

STRATEGIES FOR OLYMPIAN ATHLETES: ENGAGING FANS DURING THE FOUR-YEAR INTERIM PERIOD*

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Abstract: *This research investigates the strategies by which Olympic athletes can engage with and connect to fans during the four-year interval between Olympic Games. Fifteen professionals from media, marketing, and academia participated in qualitative interviews. The insights from experts underscored several vital strategies, including crafting and distributing content on social media; increase exposure through mass media; engaging in and covering various sporting events; establishing partnerships with brands; sharing personal aspects of their lives; and organizing fan clubs and events.*

Key words: *Olympiade, Branding, Olympic movement, Olympian athlete, Fan engagement.*

1. Introduction

The Olympic Games stand as the pinnacle of global sporting events, lauded for their grandeur and inclusivity. They provide a stage where athletes from every corner of the globe converge to display their skills and compete. Every edition captivates millions globally, bridging language, cultural, and geographic gaps, fostering an unmatched sense of unity and jubilation [20].

Media platforms have played a pivotal role in this transformation, affording athletes unprecedented opportunities to engage with their followers, chronicle

their journeys, and foster enduring connections [13]. Nonetheless, for Olympians, this interaction transcends the Games and permeates the four-year interim between Olympiads. This period, often marked by a scarcity of major sporting events, offers a distinctive challenge and opportunity for athletes to nurture and retain their fan base. The capacity to recognize and employ effective strategies to interact with fans during this interval can profoundly influence an athlete's trajectory, endorsements, and overall public persona. The duration between Olympic Games has become an integral facet of an athlete's professional

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journey, providing occasions to engage with fans, forge brand partnerships, and elevate their public profile. Grasping the significance of fan engagement and adeptly employing strategies during this four-year span has become increasingly pivotal for Olympic athletes striving to sustain relevance and secure endorsement deals in an intensely competitive sports landscape.

Therefore, the current study aims to explore how Olympian athletes can effectively interact with and bond with fans during this four-year period. Understanding and implementing effective strategies to interact with fans during this downtime can significantly impact an athlete's career, endorsements, and overall public image. The study will investigate strategies such as social media engagement, mass media involvement, participation in other sporting events, brand partnerships, sharing personal life, and involvement in fan clubs and events. By understanding and implementing these strategies, Olympic athletes can maintain and nurture their fan base, ensuring their relevance and securing endorsement deals in a highly competitive sports market.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-presentation theory

The self-presentation theory posits that individuals tailor their personas to evoke favourable reactions and foster a positive image [14]. The theory of self-presentation, frequently utilized in the athlete's context, posits that individuals strategically mold and handle the impressions they present to others [1]. In the athletic realm, athletes adeptly manage their public image, recognizing its profound effects on their careers and

endorsements [16], [25] from meticulously crafting their online presence to exhibiting grace and expertise during public engagements, athletes deliberately improve specific images for their fans, peers, and media [16]. This calculated self-presentation extends to their athletic performances, where they strive for composure, resilience, and excellence, all of which contribute to their desired public image [3]. However, the self-presentation of athletes is not merely about creating a favourable public image; it also serves to shape and safeguard their personal identity, ensuring it aligns with the public perception [21]. Previous research has demonstrated that athlete branding is an effective strategy as it projects a favourable image of the athlete to their audience [23]. Athlete branding, which is the public image crafted by athletes for marketing purposes [16], has been shown to enhance the relationship between the athlete and their fans [27]. Thus, athlete branding leads to increased visibility and fan engagement [36].

2.2. Fan engagement

Consumer engagement refers to the depth of an individual's involvement with and attachment to a company's offerings or activities, which can be initiated either by the customer or the company [32]. In this context, fan engagement represents a form of customer engagement behaviour that emphasizes the fan's non-transactional, extra-role actions [37]. According to Annamalai, et al. [2], the engagement of customers and fans with a brand is often linked to interactive and co-creative experiences, which are typically preceded by a certain level of involvement. Consequently, fan

engagement can yield numerous benefits for athletes, as Huettermann, et al. [18] observed that the outcomes of engagement include not only financial gains but also emotional and intangible advantages. Sandi and Triastuti [31] further added that consumer engagement frequently fosters a deeper commitment and increased loyalty.

Hasaan, et al. [17] pointed out that fan engagement is a crucial instrument in athletes' branding process, as they can leverage high levels of fan loyalty to establish a compelling athlete image [3]. Therefore, the effectiveness of athlete branding is contingent upon their media persona and their ability to engage and connect with fans [16 - 3]. In light of this, one could argue that fan engagement is a critical aspect of any athlete's brand promotion, and improved fan engagement is essential for better branding. Past studies have examined the importance of fan engagement in athletes' branding efforts, yet few have focused on Olympic athletes in this context. Olympic athletes, who have to contend with a four-year gap between their prime opportunities to perform in front of fans, face challenges in maintaining their popularity and fan engagement. Hence, this study aimed to investigate strategies that Olympic athletes could employ to retain their fans during this hiatus, thereby preserving their popularity and fostering loyalty to their brand image.

The study holds significance for multiple reasons. Firstly, it aims to provide insights into how Olympic athletes navigate the intricacies of self-presentation, revealing the pressures and complexities that these athletes encounter. Secondly, the research aims to unravel the role of different media platforms in moulding

athlete identities and shaping fan perceptions. Given the increasing importance of media in sports, understanding athletes' strategies in managing these platforms is pivotal. Lastly, the study seeks to offer a framework for comprehending how individuals manage their public personas and negotiate external expectations across diverse contexts. As such, the research presents the following research question:

RQ1: How Olympian athletes might effectively interact with fans in the four years that elapse between Olympic Games?

3. Methodology

The study employed an inductive qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from participants.

3.1. Participants

The study included participants from four distinct groups: experts, academics, journalists, and sports managers. The total sample size for this study was 15 participants. The criteria for participant selection guaranteed that experts possessed a minimum of three years of relevant experience. To ensure data richness, criterion sampling was employed. The rationale behind setting these criteria is to ensure the collection of data that is abundant in valuable information, as advocated by [28]. Experts were selected based on specific criteria, requiring them to have served in their respective occupations for at least three years. Prior to giving their consent,

participants were informed about the research's aims, data handling practices, and privacy safeguards. Pseudonyms (E1-E15) were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1
Participants' description

No. of experts	Code	Gender M/F	Age range	Work experience (years)
Academia				
6	E1-E6	2/4	25-39	5-14
Media				
5	E7-E11	3/2	26-34	3-10
Marketing				
4	E12-E15	3/1	27-36	5-7

3.2. Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, employing a guide developed based on the framework outlined by [28]. The interview guide was designed to encourage a reflective approach to the questions asked [7]. While the structure remained uniform, the wording and sequencing were adjusted to account for individual contexts. Interviews were conducted individually over a two-month period and lasted between 55 to 75 minutes. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The researcher employed these probing questions [24], to gather more comprehensive insights and to better understand the participants' perspectives.

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis began after the first interview in this study to allow

researchers to become familiar with participants' responses [28]. The analysis process consisted of two levels of coding: open coding and axial coding. The initial phase involved open coding for an initial examination. During this stage, the content was carefully coded, and codebooks were created through repeated examination [8]. Subsequently, axial coding was used to refine and categorize these initial themes. At the axial coding level, these preliminary themes underwent a process of integration, merging, elimination, and enhancement through iterative navigation between research materials and initial coding [8]. This iterative process continued until no new themes emerged, indicating saturation had been achieved. By employing this comprehensive analysis strategy, the research was able to deeply explore the data, ensuring a thorough understanding of the participants' perspectives.

4. Results

The participants of the study identified several strategies that Olympic athletes could employ to engage fans during the four-year gap between Olympic Games. According to the experts, these strategies include social media involvement, mass media involvement, participation in other sporting events, brand partnerships, sharing personal life, and organizing fan clubs and events. The subsequent section thoroughly explores the insights provided by the study participants regarding each of these themes.

Social media involvement: Social media engagement refers to the level of interaction and participation individuals

or organizations have with their audience on social media platforms. It includes various forms of engagement, such as likes, comments, shares, direct messages, posts and overall interactions. Social media engagement is a key metric for evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing efforts and the degree of connection established with the target audience. Maintenance of a robust social media presence is realised through active engagement and content creation. By posting a mix of behind-the-scenes training insights, personal stories, highlights of memorable competitions, interactions with fans, and reflections on their journey, athletes can create compelling content that resonates with their audience and showcases the dedication, resilience, and passion that define their sporting careers [E3].

Mass media involvement: Mass media involvement is a vital component of an Olympian athlete's strategy to engage with fans during the four-year interim period between Olympic Games. During the four-year Olympic gap, Olympian athletes can utilize a variety of mass media platforms such as television, radio, and newspapers to maintain public interest and support. They could participate in live or recorded interviews, collaborate with media outlets for exclusive features, write op-eds or columns, and even guest host sports programs. These strategies ensure sustained engagement with a broad audience, keeping their journey and aspirations at the forefront of public consciousness [E11].

Other sport event participation: Consistent participation in and coverage

of various sporting events, even beyond the Olympics, is a critical strategy for Olympian athletes to engage fans during the four-year interim period.

Competing in and being covered by various sporting events beyond the Olympics is a powerful way to maintain momentum and ensure that the public remains invested in the athlete's journey." For example, Olympic athletes could participate in events such as the Asian Games or Islamic Games and share their experiences and achievements with fans. Additionally, participating in popular sports events such as cricket in the subcontinent and football in Europe could also increase fan engagement [E9].

Brand partnerships: Forging partnerships with brands offers Olympian athletes a valuable opportunity to enhance their visibility, credibility, and financial support during the four-year interim period.

Forming strategic brand partnerships is an invaluable strategy for Olympian athletes during the four-year interim period. By aligning with brands that share their values and aspirations, athletes can amplify their reach, build credibility, and engage fans in meaningful ways. These partnerships serve as a vehicle for athletes to convey their message, inspiring fans to follow their journey with unwavering support and anticipation for the next Olympic Games [E14].

Sharing personal life: Sharing personal aspects of their lives allows Olympian athletes to connect with fans on a deeper, more relatable level, fostering stronger bonds and loyalty.

Offering glimpses into their daily

routines, challenges, triumphs, and even struggles humanizes athletes, making them more approachable and inspiring to their audience. By sharing personal stories, anecdotes, and experiences, athletes create authentic connections with fans, who feel more invested in their journey and accomplishments. This transparency not only builds trust and rapport but also provides fans with insights into the athlete's character, values, and motivations, enhancing their admiration and support [E1].

Organizing fan clubs and events:

Organizing fan clubs and events offers Olympian athletes a powerful platform to engage with their fan base, foster a sense of community, and deepen connections.

Fan clubs provide a dedicated space for fans to come together, share their passion for the athlete, and interact with like-minded individuals, creating a supportive and enthusiastic community.

By organizing fan events such as meet-and-greets, watch parties, or exclusive experiences, athletes can create memorable experiences for their fans, strengthening their bond and loyalty [E8].

5. Discussion

The study aimed to explore strategies for Olympians to engage their fans during the gap between the games as no other tournament could offer attention and coverage comparing to Olympics. In this context, the study investigated experts to suggest possible solution for this engagement dip for the image of athletes participated in Olympics. The experts identified that social media involvement,

mass media involvement, other sport event participation, brand partnerships, sharing personal life and organizing fan clubs and events are few strategies that Olympians could use to intact fans with them. The subsequent section delves into a comprehensive exploration of the insights offered by study participants with regards to each of these identified themes.

Previous research has demonstrated the utility of both traditional and digital media in athlete and brand branding. For instance, Hasaan, et al. [16] highlighted the importance of data for managers in formulating effective fan engagement strategies. Additionally, studies have shown that a strong relationship with mass media can be beneficial for niche sport athletes, providing them with new avenues for fan engagement [12]. This is supported by the observation that fans are actively involved in televised events [34], which underscores the potential of mass media to maintain fan engagement. Apart from mass media, social media is also recommended by experts for fan engagement, as it offers an interactive environment for fans to engage and discuss [9], [19]. Social media is considered an extension of traditional sports broadcasting and communication [5], providing sponsors and endorsers with a new avenue for engaging fans [29]. Furthermore, studies on athlete branding have concurred that social media plays a vital role [3], [16], [26]. emphasizing the importance of social media as a tool for Olympians to engage with fans. Therefore, it is crucial for Olympians to utilize social media with a proper strategy to ensure high fan engagement.

Sporting events often garner substantial media attention and coverage [10],

drawing large numbers of fans to various media channels [30]. This is beneficial for athletes, as their participation in events, whether international or national, typically attracts media coverage. While limited media coverage may be seen as a disadvantage from a branding perspective [12], [17] even a small amount of coverage can be beneficial to an athlete. Additionally, discussing other sporting events can also capture fans' attention. For example, Rafael Nadal sharing moments with the Real Madrid Football Club has proven to be engaging for many fans [11].

Brand partnerships serve as a valuable strategy, as collaborations between brands and athletes are recognized as effective promotion techniques for consumer products. When consumers establish a connection with an athlete, brands can capitalize on the brand-athlete association to their advantage [6]. This connection nurtures brand passion and loyalty among the athlete's fans, contributing to the sustainable growth of the advertising market [35]. Consequently, brand partnerships have the potential to further engage fans of athletes.

Hasaan, et al. [16] emphasized the importance of athletes' personal lives, stating that fans are intrigued by their personal lives and character. For example, negative information about an athlete's personal life can damage their brand and public image [33]. Additionally, the media often portrays famous athletes as pop stars, and fans are frequently interested in their lifestyle choices [15]. Therefore, sharing personal and family information could be a useful strategy, as suggested by the study experts.

The experts in this study emphasized the importance of athlete involvement in fan

club activities. Fan clubs serve as the backbone of fan communities in sports, with members showing unwavering support for their favourite teams and athletes [22]. Additionally, these fan clubs are considered high-value customers for teams and athletes, often regarded as loyal and dedicated supporters [4]. Therefore, active participation in fan club events and activities could significantly enhance fan engagement for Olympians, ensuring that their brand remains top-of-mind among fans.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has delved into the various strategies available to Olympian athletes for maintaining fan engagement during the gap between Olympic Games. Insights from experts underscored the importance of social media involvement, mass media participation, brand partnerships, sharing personal life, and engagement with fan clubs and events. Social media, in particular, emerged as a pivotal tool for athletes in cultivating their brand, enhancing fan interaction, and sustaining their presence between competitions. Moreover, the study emphasized the significance of media coverage, even from non-sporting events, as a means of keeping athletes relevant and stimulating fan interest. The power of brand partnerships was highlighted, showcasing the mutual benefits for athletes and sponsors, particularly in nurturing fan loyalty. Notably, the study suggests that personal connections, such as sharing personal experiences and engaging with fan communities, play a vital role in fostering a strong and loyal fan base.

Practically, this study provides

actionable insights for Olympian athletes, coaches, and sports management professionals in devising effective fan engagement strategies during the lull between Olympic events. By understanding the practical impact of these strategies, athletes can better navigate the complexities of modern sports marketing and maintain public interest, support, and loyalty throughout their careers. On an academic level, this study contributes to the burgeoning field of sports marketing and athlete branding. By exploring the various dimensions of fan engagement, it deepens our understanding of the role of athletes as brands and the ways in which they can leverage media and sponsorship to enhance their image and reach. Overall, this study offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the strategies and considerations involved in fan engagement for Olympian athletes, contributing to both practical and theoretical knowledge in the field.

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