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BRANDING STRATEGIES AND MARKETABILITY OF TRACK AND FIELD ATHLETES IN SELECTED ATHLETICS CAMPS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of personal, media, digital, and corporate branding strategies on the marketability of track and field athletes in selected Kenyan athletics camps, addressing their failure to benefit from effective branding despite exemplary global performance. Guided by the Athlete Brand Image theory, supported by the Social Exchange and Excellence theories, the descriptive research design targeted 1013 athletes across five North Rift camps. Data were collected from a sample of 287 athletes plus 10 coaches and managers (n=297) via questionnaires and interviews, achieving a sufficient 71% response rate. Data analysis established that all four branding strategies significantly impact marketability. Media branding demonstrated the most substantial effect, followed by corporate branding. Personal and digital branding also showed significant correlations. The study concluded that media branding is pivotal for enhancing visibility, reputation, and sponsor interest. The study recommended that athletes should focus on building an authentic personal brand by actively engaging fans through storytelling and social media. Critically, athletes should strategically use media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, to boost visibility and reputation, and should leverage digital engagement platforms and influencer marketing to attract sponsors and enhance visibility. Developing robust corporate partnerships and sponsorships is also essential. Future studies should focus on comparative analyses of branding effectiveness between different athletic hubs in Kenya.

Keywords: *Branding strategies, corporate branding, digital branding, marketability, media branding, personal branding.*

INTRODUCTION

The global sports industry has undergone phenomenal and rapid growth, establishing itself as one of the largest sectors with a substantial volume of revenue. This expansion has injected significant professionalism and commercialization, prompting marketers, sportspersons, and agents to strategically capitalize on the burgeoning marketability and commercial opportunities. Athletics, in particular, has witnessed this transformation, with star athletes transitioning into global celebrities and powerful marketing attractions for the world's largest brands and sponsors. This shift has enabled top athletes to generate substantial income off the field through their branding value. As asserted by some scholars, famous athletes have become more than just competitors; they are brands and social signs, carriers of cultural meaning that extend their influence far beyond the sports arena. A robust brand is a critical asset, capable of ushering competitive advantages to a business. In the sporting context, the athlete's good performance, coupled with a

subsequent positive image, plays a paramount role in endorsing a successful brand, leading to the development of a positive Athlete Brand Image, which is defined as the consumers' perception of the athlete's brand qualities. Generally, athlete branding encompasses the complex interaction, reaction, and emotional experience that emerges whenever fans engage with the athlete brand.

The growing capacity of modern technology has revolutionized brand creation through digital integration and social media networking. These platforms enable athletes to forge their own digital presence, allowing them to connect directly with a wider target audience. This evolution has attracted entrepreneurs to develop integrated networks that combine traditional marketing with social media strategies, significantly enhancing the brand effect in both the personal and corporate digital space. The primary objective is to capitalize on the monetization of the athlete brand through various branding strategies. In the United States, professional image and mainstream media persona have been identified as two distinct approaches adopted for the creation and marketability of the athlete's personal brand, both contributing directly to their marketability and subsequent marketing practices. For branding and marketability to be effective, athletes and their managers must possess deep insight into the foundation of athlete brand equity. International examples, such as those from Canada, where sports are a rapidly growing, professionalized, and commercialized industry, and China, where athletes successfully market their prowess through personal brands, teams, endorsements, and specialized sports agencies, highlight the global significance of sophisticated branding strategies.

African track and field athletes boast an undeniable heritage of excellence and success on the international stage. However, their branding strategies are still evolving. While talent and training remain foundational, branding is increasingly recognized as a significant factor influencing not only their marketability but also their participation in prestigious competitions. Firstly, a strong brand plays a pivotal role in attracting lucrative sponsorship deals. Sponsors are increasingly drawn to athletes with strong personal brands due to their enhanced visibility and marketability. The Nielsen Sports (2020) report, indicating significant growth in sponsorship spending in Africa, signals a burgeoning interest in the African market and its athletes. Secondly, branding empowers African athletes to cultivate dedicated fan bases, both regionally and globally, which translates into increased ticket sales, merchandise purchases, and potential endorsement opportunities. Nonetheless, it remains crucial to recognize that branding is not a standalone factor; access to resources, quality coaching, and support from national sporting bodies remain essential for sustained athletic success.

Track and field, as a global spectacle, is currently witnessing a fascinating trend: the growing significance of branding. Branding, in this context, encompasses the meticulous crafting of tangible and intangible attributes, achievements, narratives, and cultural heritage, that cultivate awareness, identity, and reputation for an individual athlete. This strategic self-presentation is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor influencing an athlete's marketability, their ability to attract sponsorships, endorsements, and public attention. Globally, organizations like the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) have been driven to re-evaluate branding to remain competitive and engage spectators through innovation. According to Lo and Peng (2022), the key branding

strategies that have revolutionized the industry are personal branding, media branding, digital branding, and corporate branding.

Personal Branding plays a pivotal role by shaping how athletes are perceived by fans, sponsors, and the media. It involves curating a unique identity that reflects the athlete's values, personality, and aspirations. Consistent messaging and public demeanor earn global admiration and lucrative endorsements. Media Branding is crucial in shaping marketability by amplifying visibility and crafting compelling narratives. Through strategic exposure in press, television, and online platforms, athletes can reinforce their personal brand and attract commercial partnerships. Digital Branding has become a cornerstone of athlete marketability, particularly for achieving global visibility and commercial success. Emerging platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and personal websites allow athletes to craft a compelling digital identity that resonates with fans and sponsors alike. Finally, Corporate Branding significantly shapes marketability by embedding athletes within broader brand narratives. It involves long-term strategic partnerships that integrate athletes into marketing campaigns and public relations efforts, amplifying visibility, credibility, and commercial appeal.

The marketability of track and field athletes transcends mere athletic performance; it signifies an athlete's ability to leverage their achievements, personality, and cultural heritage to generate commercial value, translating into lucrative sponsorship deals, endorsements, and ultimately, career longevity. Kenyan athletes have carved a unique niche, cemented by their undeniable on-field success and years of consistent victories at major championships. Globally, athlete branding is a critical driver of marketability, with star athletes successfully leveraged as prominent brands. However, the marketability of Kenyan athletes, despite their renowned athletic prowess, is significantly constrained by limited sponsorship opportunities, low earnings, and reputational damage stemming from doping scandals. Concrete statistics highlight this disparity: In key athletic regions like Iten, the average annual income for athletes is approximately \$2,000, with many relying on prize money from a single overseas race.

Economic pressures have led to substantial earnings declines, with race fees dropping from 10,000 euros to 5,000 euros per event and sponsor budgets reduced by up to one-third. Kenyan companies predominantly sponsor road races rather than individual athletes, leaving emerging talents without adequate support. International brands have scaled back contracts, for example, reducing the number of sponsored athletes from 14 to 11 in one instance. The issue is compounded by doping scandals, with 91 Kenyan athletes currently listed on the Athletics Integrity Unit's ineligible list, the highest globally, severely undermining their global appeal and endorsement potential. Even elite performers like Eliud Kipchoge, with a net worth of \$6 million, stand in stark contrast to the majority of mid-tier athletes who earn significantly less than their U.S. counterparts. The Athletics Kenya Survey (2023) further reported that only 18% of elite athletes had active endorsement deals, and 72% lacked formal branding support. While Kenyan athletes have engaged in various branding strategies, including personal, media, digital, and corporate efforts, these remain fragmented and largely unmeasured. Existing research lacks comprehensive analysis of how specific branding strategies influence marketability within the Kenyan context.

Hence, this study sought to address these gaps by examining the intricate relationship between branding strategies and athletes' marketability in selected athletic camps in Kenya. The main objective of the study was to establish the effect of branding strategies on the marketability of track and field athletes in selected athletics camps in Kenya. The specific objectives were: to determine the effect of personal branding on marketability; to examine the effect of media branding on marketability; to establish the effect of digital branding on marketability; and to ascertain the effect of corporate branding on marketability of track and field athletes in selected athletics camps in Kenya. The study is justified as it provides crucial, localized insights for athletes, managers, and policymakers to enhance marketability, reduce poverty, and mitigate damaging factors like doping scandals. It contributes to theory by validating branding models in a Kenyan context and offers practical recommendations for effective branding strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of the study was the Athlete Brand Image theory. This theory posits that an athlete's brand image is shaped by consumers' perceptions of their qualities, leading to enhanced marketability (Mahmoudian et al., 2020). Supporting theories include the Social Exchange theory, which explains mutual benefits in athlete-sponsor relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, which emphasizes strategic communication for building relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). These theories anchor the study by linking branding strategies to marketability outcomes.

Review of intervariable relationships (Empirical review)

Personal branding plays a pivotal role in enhancing the marketability of track and field athletes by shaping how they are perceived by fans, sponsors, and the media. It involves curating a unique identity that reflects the athlete's values, personality, and aspirations (Na, Kunkel & Doyle, 2020). Through consistent messaging, performance, and public demeanor, athletes have heightened their personal branding which have earned them global admiration and lucrative endorsements (Krotz, 2019). In today's digital age, personal branding extends beyond athletic performance to include social media presence, storytelling, and emotional connection with audiences. Athletes who share authentic narratives and engage with fans build loyalty and increase their visibility (Ullah, 2023). Platforms like Instagram and YouTube allow athletes to showcase their training, lifestyle, and values, reinforcing their brand identity (Green, 2024). This visibility translates into commercial appeal, as brands seek relatable figures who resonate with their target demographics (Branded Agency, 2023). Moreover, personal branding helps athletes transition into post-competition careers, such as entrepreneurship, public speaking, or media roles (Colormatics, 2023). It also empowers athletes to control their public image, reducing the risk of misrepresentation and enhancing credibility (Goal Highlights, 2024). Ultimately, a strong personal brand is not just a marketing tool, it's a strategic asset that sustains an athlete's relevance and income beyond the track. Hu et al. (2023) found that personal branding through agents enhances marketing levels.

Digital branding has become a cornerstone of athlete marketability, especially for track and field athletes seeking global visibility and commercial success. Emerging platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and personal websites allow athletes to craft a

compelling digital identity that resonates with fans and sponsors alike (Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2022). Consistent engagement through storytelling, training updates, and personal milestones fosters emotional connections and builds loyal online communities (Kunkel et al., 2021). Star athletes globally exemplify this by maintaining an active presence across multiple platforms, which has helped sustain their brand appeal and attract sponsorships from sports companies like Adidas, Nike among others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Digital branding also empowers athletes to control their narrative, showcase authenticity, and differentiate themselves in a competitive market. According to Schöberl (2023), athletes who align their online content with their values and personality are more likely to attract long-term partnerships. Moreover, platforms like YouTube and podcasts offer athletes opportunities to repurpose content and reach broader audiences (Colormatics, 2023).

As Ballouli and Hutchinson (2010) note, digital branding strategies must be integrated with traditional marketing to maximize impact and ensure brand consistency. Athletes who embrace digital innovations can also monetize their influence through sponsored content, merchandise, and brand collaborations. Michael (2023) emphasizes that authenticity and storytelling are key to building trust and driving digital engagement of athletes. As such, digital branding is not just a promotional tool, it plays a significant and strategic role that enhances visibility, fosters fan loyalty, and secures financial sustainability beyond athletic performance. Anderski et al. (2023) noted that digital engagement platforms enhance brand image and marketability. Papatungan et al. (2023) added that digital branding through creative advertisement increases marketability.

Media branding plays a pivotal role in shaping the marketability of track and field athletes by amplifying their visibility and crafting compelling narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. Through strategic exposure in press, television, and online platforms, athletes can reinforce their personal brand and attract commercial partnerships (Kimaiyo, 2023). Julius Yego's rise as the "YouTube Man" exemplifies how a unique media story can elevate an athlete's global profile and lead to endorsements, such as his partnership with Nike and other international sponsors (Korhonen, 2023). Effective media branding hinges on consistency, authenticity, and strategic storytelling. Athletes who manage public appearances, interviews, and features with professionalism are more likely to maintain a positive public image and build trust with fans and sponsors (Levine, 2025). Media training and public relations support are essential tools that help athletes navigate interviews and manage crises, ensuring their brand remains intact even under scrutiny (Korhonen, 2023).

Moreover, sports media coverage has evolved to include digital storytelling, documentaries, and athlete generated content, allowing athletes to control their narrative and deepen fan engagement (Athletic Zone Guide, 2024). Platforms like The Players' Tribune and YouTube offer athletes direct access to audiences, bypassing traditional media filters and fostering emotional connections. This shift empowers athletes to highlight personal values, social causes, and behind the scenes journeys, enhancing relatability and brand loyalty (Levine, 2025). Saatcioglu (2017) found that media branding enhanced marketability. Marthinus, Duffett and Knott (2024) noted that media branding via Twitter improves marketability.

Corporate branding significantly shapes the marketability of track and field athletes by embedding them within broader brand narratives that amplify visibility, credibility, and commercial appeal. Unlike simple endorsements, corporate branding involves long term strategic partnerships that integrate athletes into marketing campaigns, public relations efforts, and community outreach programs (Korhonen, 2023). Eliud Kipchoge’s collaboration with Nike during the INEOS 1:59 Challenge is a prime example. His record-breaking feat on 12 October 2019 was not only a personal triumph but also a branding milestone that Nike leveraged to reinforce its “No Human Is Limited” ethos, aligning Kipchoge’s discipline and humility with the brand’s identity (Levine, 2025). Such partnerships elevate athletes into global icons, as brands like Adidas, Puma, and Under Armour seek athletes whose values and stories resonate with their audiences (Colormatics, 2023).

Corporate branding also enhances athlete longevity, allowing them to remain relevant beyond competition through ambassador roles, product lines, and philanthropic initiatives (Professional Athlete, 2024). For instance, Usain Bolt’s longstanding partnership with Puma has included extensive campaigns that highlight his charisma and speed, reinforcing both his and Puma’s brand equity (Dash Sports, 2024). Moreover, successful corporate branding requires authenticity and alignment. Athletes must embody the brand’s values while maintaining their personal identity, ensuring mutual benefit and audience trust (Frost, 2023). When executed well, corporate branding transforms athletes into cultural symbols, expanding their influence across industries and continents. Matsuda and Kato (2024) found corporate branding to be positively associated with marketability. Muchemi (2021) noted that corporate sponsorship leads to brand awareness and marketability.

Study Gaps

The empirical review reveals gaps in localized application of branding strategies in Kenya, with fragmented efforts and a lack of measurement (Athletics Kenya Survey, 2023). Existing studies lack a comprehensive analysis of how specific branding strategies influence marketability in the Kenyan context (Wagoki, 2023; Kiptembur, 2019).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework depicts the relationships between the independent variables (personal branding, media branding, digital branding, corporate branding) and the dependent variable (marketability of athletes).

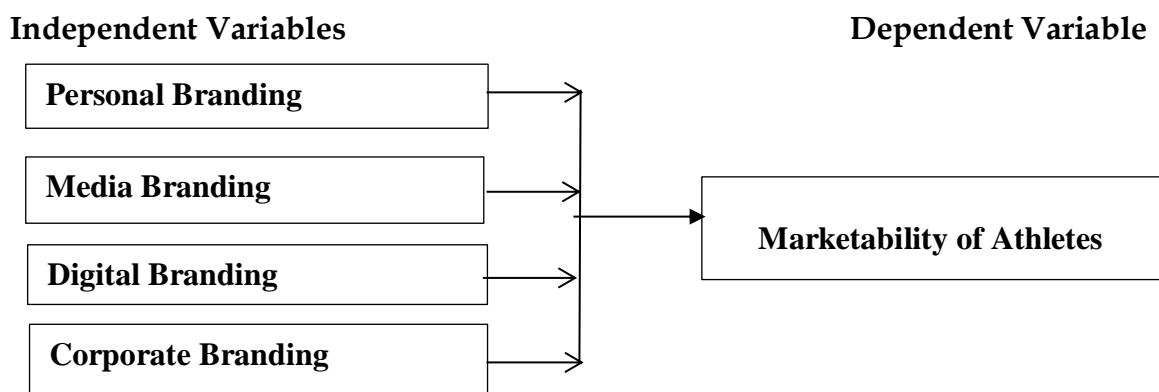


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**METHODOLOGY**

The main objective of the study was to establish the effect of branding strategies on the marketability of track and field athletes in selected athletics camps in Kenya. A descriptive research design was adopted. The target population comprised 1013 track and field athletes registered with Athletics Kenya and located in five athletics camps in the North Rift region of Kenya. The sample size was 287 track and field athletes selected through stratified random sampling, plus 10 coaches and managers, totaling 297 respondents. Data was collected using structured questionnaires for athletes and an interview guide for coaches and managers. The questionnaires included Likert scale items (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) on branding strategies and marketability. Validity was ensured through expert review, and reliability via Cronbach's alpha (>0.7 for all constructs). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (correlation, multiple regression) using SPSS version 26. Hypotheses were tested using regression coefficients and significance levels ($p < 0.05$). Ethical considerations included informed consent and confidentiality.

FINDINGS**Response Rate**

Out of 321 questionnaires administered, 229 were returned, yielding a response rate of 71.3%. This surpasses the minimum threshold of 70% for hand-delivered surveys, confirming adequacy for analysis (Gupta & Gupta, 2022).

Branding Strategies and Marketability**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 229)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Corporate Branding	4.18	0.76	2.3	5.0
Media Branding	4.12	0.78	2.2	5.0
Digital Branding	4.10	0.82	2.1	5.0
Personal Branding	4.05	0.85	2.0	5.0
Marketability	4.02	0.80	2.0	5.0

Table 1 shows mean scores and variability for all variables on a 5-point Likert scale. Corporate branding had the highest mean (4.18), followed by media branding (4.12). All variables indicate strong positive perceptions among respondents.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Branding Strategies and Marketability

Variable	Marketability	Personal	Media	Digital	Corporate
Marketability	1.000				
Personal Branding	.589**	1.000			
Media Branding	.683**	.512**	1.000		
Digital Branding	.567**	.498**	.601**	1.000	
Corporate Branding	.618**	.475**	.589**	.554**	1.000

Table 2 presents bivariate correlations. Media branding had the strongest correlation with marketability ($r = .683$, $p < .01$), followed by corporate branding ($r = .618$). All correlations were positive and significant, supporting the hypothesized relationships. $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Hypothesis Testing Summary

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
H2	Media branding has a significant positive effect on marketability	.440	7.870	.000	Confirmed
H4	Corporate branding has a significant positive effect on marketability	.258	3.061	.002	Confirmed
H3	Digital branding has a significant positive effect on marketability	.185	2.942	.004	Confirmed
H1	Personal branding has a significant positive effect on marketability	.117	3.193	.002	Confirmed

Description: Table 3 summarizes hypothesis testing. All four hypotheses were confirmed at $p < .01$, with media branding showing the most substantial impact.

Regression Analysis

Effect of Branding Strategies on Marketability

Table 4: Model Summary - Multiple Regression

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.714	.510	.502	.562	58.321	.000**

Predictors: (Constant), Personal Branding, Media Branding, Digital Branding, Corporate Branding $p < .01$

Table 4 shows the regression model explained 51% of the variance in marketability ($R^2 = .510$, $F = 58.321$, $p < .001$), indicating a moderately strong and significant relationship.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients - Effect on Marketability

Predictor	Unstandardized Beta	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.585	.198		2.956	.003
Media Branding	.283	.036	.440	7.870	.000**
Corporate Branding	.276	.090	.258	3.061	.002**
Digital Branding	.199	.068	.185	2.942	.004**
Personal Branding	.241	.075	.117	3.193	.002**

Dependent Variable: Marketability $p < .01$

Description: Table 5 presents regression coefficients. Media branding had the strongest effect ($\beta = .440$, $p < .001$), followed by corporate branding ($\beta = .258$, $p = .002$). All four branding strategies had significant positive effects on marketability.

The regression equation is:

$$\text{Marketability} = 0.585 + 0.241(\text{Personal}) + 0.283(\text{Media}) + 0.199(\text{Digital}) + 0.276(\text{Corporate}) + \text{error}$$

Objective 1: Effect of Personal Branding on Marketability

Descriptive analysis revealed a strong agreement among athletes on the importance of personal branding, with a composite mean of 4.02 (SD = 0.81). The highest-rated item was "Linkage with corporate sponsors" (M = 4.14), affirming the role of sponsorship in enhancing athlete visibility and appeal (Hodge & Walker, 2018). Correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship ($r = .589$, $p < .01$), and regression results confirmed Hypothesis H1 ($\beta = .117$, $t = 3.193$, $p = .002$), indicating a modest but significant effect. The findings align with Hu et al. (2023), who emphasized the role of agents in enhancing athlete branding, and with Kunkel et al. (2019), who found that personal brand image influences reputation and sponsor preference.

Hypothesis H1 Confirmed: Personal branding has a significant positive effect on marketability.

Objective 2: Effect of Media Branding on Marketability

Media branding had the highest composite mean score (M = 4.12, SD = 0.91), with Instagram and Twitter cited as key platforms for visibility and sponsor engagement. The strongest item was "Instagram leads to coach interest" (M = 4.30), supporting Doyle et al. (2022), who found that performance-based social media posts drive engagement. Correlation analysis revealed the strongest association with marketability ($r = .683$, $p < .01$), and regression confirmed Hypothesis H2 ($\beta = .440$, $t = 7.870$, $p < .001$), making media branding the most influential predictor. The results echo Kimaiyo (2023), who emphasized media exposure as a driver of sponsor interest, and Marthinus et al. (2024), who found that social media branding significantly improved club marketability.

Hypothesis H2 Confirmed: Media branding has a significant positive effect on marketability.

Objective 3: Effect of Digital Branding on Marketability

Digital branding was rated highly (M = 4.10, SD = 0.80), with "Digital engagement platforms enhance reputation" scoring highest (M = 4.33). Athletes affirmed the role of influencer marketing and creative advertising in attracting sponsors (Paputungan et al., 2023). Correlation analysis showed a significant relationship ($r = .567$, $p < .01$), and regression confirmed Hypothesis H3 ($\beta = .185$, $t = 2.942$, $p = .004$). These findings support Anderski et al. (2023), who highlighted digital platforms as key to brand image and performance.

Hypothesis H3 Confirmed: Digital branding has a significant positive effect on marketability.

Objective 4: Effect of Corporate Branding on Marketability

Corporate branding had the highest overall mean (M = 4.18, SD = 0.80), with "Corporate sponsorship improves visibility" scoring highest (M = 4.48). Athletes recognized the role of long-term partnerships in enhancing brand appeal and credibility (Muchemi, 2021;

Mulei, 2019). Correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship ($r = .618, p < .01$), and regression confirmed Hypothesis H4 ($\beta = .258, t = 3.061, p = .002$). These results align with Matsuda & Kato (2024), who found that corporate brand image strongly influences sports marketing outcomes.

Hypothesis H4 Confirmed: Corporate branding has a significant positive effect on marketability.

Qualitative Insights

Interviews with coaches and managers (N = 10) reinforced quantitative findings:

- “Athletes need storytelling and authenticity to connect with fans.” (Personal Branding)
- “TV and social media exposure directly lead to sponsor calls.” (Media Branding)
- “Instagram reels get more engagement than static posts.” (Digital Branding)
- “Long-term Nike/Adidas deals provide stability beyond prize money.” (Corporate Branding)

These insights align with Korhonen (2023) and Levine (2025), who emphasized strategic media and corporate branding as key to athlete visibility and long-term success.

Overall Model Summary

The regression model explained 51% of the variance in marketability ($R^2 = .510, F = 58.321, p < .001$), indicating a moderately strong predictive relationship. All four branding strategies were significant, with media branding emerging as the dominant factor.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the conclusions and recommendations based on the study's objectives and hypotheses. The study concludes that personal branding significantly affects marketability by enhancing an athlete's image and reputation. Media branding emerged as pivotal for generating visibility and attracting sponsor interest. Furthermore, digital branding was found to enhance reputation through strategic platform use, and corporate branding significantly boosts visibility via partnerships.

These findings add value to theory by providing empirical evidence from the Kenyan context to support the Athlete Brand Image theory. For practice, it is recommended that athletes build authentic personal brands using storytelling, use media platforms strategically for maximum exposure, leverage digital tools to connect with sponsors, and actively develop robust corporate partnerships. For policy formulation, the findings suggest that Athletics Kenya should consider supporting structured branding initiatives for athletes.

Finally, several areas for further studies are identified, including: comparative regional analyses within Kenya, investigations into the gender-specific impacts of branding, longitudinal studies to track long-term effects, and research on the role of emerging technologies in athlete branding.

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