

# ESMQ 2020 Special Issue Workshop: Exploring New Routes within Brand Research in Sport Management

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## **Influencer Marketing: The New Role of Athletes as Human Brands**

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### **Aim**

In 2017, digital spending (\$209 billion worldwide) eclipsed TV (Kafka & Molla 2017). This important statistic signals the long predicted “death” of advertising but it also signals the robustness of direct and bi-directional communication on the Internet. More subtly, this statistic ushers in and solidifies the role of a host of content providers. While vestiges of traditional media are found, most of the new content and related advertising orients to “influencers.” Athletes are prominent among these new “human brands” (Parmentier & Fischer 2012) but who they are, how they influence and what is their potential to up-end other marketing platforms such as sport sponsorship? This paper presents a conceptual model of the athlete influencer as a human brand and discusses the implications of this new role.

### **Theoretical Background**

Research on celebrity endorsers has given way to research on influencers but no new theoretical frameworks have been advanced. This stems in part from the fact, that past literature encompassed many influencers, for example, athletes and entertainers have always been discussed as celebrity endorsers (Erdogan 1999). Research in the area focuses on three endorser characteristics -- trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Ohanian 1990); and one central task, matching the spokesperson and brand (Wright 2016). Under the “match-up” hypothesis, only celebrities that are in keeping with the image of the brand would be successful endorsers (Kamins 1990).

An Influencer is “a person or group of people who possess greater than average advantage potential to influence due to attributions such as frequency of communication, personal persuasiveness or size of and centrality to a social network” (WOM Association). Research considering the value that athletes receive in terms of pay, has been linked to both their performance (similar to expertise) but also to their popularity in terms of social media followers (Kottemann 2018). Influencer impact stems from authority, knowledge, position and/or a special relationship with their audience, or popularity.

### **Conceptual Model**

Proposed here is a new theoretical model that seeks to understand influencer marketing in terms of audience impact (cognitive, affective or behavioral change). One key to this model is where the locus of power or control sits. With traditional sponsorship or celebrity marketing, the brand retains both of those. With influencer marketing, in contrast, it is the individual (as influencer) who dominates the relationship with audience members and consumers. Beyond this distinction, there is the contrast between micro (those with a tight orientation to a topic and a small following) and macro influencers (those able to comment broadly with a large following), which creates a four-box influencer model that looks at both orientation and realm of influence. The four quadrants of the model are Brand Centric-Micro (e.g., brand

ambassadors), Brand Centric- Macro (traditional celebrity endorsers), Human Centric- Micro (bloggers), and Human Centric-Macro (universal influencers). Each type can effect change in the audience/consumer.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The Brand-Centric/ Human Centric and the Macro/Micro distinctions of this conceptual frame give credence to the arising importance in practice of micro influencers such as bloggers and brand ambassadors. The distinctions also respond to the arising non-celebrity influencers that do not hold traditional celebrity status. It opens discussion and research regarding how established structures will deal with the new power and control that micro and macro influencers exert.

This conceptual framework also questions the established characteristics sought in an endorser: trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise. This conceptual frame demonstrates that the dimension of popularity is needed. As well, it questions the role of match between a brand and an influencer as central and brings forward the role that the audience/consumer holds with the influencer.

While the implications of new influencers play out in many industries such as fashion and food, nowhere are they more important than in sport. The dominant communications platform in sport for decades has been sponsorship of teams, leagues and events. Individuals have been sponsored and are ever more so, but the new role they play as independent marketing and communications channels already threatens some aspects of the traditional sponsorship model.

Today's athlete influencers in social media typically manage much of their own communications. They "own" their brand in an entirely new way that is highly contextualized with myriad interactions with audiences, organizations, events, media and other influencers. As athletes expand their influence, they, as other influencers, appear to be up ending current models of communication. One central value to the current model is that it acknowledges the ascendance of human-centric influence. Influencers may be employed by a brand at the micro or macro level or at both levels relative to a communications campaign, but no matter the strategic employment of influencers, they are a direct challenge to traditional models of communication.

### **References**

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