is good that you are giving yourself a break and listening to your body! I hope that you can now recover well and take something from the winter, despite the problems. Then the next season will certainly be as good as the current one has started (Supporters Club, Instagram, 18.03.2021).
		So nice to see you in the World Cup again. Have lately rarely in the sport so cheered along, as now this weekend with you. I'm already looking forward to the next races and congratulations for the already fulfilled WC-Nomination (Fan, Instagram, 29.11.2020).
		This is a very nice idea with the vegetable box. A beautiful message for all. Good luck for your preparation! (Fan, Instagram, 14.05.2020)
Human brand-related performances	Contesting	You can try it, but how the sporting "development" goes as a vegan, you have seen with others. The performance drops dramatically. As a vegetarian, top performances are still possible in the endurance area, as a vegan rather not (Fan, Facebook, 24.07.2020).
		Thanks. No. I prefer my burger with real meat (Fan, Instagram, 09.12.2020).
		You are like [another athlete], you are overtrained so you lack speed, it will come. Good luck. (Fan, Instagram, 20.01.2021).
Human brand-related performances	Elucidating	Yes, the shooting was top again. I'm just a little worried about your runtime... somehow the material doesn't seem to fit. Stay relaxed, have fun and then something will happen in the chase. It's not that far to the top 10-15, you can easily make it if you are stable and consistent in your shooting (Fan, Facebook, 18.12.2020).
		Why do you always and everywhere have sunglasses on...? Necessary, show or because of sponsors? (Fan, Instagram, 03.08.2020)
		How satisfied are you with the shoe? What distances on what surfaces do you run with it? I run regularly myself and am grateful for shoe tips. Answer Athlete: I like to run in different shoes. However, [this one] is perfect for forest floors. (Fan and athlete, Instagram, 08.07.2020)
Person-related performances	Individual loving	Finally found your site and glad to pass on my thoughts and greetings to you. I "follow" you since you are in the World Cup! In Finland was great and after your long injury can not go well yet! Then good luck in Hochfilzen and am of course on the TV and press everything I have, so that it goes great for you. (Fan, Instagram, 11.12.2020).
		You have a SUPER RACE 🏆 made and well presented 🏆! Too bad that in the end it was only this blink of an eye that has deprived YOU of the deserved place on the podium 🏆! But this is great to build on, because next time it's YOUR turn again 🏆! 🏆 (Fan, Instagram, 13.12.2020).
		My beautiful twin ❤️ (Sister, Instagram, 12.02.2021)
Person-related performances	Individual hating	You're so bad, just stop and go to the kitchen or the office. You're getting paid for this, if I worked the way you work, I'd get immediate dismissal... (Fan, Facebook, 03.03.2021).
		Alcohol before training I know from the district league (Fan, Instagram, 05.07.2020).
		You really want to add another season? But then please in the IBU Cup. There you will also have a few successes. There you can even compete at the top halfway (Fan, Instagram, 18.03.2021).

brand meaning (such as in corporate brands) but rather also in terms of collaborating forms of behavior (i.e., *cooperating*) and regarding the individual behind the human brand as well.

5.2. Managerial implications

This study provides manifold implications for brand management practice and enhances brand managers' and athletes' knowledge on the

dynamics of integrative human branding. It contributes to the analysis of different performances on digital engagement platforms, enabling athletes and brand managers to interact specifically with different actors based on our results and to build, develop and maintain a unique brand through strategic marketing concepts.

First, it advises brand owners that they cannot autonomously control their brands and branding decisions. Instead, they must be aware that brand meaning is always co-created by multiple actors in heterogeneous

networks on different engagement platforms. However, these actors can change according to the dynamics of integrative human branding. It is crucial to consider digital engagement platforms (e.g., social media channels) as enablers and facilitators for the co-creation of brand meaning. Therefore, brand managers should take advantage of the benefits of digital engagement platforms and encourage interactions among various actors.

Second, brand managers should analyze which actors are relevant and involved in the brand meaning co-creation of human brands on their respective platforms. Various digital engagement platforms can be used to reach specific actor networks and actors with the targeted content. In doing so, brand managers must be aware that the use of selected digital engagement platforms must be strategically planned for the integrative branding process of human brands. For example, the actors on the social media channels Instagram and LinkedIn vary, with the latter specifically targeting business contacts. Furthermore, it must be understood through which performances different actors engage and how they co-create the brand meaning of the human brand. Network-related performances refer to strategic, long-term partnerships with corporate brands, such as sponsors and equipment suppliers. This leads to financial revenues, a targeted positioning of the brand's core and the building of a post-career life. The purpose of human brand-related performance is to share and communicate the brand's identity with the community. For instance, a practical application is the activism of athletes who use social media to clearly express their positioning on social issues and concerns, e.g., against racism or for gender equality and climate change. Person-related performances should look behind the scenes of the brand, focusing on the individual. Sharing private content on social media, such as pictures with family and friends, leisure activities or content without sports facilitates individual loving and strongly engages with the brand's community. This enables brand managers to specifically apply or promote various performances among different levels to facilitate the co-creation of the human brand.

To summarize, it is necessary for human brands to understand the process of co-creating brand meaning to identify, engage, and interact with all actors involved on their respective platforms. By recognizing and embracing the role of the various actors involved in the brand meaning co-creation process, human brands can establish a meaningful and authentic brand that resonates with their respective target audiences and leads to leveraged brand engagement, sustainable relationships with all actors as well as improved brand advocacy. By engaging in or enabling of different performances, human brands can increase their brand loyalty, enhance their brand reputation and develop a unique brand. Therefore, our study provides a significant contribution for human brand management.

## 6. Limitations and future research

As with any empirical study, this study has several limitations that need to be considered. Primarily, this research focuses on a single case study examining the brand meaning co-creation of one human brand. It is essential to extend the case and examine additional human brands (e.g., athletes, influencers, entertainers, coaches) to avoid individual case exceptions and ensure external validity and generalizability. Furthermore, it might be critical to refer the results back to traditional corporate brands. It seems reasonable that future research should examine human brands in other sports, differences between athletes and other types of human brands as well as comparing human and corporate brands regarding brand meaning co-creation performances. Brand meaning co-creation performances of a single-sport athlete can be certainly different from those of team sport athletes. Further research should investigate human brands with smaller and bigger followership on social media to determine similarities and contrasts with respect to the identified performances that contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning. In addition, a cross-cultural analysis would be valuable for identifying differences across various cultures and countries as well as gender and

nationality of the athlete.

Second, we focused on five different social media channels and neglected other digital engagement platforms (e.g., brand communities, websites, and other social media platforms) as well as physical engagement platforms such as competitions, sports venues, or events. We encourage researchers to explore additional digital and physical engagement platforms to illustrate the diversity and heterogeneity of different actors and their brand meaning co-creation performances. In particular, other innovative digital engagement platforms (e.g. meta-verse or web3), offer various novel possibilities for the empowerment of human brands, which could be examined in detail.

Third, this study represents a starting point for more research, as it is the first to examine various performances of brand meaning co-creation of human brands from a multi-actor perspective. Therefore, future studies should examine how and which actors initiate performances that co-create brand meaning on digital engagement platforms. A promising path for future research would be to conduct surveys or experiments with fans or sponsors in order to study the determinants of actors' performances.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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