LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Congruence Between an Athlete's Public Image and a Brand's Identity in Attracting New Customers and Retaining Existing Ones

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ABSTRACT

Brands often spend a significant amount of money on athlete endorsements, and whether an endorsement is a success is ambiguous without a specific standard. This literature review looks at how perceived congruence between an athlete's public image and a brand's identity may differ in attracting new customers and retaining existing ones. There are four frameworks that build the foundation of the review: the Source Credibility Model, the TEARS Model, Meaning Transfer Theory, and the Brand Equity Model. A Match-Up Hypothesis is also utilized, along with interviews, studies, and real-life examples. For attracting new customers, congruence helps by allowing the customers to assess the product or service with a minimum amount of knowledge and identify the brand. On the other hand, for retaining existing ones, the endorsers' initial image is not considered important, and how the brand controls its long-term relationship with the athlete is crucial. Although there are some studies that separately discuss acquisition and retention, and none that compare them directly, this literature review will attempt to examine the role of congruence in both.

Keywords Athlete Endorsement; Brand Congruence; Acquisition; Retention

Introduction

In 2016, companies paid approximately $924 million in endorsement fees to top athletes globally (Välkkynen, 2017). Athlete endorsement has become one of the main marketing strategies companies use to communicate with customers (Välkkynen, 2017). However, some athlete endorsements fail while others succeed. For instance, a successful athlete endorsement would be Nike's partnership with Michael Jordan, as it was predicted to generate $3 million in the first year, but generated 40 times more, of $126 million (Feder, 2023). Conversely, an unsuccessful athlete endorsement would be Nike's 20-year partnership with Tiger Woods, as even with the long-lasting relationship, Nike announced its exit from the market in 2016 after the sales in the golf segment decreased to $706 million (Reuters, 2016). Failed or unsatisfied athlete endorsement is prevalent, as approximately 20% of advertisements with endorsers fail to meet the goals and expectations the companies establish (Boyd & Koernig, 2009). However, it is ambiguous to define a successful endorsement with certain standards. An endorsement can be regarded as successful because it enabled the brand to acquire new customers or because it built loyalty for the existing customers; however, these two measures of success have not yet been directly compared and contrasted in the literature. The difference is important to examine because an athlete sponsorship that entices new customers but cannot retain them, and an endorsement that attracts fewer new customers but only maintains the existing ones, could be shown equally successful with a single measure of success.

Brand Identity is the dispositions, objectives, and values that give brands their own uniqueness, which can be created by the directors or athletes (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Brand identity can be broken down into six factors: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image, which are all related to decisions brands make to create a certain image towards the audience (Kapferer, 1997). In contrast, brand image is the attributes and values made by the customers of the brands rather than the people providing the products, which can be subjective, but accurate, as it is how others perceive the brand (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Congruence is the concept that combines brand identity and brand image, which is a fit between the image directors and athletes intend to convey and what consumers perceive (Madhavaram et al., 2005). This paper will analyze athlete endorsement through the lens of these three noninterchangeable concepts. The main relationship examined in this review is the congruence between the athlete and the brand: how the endorsers' public image matches the brand's identity.

The other two congruence relationships are utilized to support the central relationship. One of them is Athlete identity and image congruence, which is how the endorser wants to be seen by the public and how the public truly perceives them (Linsner et al., 2021; Sotiriadou et al., 2025). This correlation is important because a brand may partner with endorsers whose projected image aligns with its own, but customers may perceive them differently. The difference may cause ineffective athlete endorsement. The other relationship is the self-image congruence, which is how customers perceive themselves and how they perceive the average customer of the brand, to check whether the endorsers' promotion can truly be effective for the customers (Kwak & Kang, 2009).

Athlete endorsement is widely used by brands to shape how they want to be viewed by the public. It is effective because the athlete's image becomes integrated into the brand in two distinct ways, the managers from the brand contemplating and choosing an athlete that parallels with the image they want to be viewed as

(De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998), and consumers engaging with the athlete and consider the image of the endorser as the image of the brand, shaping how the brand is viewed by the public (McCracken, 1989). An endorser is a celebrity or a well-known individual who uses the fame gained from the professional field towards advertising by appearing in it (McCracken, 1989). Not only do companies have to pay the athletes for endorsing the brand, but they also have to create a marketing strategy centered on them. The significant scale is also evident in Nike, as it spent around 10% of its annual revenue on marketing expenses, which consisted of athlete endorsements for five years until 2016 (Välkkynen, 2017). However, as the investment is considerable, returns can also be substantial. Recently, Formula One Driver Charles Leclerc's partnership with Puma in 2024 and sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson's collaboration with Nike both demonstrate how the impact of athlete endorsement perpetuates (Juusola, 2025).

Examining previous literature reviews and research, some papers have dealt with the congruence between the brand's image and the athlete's image, but they rarely examine acquiring new customers versus retaining existing ones. Although few studies truly try to relate the brand and the athlete, they merely examine a single firm, a single athlete, or a few participants from a survey (Hennayake, 2017, Sri Lanka; Okorie & Agbaleke, 2017, Nigeria; Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016, Serbia; Juusola, 2025, Finland). Few studies directly investigate the effect of athlete endorsement factors, such as brand recognition, willingness to purchase, perceived value, and loyalty, on acquiring new customers versus maintaining existing ones.

Therefore, this research paper investigates the factors that impact the effectiveness of athlete endorsement on customer acquisition versus customer retention. Specifically, this research paper examines the role of brand image and athlete image, and the relationship between these factors, on attracting and retaining customers.

Theoretical Frameworks For Endorsement Effectiveness

For the purposes of this research, the effectiveness of athlete endorsement will be examined through four theoretical models: the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953), the TEARS model (Shimp, 2003, 2010), Meaning Transfer Theory (McCracken, 1989), and the Brand Equity Model (Aaker, 1991, 1996). Each theory uniquely examines the factors contributing to effective athlete endorsement. This section compares the theories before examining brand congruence and how acquisition differs from retention.

Source Credibility Model

The Source Credibility Model was developed by Hovland et al. (1953) to research the psychological implications of persuasion and communication. They identified that when conveying or advertising a product or a service, the two most important attributes are expertise and trustworthiness to establish its perceived credibility. Consequently, the credibility can decide whether the conveyance was enticing or not (Hovland et al., 1953). Another author, Carroll (2008), also specified credibility similarly, defining it as the extent to which the receiver perceives whether the advertisement is unbiased or not.

The Source Credibility Model emphasizes "trustworthiness" as the fundamental trait. O'Mahony and Meenaghan (1997) treat trustworthiness of the advertisement as what separates an effective endorsement from an ineffective one, and the absence of it can lead to a failure in changing consumers' perception towards a product or a service. Trustworthiness was described by Erdogan (1999), who claims that it is the customers' awareness of the celebrity endorser's sincerity and reliability. Another important trait was expertise, which is the endorsers' professionalism, understanding, and aptitude in the product or service, and when demonstrated well, can be more effective than demonstrating trustworthiness in endorsements (Ohanian, 1991). A key point of this model is that the effectiveness of endorsements is described by how effective they are at persuading or changing a customer's perception of a product or service to encourage purchase

Tears Model

Whereas the Source Credibility Model has credibility as the main attribute, the TEARS model adds attractiveness when assessing the effectiveness of the endorsement (Shimp, 2003,2010). The TEARS is an acronym that includes trustworthiness, expertise, physical attractiveness, respect, and similarity (Shimp 2003, 2010). Shimp (2003, 2010) suggested that attractiveness is a high-level factor that is influenced by respect and similarity. Attractiveness can be very effective and can provide a better evaluation than credibility for the promotion and the brand (Kahle & Homer, 1985). The respect from the TEARS refers to the appreciation of the athlete's achievements, and similarity refers to how the endorser and customer share demographic or practical features (Shimp 2003, 2010). Seno and Lukas (2007) tried to differentiate credibility and attractiveness from brand-promoter congruency and how the advertisement is initiated and progressed in the actual market. Although the source credibility model focused on the trust and reliability of the advertisement, the TEARS model also focuses on the affability when describing endorsement effectiveness, such as how the customers admire and want to be like the athlete.

Meaning Transfer Theory

McCracken (1989) argued that the two preceding models were not effective enough at evaluating endorsement effectiveness, as some credible and attractive athletes succeeded while others did not (Cohoon et al., 2007). Meaning Transfer Theory suggests that the endorser is a distinctive figure constructed by differences in gender, age, character, and other characteristics, and the significance created by it moves from the athlete to the product and to the consumer (McCracken, 1989). Unlike the preceding models, this theory focuses on how effectively the intended significance transfers from the endorser to the product or the service. Rather than examining the shift in the customer's perception and decision to purchase, the theory examines the transformation of meanings between the athlete and the consumers.

Brand Equity Model

The Brand Equity Model examines the results of the athlete endorsement. According to Aaker (1991), the model can be divided into four categories: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, and effective endorsement should enhance one of these. Unlike the source credibility model and the TEARS model, the Brand Equity model claims that even though the endorser may be credible and attractive, if the athlete fails to influence the purchase or loyalty

of the brand, the endorsement may be considered ineffective (Feder, 2023). Even though the four categories are not separated by customer type, brand awareness and associations are related to enticing new customers since customers know nothing about the brand initially, and perceived quality and brand loyalty are related to retaining original customers since they are the factors that make customers want to become loyal to the brand.

Understanding Endorsement Effectiveness

All of these models suggest that endorsement effectiveness cannot be defined with a single trait, it should be interpreted and understood based on multiple variables. They all examine different aspects of the acquisition and retention relationship. The first two models, the Source Credibility Model and the TEARS model, focus on attracting new customers, as they illustrate first impressions, or how customers perceive the endorsement in the first place. Next, the Meaning Transfer Model explains how the public image of the athlete progressively integrates into the brand's image, connecting initial perception with long-term relationships. Lastly, the Brand Equity Model focuses on the results of the endorsement, and how it can be measured with brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. However, the models cannot solely identify whether the endorsement is focused on acquisition or retention, which will be further explored in Section 2.

When applied to real life, rather than the four frameworks working separately, they can be used within a single endorsement, but at different phases. When deciding whether a candidate for the endorsement is suitable or not, firms can use the source credibility model and the TEARS model, checking expertise, trustworthiness, and likability (Välkkynen, 2017). When the endorsement becomes more complex and long-term, meaning transfer theory can become applicable, exemplified by how Nike and Michael Jordan's endorsement led to Jordan establishing his own brand within Nike (Feder, 2023; Välkkynen, 2017). The example demonstrates how the athlete can progressively add value to the brand, impacting the loyal customers after the initial impression. To test whether the partnership is producing the intended outcomes and changing the perception of customers, a brand equity model can be utilized, as demonstrated by Puma signing with Formula One driver Charles Leclerc in 2024 (Juusola, 2025).

Congruence And The Match-Up Hypothesis

The Match-Up Hypothesis can be considered as an extension of the source models explained in the first section. The Hypothesis was suggested by Kamins (1990), indicating that in order for an endorsement to be effective, the endorser's image should align with the product or service's image, harmonizing between the athlete and the brand itself. It is closely related to the TEARS model's attractiveness, but whereas the TEARS model considers attractiveness merely as one of the attributes of credibility, the Match-Up Hypothesis considers attractiveness as a relative concept, connecting how the athlete's image suits the brand's image (Shimp, 2003, 2010; Kamins, 1990).

Therefore, high congruence would mean the athlete matches the brand's image well, but low congruence would mean the attractiveness of the athlete in relation to the brand falls (Lee & Koo, 2015). The source credibility proposes that credibility cannot ensure change in customers' perception, which is very similar (Hovland et al., 1953). Extending the Match-Up Hypothesis, Mukherjee claims that the effect of endorsement multiplies when the endorsement is made from symbolic brands compared to functional brands (Mukherjee, 2009).

The Gap Between Brand Identity and Brand Image

The match-up hypothesis is necessary for assessing an effective endorsement, but Linsner et al. (2021) found an unyielding gap in it, which relates to Aaker's (1991) brand equity model. Linsner et al.'s (2021) literature review reviewed about 63 articles published since 1999 and found that most of them separate brand identity (what the athlete wants to be perceived) from brand image (how the customers perceive the athlete and the brand), which is what Aaker uses in the brand equity model as brand associations (Linsner et al., 2021). Out of those 63 articles, only three of them addressed both the brand identity and brand image (Linsner et al., 2021). As Linsner et al. (2021) argue, the Match-Up Hypothesis is only effective when both of the perspectives, the athlete's image and the customer's image of the athlete, are evaluated together, so assessing the congruence is the next step for the firms to take in terms of endorsement (Linsner et al., 2021).

To address the gap between how athletes want to be perceived and how customers perceive the athlete, Sotiriadou et al. (2025) developed a testing method called athlete brand congruence, which practically measures the congruence between brand image and brand identity. Using the Athlete Brand Identity Scale created by Linsner et al. (2020), professional athletes from Australia and 794 customers were tested based on athletic morality, fan involvement, athletic success, and character attributes. The results were compared to Euclidean Distance measurements, scores more than 0.70 meaning high congruence (Musante et al., 1999). The results were successful, as four athletes scored high congruence, while one athlete received a score of 0.67 due to fan involvement (Sotiriadou et al., 2025). Fan involvement can be related to retaining existing customers, but because customer behavior was not considered, a low score for this attribute does not necessarily mean that one athlete's endorsement failed to maintain existing fans. Although some people may argue that the discrepancy comes from athletes overvaluing themselves, it was not the case for this testing, as customers sometimes gave higher scores to the athlete than the athlete rated themselves, meaning the gap between brand identity and brand image can occur from both the athletes' side and the consumers' side (Sotiriadou et al., 2025). This test implemented a different approach, evaluating both perspectives in athlete endorsement. Because the study examines the relationship between the athlete's persona and image, its significance to the congruence between the endorser and the brand is indirect. When a brand partners with an athlete, it expects a certain identity, but the only important factor transferred to the sponsoring company is how customers perceive the endorser (McCracken, 1989). Thus, a disparity between the athlete's identity and the brand may mean that the endorser's image as perceived by customers was not initially intended.

Different Interpretations of Congruence

Congruence can also be thought of on the customers' side, addressing the harmony between how the consumers perceive themselves and how the consumers perceive an ordinary buyer of the brand, which is similar to McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Theory that primarily focuses on the consumer. The

congruence is called self-image congruence, and Kwak and Kang (2009) claimed that, consistent with a dimension of the Brand Equity Model, the harmony between the two could lead to better perceived quality and willingness to buy the product and service from the brand (Kwak & Kang, 2009).

Gwinner and Bennett (2008) also reported findings related to the Match-Up Hypothesis. How manifest and clear the brand's image is already, and the consumers' personal connection with the brand can help anticipate how well a specific event relates to the sponsor, which leads to better perception of the company and more purchases. This also relates to the source credibility model as the final result is persuasion (Hovland et al., 1953). A clear and established brand image can increase the consumer's positive perception towards the fit between the event and the brand because customers can remember its connection with the sponsor and the advertised product or service more easily (Anderson, 1983).

Thus, the Match-Up Hypothesis and the related congruence theories demonstrate how the concept of congruence cannot be seen as a single perceptible attribute in athlete endorsement but an aggregation of different perspectives, such as the sponsor, the brand itself, consumers, and relationships between them. Relating to the models in section 1, the endorser-brand correlation conforms with the source-based models, the perception of consumers conforms with the meaning transfer model, and the fit between the sponsor and the event conforms to the Brand Equity Model. These different perspectives and relationships may transmit different meanings, in terms of attracting new customers or maintaining existing ones.

Effect On Customer Acquisition

Various literature reviews put emphasis on attractiveness from the TEARS model and how consumers perceive athletic performance when attracting new customers through athlete endorsement. Feder (2023) conducted a survey of 90 consumers, and about 40% of them said that the physical attractiveness of the endorser could lead to purchasing the advertised product, and about 33% disagreed with this. Also, about 42% of the customers said high-performing athletes lead to higher-quality products, whereas 31% did not agree, which closely correlates with perceived quality in the Brand Equity Model by Aaker (1991) and the endorsers' performance affecting purchase in the source credibility model (Feder, 2023). Feder's survey also revealed that a little more than half of the participants considered sponsored products to have superior physical appearance to other brands, and about 59% of them considered the products to help them blend with their friends (Feder, 2023). The results concern initial attractiveness and perceived quality, so they are more about acquiring new customers than retaining existing ones, despite the fact that the survey examined the perceptions rather than past spending.

Unfamiliarity in Acquisition

Consistent with how the Source Credibility Model predicts the effectiveness through the expertise of the athlete, the concept of unfamiliarity is important in understanding athlete endorsement besides attractiveness and perceived performance. In Juusola's (2025) qualitative study, respondents tend to strongly rely on how the sponsored athlete presents the product when they have no knowledge in that sport, and less so when they have expertise in that field. Specifically, one respondent demonstrated the correlation by comparing an unfamiliar sneaker with skiing gear, arguing how people typically consider the brand that is sponsored by an athlete to give a minimum level of satisfaction, choosing Fischer or Rossignol gears from other brands (Interview 3, as cited in Juusola, 2025). A respondent who is a gymnastics instructor also gave a similar opinion, asserting that people make decisions on their own when they have expertise in the sport and the product, whereas they strongly rely on brand sponsorship when they are novices (Interview 4, as cited in Juusola, 2025). As such, Juusola's survey on six respondents revealed how unfamiliarity plays a crucial role in making people rely strongly on promotional partnerships when a new customer purchases an unknown product.

Attention, Recognition, and Identification

Dugalić and Lazarević (2016) explain the other two acquisition-related factors, which are attention and brand awareness. In their survey of 314 participants, 61.81% of them showed more interest in star athletes, and 63.34% said the athlete endorsement assists them in recognizing the brand (Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016). As both of the factors are related to increasing the awareness of the brand, they are closely tied to acquiring new customers rather than retaining existing ones through brand loyalty or benefits. However, the respondents did not agree on the fact that attention and brand recognition lead to actual purchase, as only about 2 out of 5 participants agreed on that. Recognition can lead to attracting customers because consumers should know about the brand before any purchases, but before it leads to actual buying, consumers go through evaluation and compare it with competitors based on their preferences. Therefore, the disparity represents how, even though consumers recognize the brand, it does not convert to actual purchases at these stages. The results are related to similarity and respect in the TEARS model. The purpose of athlete endorsement is to induce consumers to follow the endorsed athlete and be like them, which is especially effective among the teenage audience, who regard the athletes as idols (Nyakado, 2013). The concept can be considered identification as the consumers desire to be identified as the endorsed athlete. The endorsement is particularly effective among the young audience, as older consumers tend to have fixed purchase habits, which should be evaluated by retaining existing consumers rather than identification, which relies on initial impressions.

Effect On Customer Retention And Loyalty

Section 3 focused on how initial impression, attractiveness, and perceived performance can entice new customers, whereas this section is about maintaining existing customers with concepts such as brand loyalty. Although consumers' favorite endorser promotes the product, Feder's survey revealed that 63.33% of the participants would not pay more because of it (Feder, 2023). Also, even though the consumers' favorite athlete promotes another brand, 57.78% would not change their purchase habits, whereas 41.11% would (Feder, 2023). About half of the participants were also skeptical of the endorsers' actual passion and affection for the product they are endorsing, and respondents think that athletes promote the product because they receive compensation. That is to say, respondents think that endorsed athletes do not utilize the product they promote (Tripp et al., 1994). As such, these results indicate that the factors that acquire new customers, such as attractiveness, may be less effective at retaining existing customers and endorsers since respondents would not simply change their purchase habits solely because a

certain athlete is promoting it. Also, these are intentions, not behaviors.

Long-Term Trust and Reduced Perceived Risk

Retention and customer loyalty may increase when the endorsement relationship lasts long and demonstrates genuineness. This is evident in Juusola's (2025) qualitative study, as respondents believe long-term endorsements are more effective and credible than short-term ones. As one of the respondents claims, the short-term endorsement is not as effective and trustworthy because consumers know that the athletes are promoting the product because they are receiving compensation (Interview 1, as cited in Juusola, 2025). Another respondent also believes that short-term endorsements are not shown as genuine, and they are done due to the financial rewards the athletes get. The same respondents believe that their risk of buying is lower when the brand is prominent and credible, giving examples of them purchasing Wilson tennis gear over other brands because the brand is famous and a renowned athlete, Federer, promotes it. In addition, they would purchase Fischer skis over other ski brands because the products were exposed on television (Juusola, 2025). The participants' interviews reveal how, rather than initial impression and attractiveness, a lasting endorsement relationship will increase retention and brand loyalty as credibility is built over time (Guan et al., 2021). Credibility provides a reason for customers to become loyal and to keep buying products from the brand, but Juusola's (2025) study examined quality and risk perceptions rather than continued purchasing.

Attraction Versus Loyalty

As previously explored, retention-related endorsement factors and acquisition-related ones may operate differently. Retention-related factors test whether the customers would keep buying from the brand, whereas acquisition-related factors are what entice consumers to the brand initially. Factors like attractiveness, unfamiliarity, perceived quality, and brand awareness rapidly entice new customers, and Dugalić and Lazarević's (2016) participants argued that these factors do not lead to actual purchase. Retention-related factors are similar, but different to some extent, as Feder's survey demonstrated that a favorite athlete's endorsement alone would not lead to a change in purchasing habits. Moreover, Juusola's respondents demonstrated that long-term endorsement relationships can build trust and decrease the risk of buying an unknown product, but to a limited extent. From the acquisition's side, this disparity can directly address the research question, as the harmonization between the endorsers and the brand's image can entice new customers and build initial endorsement relationships. On the other hand, from the retention side, maintaining customers and building trust requires a long-term relationship between the endorser, the customer, and the brand, and credibility cannot be built in a short time, like a simple, temporary sponsorship.

Risk, Scandal, And Brand Image Stability

How brands handle athlete disgrace and scandal can provide further evaluation of the disparity between acquisition and retention. This is because brands handle athlete scandals in order to recover existing relationships with customers by protecting and explaining their own stance, not to gain new customers. A well-known example is how Nike handled incidents with Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. In 2009, when Tiger Woods was sponsored by Nike, he was involved in a personal scandal. However, Nike's response was not expected, and along with the cofounder Phil Knight, it decided to support him, announcing that the scandal would not have substantial consequences (Välkkynen, 2017). Nevertheless, when Nike's other athlete, Lance Armstrong, was implicated in doping in 2012, it immediately rescinded the contract as it damaged Nike's brand image (Välkkynen, 2017). Employees from Nike's marketing team asserted in Välkkynen's (2017) interview that the difference in the result of the scandal was due to the nature of the issue, one being personal and the other being professional. According to the interviewees, the discrepancy came from the fact that doping is simple to identify, and doping was presented as a more clearly identifiable violation, but with Tiger Woods, it was less straightforward to assess (Välkkynen, 2017). From the consumers' perspective, the discrepancy was also clear, as they acknowledged that doping can be exposed very easily, whereas the scandal with Tiger Woods was not directly related to his sports field (Välkkynen, 2017). As such, when a public dishonor is not apparently related to the athlete's professional field, consumers will not criticize them as much as those that are directly related (Bednall & Collings, 2000). Nonetheless, there is some evidence that consumers may not be affected by the type of scandals when criticizing (Till & Shimp, 1998).

Risk Management Tools

Rather than examining individual athlete scandals, systematic literature reviews determine different risk management tools brands use to minimize the effect of endorser scandals. When brands decide to conduct athlete endorsement with an endorser, they have morality and termination provisions, so that when a scandal occurs, rather than renegotiating the contract, they can terminate the endorsement relationship (Zarriello, 2015). In addition, rather than initiating an endorsement with only one athlete, recruiting multiple endorsers from various fields can reduce the negative effect of the scandal, which is already evident from several firms with merely one endorser having more negative market consequences than firms with diverse athletes (Bartz et al., 2013). Financially, the share price data reflects the effect of the scandals on Nike, as when Tiger Woods's car accident occurred in December 2009, the stock fell (Knittel & Stango, 2014). On the other hand, when Armstrong's doping report was released, the share price did not show any specific decline and remained at the market level (Välkkynen, 2017). Nike's marketing team saw the risk in brand image as less critical than the financial loss that comes from terminating the contract with the endorsed athlete, as the investment was not returned. However, general managers in the industry argue the opposite, asserting that reputational loss is more difficult to recover than financial risks and should be the risk to prioritize (Gaudenzi et al., 2015).

Why Scandal Management Favors Retention

The tools used to minimize the scandal's negative effect primarily concern retaining existing customers rather than acquisition. For instance, when new customers encounter a product from a brand, they would judge the brand by its appearance and reputation now, not by how the brand managed previous scandals. However, that scandal can also construct the current reputation, so managing it can influence possible customers. On the contrary, extending the contract with Tiger Woods as the congruence between the athlete and the brand remained intact, but terminating it with Lance Armstrong as the

congruence was disrupted. These decisions are intended to maintain and regain trust from the consumers who are already loyal to the brand. Structurally, endorsing various athletes and spreading the negative consequences with them can be effective at maintaining trust from the existing customers. In essence, the congruence between the endorser's image and the brand's image can be more than making the endorsement effective, but can also minimize the negative impact on the brand's image when athlete scandals become public. In contrast, when the congruence is not met properly, the existing customers may leave the brand.

Discussion

This research paper examined how the congruence between the athlete's image and the brand's identity differently affects acquiring new customers and maintaining existing ones. Primarily, it integrated the findings from four key research articles that have not been previously interpreted together: a survey on brand equity (Feder, 2023), athlete endorsement interviews with short-term and long-term time frames (Juusola, 2025), a survey on athlete endorsement factors (Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016), and a study on scandal management (Välkkynen, 2017), in the scope of acquiring new customers versus retaining existing ones. This section discusses these with three different themes: enticing awareness, shaping purchase habits, and maintaining trust.

The studies used different methods but led to similar findings on enticing attention. A survey by Dugalić and Lazarević (2016) showed how celebrity endorsement becomes more effective when a superstar endorses and respondents notice the sponsoring company with that, and Feder's (2023) demonstrated how attractiveness and perceived quality of the athlete decide the initial impression of the brand. Nevertheless, those initial impressions did not ultimately lead to purchases for most respondents, meaning attention can draw customers, but cannot solely lead them to actually buy from the brand.

On shaping purchase habits, the studies provided different insights. Endorsement interviews by Juusola (2025) demonstrated that if consumers have no prior knowledge of the brand, they rely on athlete endorsements to fill in the gap in their knowledge. The surveys included both consumers with little knowledge and a considerable amount of knowledge, so combining these may have been the reason why the first impressions did not lead to purchases for most respondents. The disparity may also be due to the different results each survey measured: Dugalić and Lazarević measured how much initial impressions led to actual buying, Juusola measured the spending decisions behind respondents, and Feder measured how consumers perceived endorsed products and services.

Moreover, for the retention-based findings, Feder's (2023) survey reported how consumers do not change their purchase habits solely because their favorite athlete is partnering with a specific brand. In Juusola's (2025) interview, it separated short-term and long-term endorsements, and claimed that short-term ones are merely for-profit purposes and long-term ones are ideal and effective at retaining customers. Both studies consider credibility differently, but they address different aspects: Feder provided a more holistic view of the endorsement, whereas Juusola compared short-term and long-term endorsements. Both studies illustrated how loyalty does not build from a single endorsement, rather consistent relationships and credibility may be required.

Lastly, the scandal management of Nike in maintaining the partnership with Tiger Woods but ending the contract with Lance Armstrong (Välkkynen, 2017) demonstrates how congruence may involve ongoing management of the relationship. In essence, these results demonstrate a consistent trend. For acquisition, attractiveness and perceived quality are important, and for retention, building a long-term relationship and managing it is essential.

Limitations

Although the results were explicitly explored, there are several limitations. First, the studies and interviews examined in this paper have relatively small samples, such as merely four Nike employees and two scandals (Välkkynen, 2017) and six participants (Juusola, 2025). Even though some studies have large samples, they were part of a broader research, such as 90 participants for the brand equity research (Feder, 2023), 260 audience at multiple basketball games (Kwak & Kang, 2009), and about 300 interviewees for people curious about tennis (Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016). In addition, the studies are focused on a specific geographic area, such as participants in only Finland (Juusola, 2025), Serbia (Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016), Nigeria (Okorie & Agbaleke, 2017), Australia (Sotiriadou et al., 2025), Sri Lanka (Hennayake, 2017), and South Korea (Kwak & Kang, 2009), and no studies have tried to apply the results from one location to another location that may provide insights in how a factor of acquisition or retention can be applied more broadly. The sports dealt with in the studies are focused on commercially

prominent sports that have individual stars, such as basketball, golf, skiing, and tennis. Linsner et al. (2021) mention this limitation, claiming that studies about athlete endorsement merely concentrate on prominent athletes and disregard lesser-known athletes.

Another limitation is the disparity between acquisition and retention. The studies examined did not intend to explore both acquisition and retention, and although one of the studies from Sotiriadou et al. (2025) measures harmonization between an athlete's public image and brand identity, the review only examines five athletes and indirectly relates acquisition and retention. Therefore, the conclusion that the congruence between an athlete's public image and a brand's identity affects acquisition and retention differently is deduced from investigating various studies.

Future Research

The limitations of reviewing those studies can be countered with two future research directions. First, to make a more generalized conclusion and investigation, the research should unify the congruence between athlete image and brand identity into a single measurement with a larger sample across different geographical areas. Secondly, further research should directly address the disparity between obtaining new customers and maintaining existing ones within a single study and also address the congruence between the image of the athlete and the brand, considering factors like brand recognition, loyalty, and change in purchase habits. When future research implements these two, then it will be clear to researchers whether the disparity addressed in this paper represents a relationship warranting further investigation or whether the concepts can be meaningfully compared

Conclusion

In summary, the reviews explored here indicate that the harmonization between an athlete's image and the brand's image does not influence gaining new customers and maintaining existing customers equally. The congruence between the two is instantly necessary for acquiring new customers, as the initial impressions and attracting their attention are important when the brand is trying to entice customers who are not familiar with the brand (Feder, 2023; Juusola, 2025; Dugalić & Lazarević, 2016). On the other hand, maintaining existing customers relies less on the attractiveness and familiarity of the brand and the endorser. Factors like credible perception and the length of the relationship are more important, which can build brand loyalty (Feder, 2023; Juusola, 2025). Managing scandals and public disgrace of the endorsed athlete also may primarily support customer retention, as the firm's decision to continue the endorsement or not is mostly for existing customers (Välkkynen, 2017). Thus, congruence is not a one-time marketing strategy, but rather a lasting relationship that should be continuously managed by the brand to acquire new customers and also retain existing ones. However, because there are not many studies that directly examine the relationship between acquisition and retention, it is not a proven result, but a pattern. The findings are still useful because when athlete endorsement is examined from different aspects, such as attracting new customers and maintaining existing ones, brands can avoid the mistake of withdrawing an endorsement solely because it fails in one of these aspects.

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