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Identity construction and impression management across digital sport platforms: a PRISMA 2020 systematic review of studies published between 2015 and 2026

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of social media, there is a change in the way athletes create, manage and convey their images. They no longer depend on traditional media outlets to shape their reputation but can now use digital platforms to craft their image directly. While there have been lots of studies in this field that span sport sociology, sport communication, and digital media, most results are disjointed, and there is barely any research on how self-presentation, impression management, athletic identity and personal branding come together in the connected context. This review attempts to fill some gaps in the literature by consolidating the empirical works done on athletes' self-presentation in digital environments. According to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a Scopus search was carried out that turned up 649 documents. The Scopus search was conducted in January 2026 using the search terms "social media", "Instagram", "TikTok", "self-presentation", "impression management", "personal branding", and "athletes", combined through Boolean operators. Two independent reviewers screened all records following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Inter-rater reliability reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$. Study quality was assessed using the FICO appraisal framework, while thematic synthesis followed the procedures proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). Once duplicates were eliminated (n =6), 643 records were checked; out of these, 582 were either in the wrong type, language or were completely off the topic of the study. Finally, after assessing 61 full-text articles and discarding 51 for not meeting the requirements of self-presentation through an empirical lens or not available, only 10 papers emerged for thematic synthesis. The analysis covered topics such as image building, identity construction, self-promotion techniques, and environmental factors affecting online self-presentation. The three main outcomes were: 1) Athletes playfully weave together aspects of their public and private faces, 2) True or authentic image is primarily an athlete's branding tool, though commercially driven, and 3) Gender, characteristics of a social media platform and the influence of advertising are factors that define how athletes use the medium. In conclusion, the review has laid out the theory, practical guidance, and the scope of further research on this subject to different stakeholders such as sportspersons, trainers, and advertisers.

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Introduction

Sport is a unique cultural phenomenon in today's digital world and has the power of uniting people across the world. It is simultaneously a source of entertainment, a commercial enterprise, and an arena for social identity negotiation. Thanks to the internet, sport communication no longer only happens in front of a camera or on a printed page; it has become decentralized allowing direct and ongoing dialogue with the public from the mouths of the athletes (Marwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). In the new world of platform society, visibility is governed by the algorithm and identity is performed in front of a huge audience. Therefore, analyzing how athletes present themselves digitally has not only a theoretical but also practical value (Castells, 2010; Lupton, 2015). Here, remaining in sight is one of the forms of work; and the platform infrastructure not only determines but also creates the content that receives attention (Abidin, 2016; van Dijck, 2013).

Ultimately, it's the digital self-presentation practice that leads the way of this change; the intentional creation and maintenance of an online persona via posts, images, text, and interactions. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework of frontstage and backstage behaviour has greatly contributed to our understanding of this practice, because via social media, different audiences that were once separated are now combined within one public space and we are obliged to constantly manage the impression we give (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Marwick & boyd, 2011). For athletes whose job is closely associated with their personal identity and who are under constant social media pressure, these aspects become even more significant (Brewer et al., 1993).

In the past, researchers have explored the creation of image and identity by athletes and other celebrities on social platforms (Horky et al., 2021). Their work has covered image/caption strategy of content analysis, engagement metrics-based studies, and authenticity work narratives through qualitative research (Lopes & Nagel, 2025; Woods et al., 2023).This strand of research employs identity theory and social identity theory to unpack how role-based and group-based self-understandings are performed online (Stryyer & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), yet "identity" remains a challenging category for scholars who warn that analytical care is needed (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) On another note, personal branding theory highlights the increasingly entrepreneurial nature of identity management (Khamis et al., 2017; Senft, 2013).

The recent innovations have expanded both the methodological and empirically aspects of the field. Researchers have started to explore the potential of machine learning applied to huge textual data sets (Bigsby et al., 2019). They used also longitudinal image analysis (Woods et al., 2023), and integrated survey and content data using mixed-methods design, for instance, Su et al., (2023). At the same time, the commercial aspect of internet platforms such as name, image, and likeness monetization, influencer marketing, and human-AI co-production have changed the nature of the athletic self to quite a degree (Taniyev et al., 2022; Westerbeek, 2025). Other scholars have examined how these changes have affected esports branding and cross-border fandom and have also investigated the self-branding's influence in terms of perceived authenticity for both athlete-adjacent and non-athlete influencers (Singer & Jonas, 2025; Xu, & Zhang, 2026). Uses and gratifications and parasocial interaction frameworks have been mobilised to explain why audiences engage with these performances (Chen, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Katz et al., 1973).

Nevertheless, the knowledge base is still incomplete in a way that makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive picture. Firstly, results are spread across different disciplines, e.g., sport management, sociology of sport, communication, and digital media, which do not often cite each other thereby leading to repetition and different approaches to the main themes (Guraya et al., 2025; Xu, 2026). An example is the development of a study on team/collective-level identities online that has happened independently from the field of individual branding (Ni et al., 2025). No integrated review has been carried out yet that has linked all these strands together to look at the phenomenon of athlete self-presentation specifically.

Also, theory and methodology-wise, limitations still exist. The vast majority of the research has been using cross-sectional content analyses focussing on a limited number of famous athletes, so the possibility to infer about process, change, and generalizability is severely restricted (de Rezende Costa & Hallmann, 2022; Harris & Brison, 2023). Research evidence is also very lopsided in different population groups: amateurs, youths, and non-elite athletes (Broms et al., 2022; Putri & Aras, 2021), and cross-cultural or diasporic performers (Torjesen, 2024; Wang & Zhu, 2026) have been researched a lot less and their features are less described. The major attention given to Instagram and Twitter, also leaves specific characteristics of these two platforms under-researched and, non-Western and marginal contexts are still significantly underrepresented in research (Leng et al., 2025; Li, 2026; Terason & Pahasing, 2025).

These shortcomings are a matter of urgency because athletes, in their capacity as content producers online, are earning revenues and building communities through digital identity. Simultaneously, their audiences are becoming close with them without direct engagement. The lack of a sound research basis in this domain prevents professionals from having an accurate and consistent explanation of effectiveness for different individuals and

at what level it could hurt wellbeing and authenticity (Ergün, 2025; Harris & Brison, 2025; Mudrick et al., 2016). A rigorous meta- analysis should, therefore, be a priority and an asset to the field of research.

In alignment with the above, the present paper aims to highlight the findings of the existing research about athletes' digital self-representation via a concise integration. To address these gaps, this study employs a systematic literature review following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Rather than generating new empirical data, the review synthesizes existing evidence through thematic synthesis, enabling transparent identification of recurring theoretical constructs, methodological patterns, and research gaps concerning athlete self-presentation across digital platforms. It will focus on three main research questions and each will lead the reader from one to the next. The first one is about identity formation, that is to say, how athletes, through the various platform activities, put together and manage their different identities in order to represent them on the screen, which will result in an overview of the role of identity building in connected athletics.

The second question revolves around one hand is strategy and one the other hand, through concrete practices, that is, the self-presentation and personal-branding methods athletes use, offering a classification that links Goffmanian dramaturgy to contemporary branding logics and also explains how the two levels (front- and backstage regions -) of identity production are dealt with on the Web.

The third question is about what factors influence self-presentation and how that presentation is perceived and reacted to. For instance, how gender, platform, and pressure from commercial interests lead to presentation and its effect contribute a moderated account of when certain strategies are likely to be victorious. These three aspects combined are what the author views as the novelty of these work: a theory-integrated, PRISMA-based summary of the athletic self present online via a number of platforms.

RQ1: How do athletes construct and negotiate identity through digital self-presentation on social media?

RQ2: What self-presentation and personal-branding strategies do athletes employ across social media platforms?

RQ3: How do situational factors—particularly gender, platform affordances, and commercial pressures—shape athletes' digital self-presentation and its audience outcomes?

Method

Research Design and Framework

We implemented a systematic literature review (SLR) primarily because it is suitable for research questions that need to make transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of the dispersed evidence base rather than providing selective coverage, which is common in narrative reviews, Tranfield et al., 2003. The review strictly followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement, which lays down the standards for the description of the search, screening, and reporting of the flow (Page et al., 2021). These principles were based on the ones introduced in the original PRISMA guidance (Liberati et al., 2009). This design will support methodological rigor and audit by enabling future researchers to repeat or broaden their search work.

A Boolean string search was gradually constructed, incorporating words relating to the platform context, the physical activity act, and the sports population. Different parts of the article such as the title, the abstract, and the keywords were targeted by field codes (TITLE-ABS-KEY); a method to find the various forms by truncation was also employed (e.g., present* for 'presentation' and 'presenting').

```
TITLE-ABS-KEY(
 ("social media" OR "instagram" OR "twitter" OR "tiktok"
    OR "digital platform*")
 AND ("self-present*" OR "impression management"
    OR "self-brand*" OR "personal brand*")
 AND ("athlet*" OR "sport*" OR "player*")
)
```

The string was modified through pilot searches to achieve a balance between sensitivity and precision, and limitations were imposed at the screening stage, as described.

Scopus was my main source of information because I found it the most reliable as it includes peer-reviewed sport communication, sport management, and sociology journals. The database search was conducted on 15

January 2026, and all records available up to this date were included in the retrieval. It is also multi-disciplinary and its metadata structure makes it very good for systematic screening. The search was done during the same retrieval date, and the total export (n = 649 records) became the evidence base for all the other stages of screening and PRISMA calculations. No extra databases were used, a point which limits the study and is therefore recognized as such.

Eligibility was determined beforehand over six criteria, listed in Table 1. Peer reviewers must have approved the publication for the article, it should be written in English, released within publication period considered in this review, the research question must have addressed the use of digital platforms by athletes for self-presentation, identity, and marketing。

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English-language full text	Non-English documents
Document type	Peer-reviewed article or review	Conference paper, book chapter, book, editorial, note, erratum
Publication period	2015–2026 (last decade)	Published before 2015
Subject focus	Athletes' digital self-presentation, identity, or personal branding	Topics unrelated to athlete self-presentation online
Accessibility	Full text retrievable	Abstract only / inaccessible full text
Relevance	Directly addresses the phenomenon with empirical or systematic data	Tangential or passing mention only

We screened the title and abstract of each paper at first. We also checked if the article met our criteria for eligibility in terms of document type, language, and topic. Second, we selected all eligible papers of the 643 deduplicated studies that were left. Finally, we discarded those articles that either did not have direct analysis of athlete self-presentation, were devoid of empirical data, or were un accessible. This was done so that a total of 10 studies were selected that fit the criteria. We kept track of all our decisions during each stage of screening and, when necessary or doubtful, we re-checked the papers against our criteria to resolve any conflicts.

Two independent reviewers conducted the title/abstract screening and full-text eligibility assessment. Any disagreements regarding study inclusion were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. To evaluate screening consistency, inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding $\kappa = 0.87$, indicating excellent agreement between reviewers. Inter-rater agreement reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$, indicating excellent agreement between reviewers.

The quality check of the studies was done with the FICO method, four main areas were investigated: (1) Focus (how much the study goal reflects athlete self-presentation), (2) Information (how much the data and sampling are disclosed), (3) Context (how the study is connected with the theory and background situation), and (4) Outcome (degree of confidence in the result and how readable it is). The FICO framework was selected because it provides structured assessment for qualitative and mixed-method evidence frequently encountered in sport communication and digital media research. Each of the categories was scored with a three-point system and a decision made that only papers with at least a certain total number of good scores that is, clear focus, open data, and comprehensible results should be accepted. All of the ten included studies passed the threshold.

Table 2. Table Scoring FICO

Score	Interpretation
10–12	High quality
7–9	Moderate quality
<7	Low quality (excluded)

Using a standardised study extraction template, each of the included studies were captured with the author(s), year of publication, country of study setting, research design, population and measurement platforms used, the presentation construct or intervention that was being examined, type of outcome measures that were used, as well as the main findings. The extraction work was done primarily from the original articles and then compared to the Scopus metadata to ensure the accuracy of references.

To characterise the overall intellectual landscape of the studies that have been selected, a qualitative bibliometric approach was used on the entire set of papers. Publication count per year was counted in order to show the development of the field (Figure 1), authors' institutions were extracted to identify geographies (Figure

2), keywords added by the authors were pooled to get an understanding of the most prominent concepts through a co-occurrence diagram (Figure 3). These analyses explain a historical context of the ten studies rather being a replacement for the thematic synthesis.

Thomas & Harden's (2008) thematic synthesis was adopted in this study. It is a method that allows for synthesis of heterogeneous qualitative and quantitative data. First, findings were coded by inductive content method. Afterwards, codes were grouped into descriptive themes while the descriptive themes were finally interpreted and grouped around the three research questions as analytical themes. Theme deriving was done in an iterative manner by going back and forth with sources in a continuous manner until all themes were considered to be consistent. Coherence of themes was checked by re-reading relevant parts of the original studies to determine that each analytical theme was supported by primary sources and that all analytical themes together covered the entire primary evidence.

We followed and presented our work according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The steps leading from the identification of the references, through screening, eligibility, and finally to the inclusion is summarized in Section 3 and also depicted in Figure 4, while the number of items in all sections including Abstract, Methods, Results and diagram remain accurate and the same as the text.

Figure 1 shows the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram that illustrates the pathway of the records from their initial discovery up to final inclusion. The four stages, identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, are represented in different colours, while the reasons for exclusion are listed with their respective numbers at every stage.

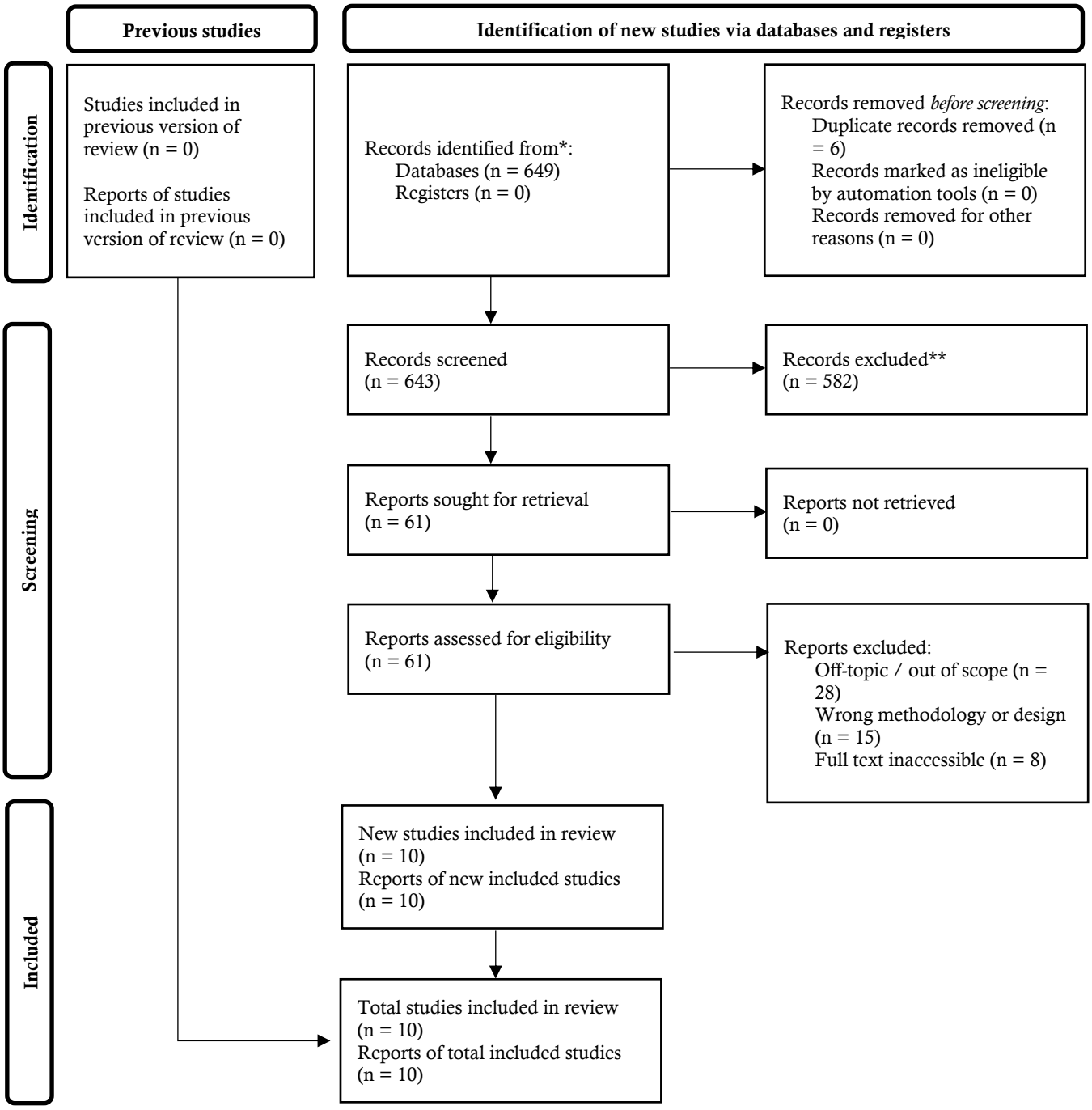

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Note. The diagram traces all 649 records identified in Scopus through the removal of 6 duplicates, the title/abstract screening of 643 records (582 excluded), the full-text assessment of 61 records (51 excluded with reasons), and the final inclusion of 10 studies. Counts are identical to those reported in the Abstract and in Section 5.1, satisfying the PRISMA consistency requirement.

Two independent reviewers conducted each screening stage, and all inclusion/exclusion decisions were documented in a standardized screening sheet. Cohen's κ reached 0.87.

Results and Discussions

After carrying out a search on Scopus there were 649 records found. Out of the duplicates 6 only 637 remained which were title and abstract screening. 582 were excluded at that level: those belonged to wrong document

types such as book chapters, conference papers, books, and editorials (n = 252); non-english (n = 18); and the topic of the papers did not relate to the athletes online self-presentation (n = 312), The 61 documents were scrutinized for content and 51 of them are out of scope (n = 28); they did not use methodology that led to empirical self-presentation data (n = 15) or the text was not available (n = 8). Finally, 10 studies met all criteria and are part of the synthesis.

The ten studies included range from 2019 to 2026 and have been carried out not only in different countries like the USA, Germany, Norway, Turkey but also multinational setups using mainly content analysis and mixed-methods designs. Each study has been briefly summarized in table 3 and the corpus has been categorised under "research design", "theme", "platform", and "outcome" in table 4. One can see that Instagram has become the most studied platform and females athletes the primary study population of researchers. This reflects both the development of women's sports and the researchers' concern.

Table 3. Summary of Included Studies

Title (abbrev.)	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
Self-presentation before/after motherhood	Johnson et al.	2023	USA	Content analysis (732 posts)	Female athletes blend athlete and mother identities into a combined dual-identity persona.
College athlete influencers & NIL	Su et al.	2023	USA	Mixed methods (survey + qual.)	Projecting athletic identity raises credibility; shared-school homophily drives purchase intent.
Online identity, addiction & self-esteem	Ergün	2025	Turkey	Survey (n = 288)	Online identity construction correlates with social media addiction; no direct self-esteem effect.
Self-presentation in football recruiting	Bigsby et al.	2019	USA	Machine learning (5.5M tweets)	Self-promotion and ingratiation online predict more scholarship offers.
Self-branding of lifestyle athletes	Woods et al.	2023	USA	Longitudinal content analysis (6,240 images)	Self-branding is pervasive even absent monetisation; explained via habitus and capital.
Frontstage/backstage/hidden stage	Bae et al.	2026	USA	Content analysis (1,142 photos)	Backstage content outperforms frontstage brand-ambassador posts on engagement.
Instagram use at UEFA Women's EURO	Rogstad et al.	2024	Norway	Quantitative content analysis	Strategic impression management peaks at matchdays; activism posts attract backlash.
Personal brand of national footballers	de Rezende Costa & Hallmann	2022	Germany/Brazil	Content analysis + survey	Players present as athletes first; fans prefer professional over gendered presentation.
Social personalities across networks	Horky et al.	2021	Germany	Mixed content analysis (15 figures)	Athletes display multiple, platform-specific social personalities and authenticity levels.

Title (abbrev.)	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Key Findings
WNBA personal brands on Instagram	Lopes & Nagel	2025	USA	Content analysis (1,405 photos)	Athletic and personal images dominate; women exercise authentic brand control.

Table 4. Study Classification by Theme, Method, and Platform

Author(s)	Year	Research Design	Theme / Focus	Platform	Outcome Examined
Johnson et al.	2023	Qualitative content analysis	Identity negotiation (motherhood)	Instagram	Presentation strategy shift
Su et al.	2023	Sequential mixed methods	Athletic identity & branding	Multi-platform	Credibility, purchase intent
Ergün	2025	Quantitative survey	Online identity & wellbeing	Social media (general)	Addiction, self-esteem
Bigsby et al.	2019	Computational / ML	Impression management	Twitter	Offline recruiting outcomes
Woods et al.	2023	Longitudinal content analysis	Self-branding practice	Instagram	Branding behaviour over time
Bae et al.	2026	Qualitative content analysis	Frontstage/backstage strategy	Instagram	Fan engagement
Rogstad et al.	2024	Quantitative content analysis	Strategic self-presentation	Instagram	Content type, engagement
de Rezende Costa & Hallmann	2022	Content analysis + survey	Personal brand & gender roles	Instagram	Brand image congruence
Horky et al.	2021	Mixed content analysis	Social personalities / authenticity	FB/Twitter/IG	Cross-platform presentation
Lopes & Nagel	2025	Quantitative content analysis	Personal branding & gender	Instagram	Follower engagement (likes)

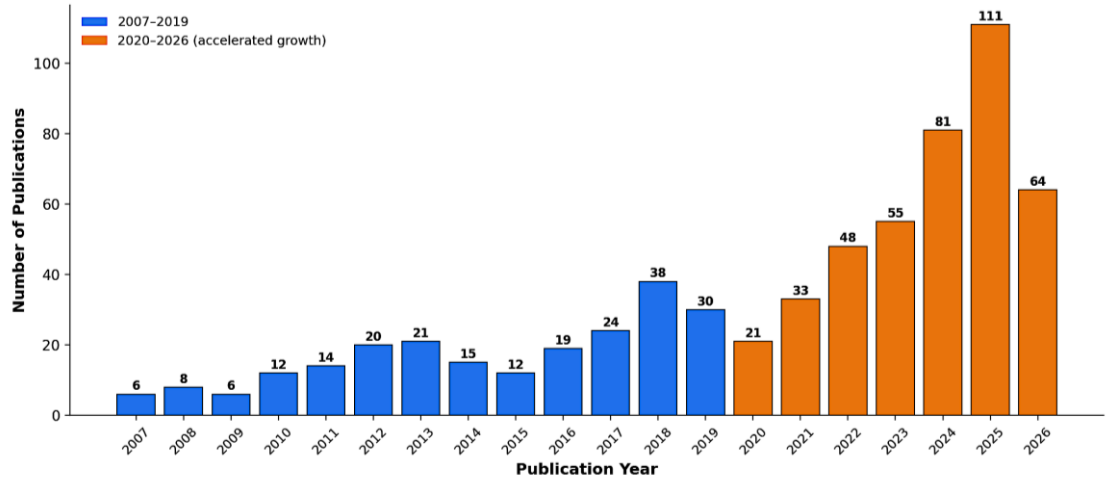

Figure 2. Annual publication trend on social media and athlete self-presentation (Scopus, 2007–2026)

Note. The chart plots annual publication counts across the corpus. Output remained modest through the 2010s but accelerated sharply from 2020 onward, peaking at 111 publications in 2025. The steep recent growth (orange bars) signals a maturing yet still-consolidating field and reinforces the timeliness of a systematic synthesis.

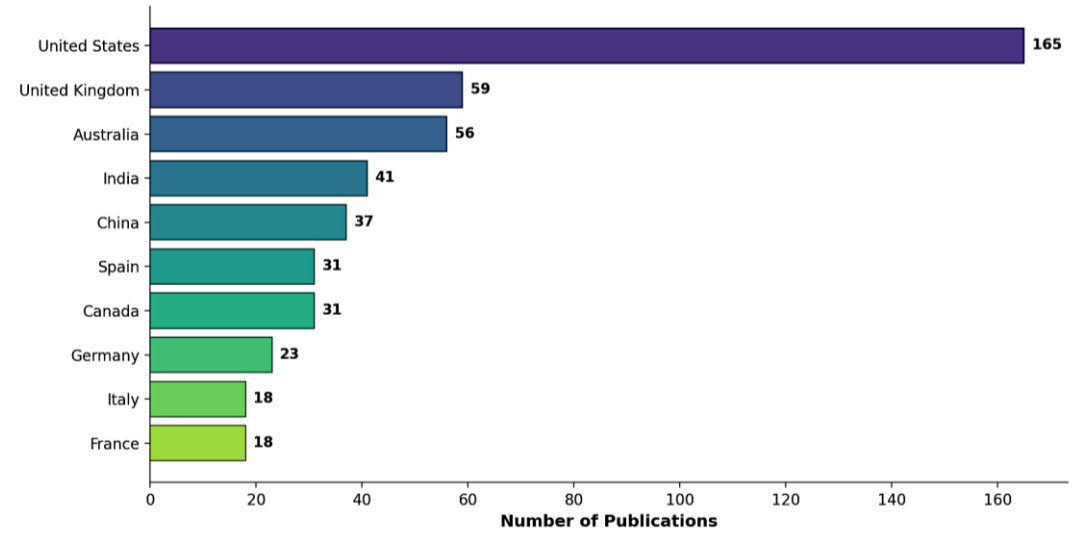

Figure 3. Top ten contributing countries in the research corpus

Note. Contribution is derived from author affiliation metadata. The United States dominates output (n = 165), followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, India, and China. The concentration of scholarship in Anglophone and high-income contexts underscores the geographic gap discussed in Section 4.5 and the need for research situated in non-Western sporting cultures.

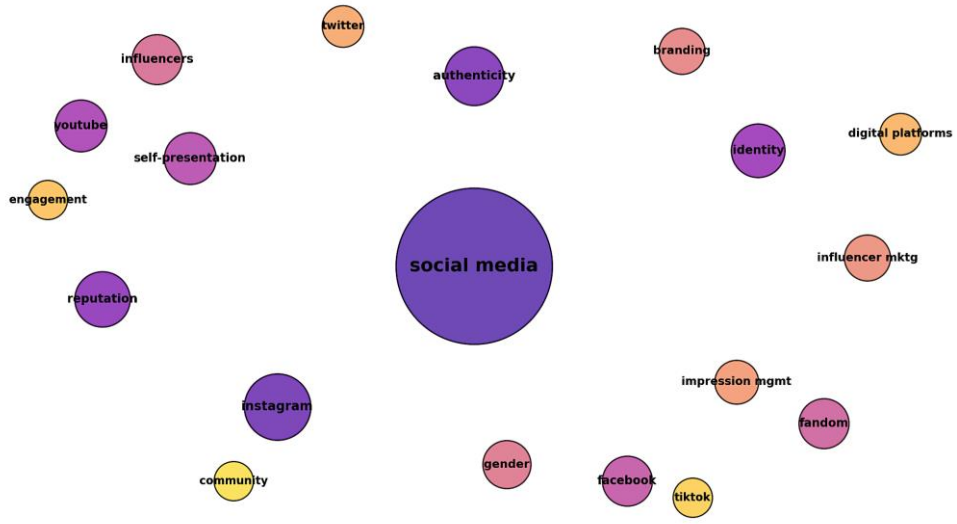

Figure 4. Author keyword co-occurrence landscape (bubble size proportional to frequency)

Note. Bubble size reflects how often each author keyword appears across the corpus. "Social media" is the central hub, surrounded by "self-presentation," "identity," "authenticity," "impression management," and "branding." The clustering visually confirms that the dominant conceptual vocabulary of the field aligns closely with the theoretical constructs framing this review.

One notable pattern across the texts is that athletes are not portrayed solely as individuals with a fixed single identity but rather as people who actively shape many identities activated in different scenarios. Johnson et al. (2023) provide a very striking example when they describe how elite female athletes at the same time were transitioning into motherhood still maintained their athletic identity and actually combined it with the one of a mother, giving rise to a very unique double role that breaks from the cultural norm that motherhood and career cannot go together. Their role identification fits the definition according to identity theory that one can be aware of role identities hierarchically ordered, and depending only on the particular context the prominence of some identities may be greater than others (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Identities tied to groups also carry considerable effects. The research done by Su et al. in 2023 has shown that projecting an athletic image which the audience can easily identify with results in higher perceived credibility, whereas having the same institutional connection between athlete and audience, homophily arising from being in the same school, serves to be the main connecting link which consumer response is all about. This mechanism of the functioning of both a person's role identity and a social group identity perfectly describes what social identity theory forecasts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and it is also substantiated in the finding by Horky et al. (2021) that athletes, at least on some level, have several "social personalities" which have been adapted to fit different platforms and audiences.

Constructing oneself online definitely carries a price. Based on her study, Ergun (2025) concludes that the more student-athletes engage in intensive online identity work, the more likely it will be for them to develop a habit of excessive usage of social media sites. Yet, such behavior is only indirectly tied to self-esteem and hence, suggests a negative impact on one's wellbeing due to the effort of creating a personal digital footprint, something branding-oriented literature has typically ignored. Put shortly, these research articles respond to RQ1 by describing athlete identity in terms of being multiple, context dependent, audience aware, and at times challenging that is, social media platforms serve as a means for constructing, not merely exhibiting, athlete identity.

The research shows a Goffmanian model of a public stage and backstage as the main way how athletes self-present. This can be extended by differentiating front- back- and hidden stages that Bae et al. (2026) describe as three types of content categories. Backstage (personal and routine lifestyle related) content always generates more likes and comments comparing to frontstage-brand (commercial) content. That flips the common belief that a high polish product presentation gives the best reach and focuses instead on personal relationship or intimacy, a view that is also in line with the parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Sporting self-branding is found to be a widespread and goal-directed way of life which many athletes do not see as the domain of top stars in particular. Woods et al. (2023) have studied 6, 240 images over time and come to the conclusion that even lifestyle athletes with lower profiles are systematically involved in their own self-branding activities irrespective of their potential to get financial returns. The authors explain such a practice through the concept of habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu along with the idea of collecting symbolic capital. Bigsby et al. (2019) further develop the strategy of brand promotion by bringing it into the domain of computational social network analysis where they demonstrate that some types of self-presentation techniques such as showing off and making oneself pleasing can be quantified on an enormous scale of tweets and lead to offline rewards in the form of recruitment proposals.

In addition to being spatially strategic, presentation is also temporally strategic. Rogstad et al. (2024) provide examples of how national-team football players changed their frequency of postings and content styles depending on the rhythm of a major tournament, focusing their sporting messages much more on matchdays, and opening up to personal and commercial content once they were out. Athletes in both studies by Lopes and Nagel (2025), de Rezende Costa, and Hallmann (2022) are primarily representing their professional athletic identity but selectively showing a bit of their personal and gender aspects. Therefore, RQ2 is answered by a set of consistent strategical skills: managing one's space-time region, adjusting the time scale, and consciously presenting athletic, personal and commercial versions of self.

Gender influences the way people present themselves, and also how those presentations are received. de Rezende Costa and Hallman (2022) argue that female footballers highlight their athlete identity first, while they both negotiate their gender with the society in terms of being active or nurturing. The study also indicates that fans are rather in favor of professional looks compared to feminized or sexualized ones. However, Lopes and Nagel (2025) throw a different light on the ongoing issue of sexualisation, stating that even though sexual images were very few among WNBA players, the few that did surface were given disproportionate attention. This reveals that public demand and standards of morality are often at odds.

Platform affordances determine which identities can be expressed and what kinds of identities get rewarded most. As stated by, for instance, Horky et al. (2021), the same person may show very different characteristics on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which implies that the very concept of authenticity is platform-relative nowadays. A similar conclusion can be drawn by Bae et al. (2025-09) and Rogstad et al. (2024) who demonstrate that engagement outcomes also depend on the interaction of content type, on the one hand, and the affordances of Instagram's feed and stories, on the other, a combination that implies that presentation strategy cannot be evaluated independent of platform architecture (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Pressure from commercial sources was identified as the third major influence. The works of Su et al. (2023) focus on the presentation of athletes through the lens of the name, image, and likeness economy as a commercial product, where realness gets exploited for commercialisation while Rogstad et al. (2024) demonstrates through

a case of activist self-presentation, in this case, the support of LGBTIQA+ rights, that such a portrayal can result in audience disapproval. This reveals the conflict between commercial viability and authentic self-expression. Overall, these two contributions reveal how gender, platform, and commercial motives interact as factors that influence the effectiveness of a self-presentation strategy at the personal level, the target audience, and with how much one is exposed to the danger of having a bad reputation.

In terms of methodology, the corpus is most prominently represented by content analysis of visual and textual posts, which have mostly been cross-sectional and centred on a few elite athletes who frequently appear in the media (de Rezende Costa & Hallmann, 2022; Johnson et al., 2023; Lopes & Nagel, 2024). This focus provides a very detailed account but at the same time restricts the ability to make causal deductions and limits the extent to which findings can be applied more generally. Only a few research papers go further woods et al. (2023) adopt a longitudinal approach in order to trace change over time, Bigsby e al. (2019) show the analytical power of computational text mining on a large scale, whereas Su et al. (2023) combine survey and qualitative data to establish how a message is presented to an audience. Thus, although cross-sectional content analysis remains an essential tool in the field, the development over the years clearly indicates an increase in the scale of the samples, the depth of the temporal perspective, and multimethods triangulation.

Very basically, relying too much on Instagram (and a little bit on Twitter) to study athletes' social media behavior makes new platforms like TikTok less of a subject of study. On the other hand, focus on Western, predominantly female, elite athletes limits the extent to which findings can be applied to contexts that are characterized by male, amateur, non-Western players and paralympic sports. The framework provided is a coherent one but it is unevenly used as Goffmanian dramaturgy gets frequently referenced, while branding, uses-and-gratifications, and parasocial are less systematically employed

Different fields or literatures adjacent to our discipline help support the idea of blending different areas to gain new insights and learnings. Research into general & comparative influencer cultures (Caro-Castaño, 2022), narrative authenticity as a platform directive (Georgakopoulou, 2022), and how the social self is shaped online by filtering & context-collapse dynamics (Kini et al., 2022) give rise to concepts that have direct application to athletes' self-presentation but are hardly ever brought up or cited by sports scholars. Work from related areas on identity construction of gaming content creators (White, 2024), "momfluencers" (Mukherjee & Satapathy, 2025), entrepreneurial lifestyle influencers (Balishyan & Kompatsiaris, 2023), and collective identity making of niche communities (Maskell, 2023) show once again that the processes documented for athletes are only specific manifestations of the larger, digital self-presentation processes and that a sport-specific knowledge base would greatly profit from a systematic conversation with these diverse areas of research.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that the athletic self in cyberspace remains a never-ending show of performances, a strategically crafted, and a commercially motivated one at that, where various identities are negotiated for different and algorithm-orchestrate audiences. The finding that intimacy backstage can outperform promotion frontstage (Bae et al., 2026) repeatedly shows the value of the online presence of athletes to be less in the polished endorsement, but more in the perception of authentic access, an insight that refraims branding as relationship management rather than broadcast.

Theoretically, synthesis validates existing theories and also adds new elements. It reveals how the drama-like approach of Goffman (1959) and the explanation of self-presentation by Leary and Kowalski (1990) can be seen as having explanatory force through a new lens, showing at the same time that "context collapse" causes athletes to act before merged audiences as frameworks predicted but did not detail completely (Marwick & boyd, 2011). It also indicates to what degree personality and social identification theories are mutually exclusive or rather, as in this case, supportive, jointly giving an account of the way the personal, role identity and the belonging to the social group result in an athlete image (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Essentially, these results provide practical insight. Athletes and their advisors can take from this that, along with the authenticity backstage material generates for the viewer, the timing factor between audience focus during the event and the risk of damaging the public persona through protest all together mean a strategic approach that is tailored rather than a general mass promotion (Rogstad et al., 2024; Taniyev et al., 2022). Coaches, and sports recruiters will find it very useful that the correlation between online impression management and offline effects is evident, therefore they should treat social media ability as a part of their athlete development program (Bigsby et al., 2019). As a result, a new trend that allows authentic and high quality co-produced human-AI campaigns could beat the traditional endorsement for marketers as they are currently able, with the help of artificial intelligence, to co-create very creative personalized campaigns through human-AI co-production

Putting this work next to previous reviews, this synthesis extends Xu's (2026) scoping work beyond descriptive mapping to a question-centered, theory-based integration. At the same time it coincides with a range

of digital identity interpretations outside the field we are mainly looking at (Gurya et al., 2025). The biggest contradiction found so far in the field is about sexuality and gender: while the standard scientific work sees presenting oneself sexually as a harm one has to resist, data that the work of people gets them paid show that such presentation is actually rewarded (Lopes & Nagel, 2025); this conflicting situation is the best explanation of the different views between platform reward systems and values of equity.

There are at least three research gaps. One of them is a lack of causal designs and longitudinal studies that can follow how self-presentation strategies change and what results they bring over time. Two, people living in the East, male athletes, amateur sportsmen, and para-athletes are still very few which makes the generalizability of the results questionable. Three, very little has been done on identifying the psychological outcomes of continuous identity work on the cyber-net, Ergün (2025) already foresaw this, but the topic continues to be highly unexplored by researchers as compared to issues of a more commercial nature within the area.

Of course, there are still limits to the study. The use of an only database (Scopus) could have left out some good papers in other databases; the limitation to English-only excludes potentially significant non-English scholarship; and the deliberate inclusion of only ten top-quality studies has increased the depth, but at the expense of the breadth.

Future research is mainly focused on three main aspects: one is multi-platform longitudinal studies especially ones involving TikTok that connect presentation strategy to the change in audience and wellbeing outcomes; second is a conscious diversification of sampling across gender, level of competition, and location, including non-Western sports cultures (Leng et al., 2025; Terason & Pahasing, 2025); and third is understanding how self-presentation is changing as algorithms and AI co-authoring athletic selfies become more prevalent (Westerbeek, 2025). In a nutshell, RQ1 is supported by the fact that sportspeople have many, negotiated identities that change; RQ2 is based on the presence of a recognizable set of strategies of regional management and temporal calibration; RQ3 is supported by how gender, platform, and commercial pressure are moderators that interact.

Comparison with Previous Literature

The present findings are broadly consistent with previous reviews examining digital identity and online self-presentation. Xu (2026) emphasized the increasing complexity of athletes' digital identity but primarily provided descriptive evidence. In contrast, the present review integrates identity theory, impression management, and personal branding into a single analytical framework. Similarly, Guraya et al. (2025) reported fragmentation across communication and sport management literature, whereas this review demonstrates how these theoretical perspectives converge within athlete-centered social media practices. Harris and Brison (2023) highlighted the growing commercialization of athlete identity, which is further supported by the present synthesis showing that authenticity and commercial branding coexist rather than operate as opposing constructs.

Methodological Implications

The reviewed literature reveals several methodological strengths. Most studies employed systematic content analysis and robust qualitative coding procedures, providing detailed insights into athlete self-presentation. However, several methodological limitations remain. First, Instagram dominates the existing evidence, while TikTok, YouTube, and emerging platforms remain underexplored. Second, most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference regarding identity development over time. Third, the overwhelming focus on elite Western athletes reduces the generalizability of findings to amateur athletes, para-athletes, and non-Western contexts. Finally, because this review was restricted to English-language publications indexed in Scopus, publication and language bias cannot be completely excluded.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications. Athletes should strategically balance authentic and commercial content to strengthen long-term audience engagement while preserving credibility. Coaches and sport organizations should incorporate digital identity management into athlete development programs because online self-presentation increasingly influences recruitment, sponsorship, and public reputation. Sport marketers may also use these findings to design branding strategies that prioritize authenticity over excessive commercial promotion. Finally, governing bodies should develop ethical guidelines supporting responsible athlete engagement across rapidly evolving digital platforms.

Study Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, only the Scopus database was searched, which may have excluded relevant studies indexed elsewhere. Second, only English-language publications were included, introducing potential language bias. Third, the included studies employed heterogeneous research designs, populations, and

measurement approaches, limiting direct comparability. Finally, the dominance of Instagram-focused studies indicates potential platform bias that should be addressed in future research.

Conclusions

Despite the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies-including qualitative content analysis, quantitative surveys, computational approaches, and mixed-methods designs-the PRISMA-guided thematic synthesis enabled the identification of consistent patterns across the evidence base. Mapping each research question to its supporting primary studies further strengthens the transparency and traceability of the review findings. This review paper summarized ten studies listed in Scopus journal that aim of figuring out how athletes create a sports identity and communicate their image on social media through what they publish online. The paper mainly discusses three research questions: firstly, it argues that athletes have no one single self to represent their personality but instead, they create a repertoire of personalities and social identities that are negotiated or chosen, that is, they activate identities based on context or the audience they imagine they are writing or posting for. These identities include being a sportsperson, oneself as a person, and in some cases, roles like being a mother, gender-related roles, or group-related roles. Secondly, the paper states that athletes utilize a consistent strategic repertoire which is based on the ideas of backstage and frontstage regions put forward by Goffman. According to this strategy, posting authentic backstage content and regulating the timing of the posting is what works very well, whereas, regardless of the monetization factor, self-branding is nearly universal. Thirdly, it was found that gender, platform affordances and commercial incentives are not independent influences as these three function as interacting moderators that determine not only which of the communication strategies will work but also what reputational and personal cost will have to be borne for implementing them. One great achievement of the paper has been its ability to offer a theoretically coherent PRISMA-based summary that ties together the previously compartmentalized constructs of self-presentation, impression management, athletic identity, and personal branding in the form of a single explanatory framework. In practice, these results help sportsmen and sportswomen, coaches, and marketers alike by providing them with an evidence-based guidance which strongly recommends using one's real identity, planning the posting times as part of the overall strategy, and mastering the use and understanding of the features of the available social media platforms. The major limitation of this study is that it only looked at an English-language, single-database corpus and selected samples so as to maximize analytical depth but at the expense of breadth of coverage. Apart from these limitations, the paper has also revealed some areas that have not been sufficiently addressed before so it gives a clear direction for future research. A future research agenda would probably consist of longitudinal, cross-platform, demographically and geographically diverse studies also looking into the effects on wellbeing of the athletic self as depicted and expressed online.

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