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Article

When the Face of the Ad Is Bigger than the Brand: How Zlatan Ibrahimović Redefined Advertising with Athletes

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Abstract: Athletes today are no longer defined solely by their performance on the pitch; they have evolved into powerful personal brands that shape advertising narratives and influence consumer behavior globally. Their charisma, public personas, and ability to engage with audiences often make them as marketable as traditional celebrities. This research investigates the phenomenon of athlete branding, focusing on the intersection of personal identity and commercial partnerships. A prime example of this evolution is Zlatan Ibrahimović, whose outspoken, rebellious personality, humor, and confidence have allowed him to transcend the typical boundaries of sports endorsements. Applying the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) framework, this study explores how Ibrahimović's unique persona dominates advertising campaigns, often taking center stage alongside the brands he represents. Through a content analysis of commercials, the research highlights how Ibrahimović's personal brand drives engagement and resonates with consumers, offering insights into the growing significance of authenticity and individuality in advertising with athletes. Ibrahimović's case exemplifies how modern sports figures extend beyond the realm of athletics, becoming influential cultural icons and redefining the dynamics of brand partnerships.

Keywords: sports marketing; sports celebrities; athlete persona; advertising with athletes; athlete endorsements; personal branding; athlete branding; commercial campaigns; brand authenticity; Zlatan Ibrahimović



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1. Introduction

While not entirely unexpected, given that he was already 42 years old, Zlatan Ibrahimović's retirement in June 2023 still felt sudden. The legendary footballer announced his decision overnight, marking the end of an era. His farewell as an AC Milan player took place during a match against Hellas Verona, and in true Zlatan style, it featured a memorable parting shot. As Verona's away fans began to boo him during his farewell speech, Ibrahimović turned to them and quipped, "Go ahead and boo—this will be your biggest moment of the year!" The Milan fans erupted in cheers, while even the Verona supporters acknowledged the comment with murmurs of respect (Kickoffs, 2023). It was a classic Zlatan remark, reflecting the wit and confidence that had defined his career for nearly 25 years as a professional footballer.

The Swedish striker began his journey in his homeland, playing for Malmö FF (1999–2001), before moving on to Dutch giants Ajax (2001–2004). His career then took him to Italy, where he played for Juventus (2004–2006) and Internazionale (2006–2008), followed by stints at FC Barcelona (2009–2010), AC Milan (2011–2012), Paris Saint-Germain

(2012–2016), and Manchester United (2016–2018). After a brief period in the United States with LA Galaxy (2018–2019), Ibrahimović returned to Europe and finished his career at AC Milan (2020–2023).

Despite never winning the UEFA Champions League, Ibrahimović collected an impressive 32 trophies at the club level, according to [Transfermarkt \(2024\)](#). He was named Player of the Year 12 times in Sweden and won the Player of the Year title three times in Italy. In August 2023, goal.com ranked him 15th on their list of the top goal scorers in football history. By comparison, Ferenc Puskás ranked 6th, Pelé 5th, Lionel Messi 2nd, and Cristiano Ronaldo 1st ([Goal.com, 2023](#)).

However, Ibrahimović's fame stemmed not only from the sheer number of goals he scored but also from how he scored them. Known for his acrobatic bicycle kicks and taekwondo-like precision, Ibrahimović consistently amazed fans with spectacular goals. One of his most iconic moments came in 2012, during a friendly against England, when he scored a 30 m overhead kick after the goalkeeper misjudged the ball. When Cristiano Ronaldo scored a similarly impressive bicycle kick for Real Madrid against Juventus in the 2018 Champions League quarterfinals, Ibrahimović was asked about it on live TV. His response? "Ronaldo scored a beautiful goal today. But he should try it from 40 m and see if it goes in" ([Mister X, 2018](#)).

Ibrahimović's confidence, often bordering on arrogance, became part of his brand. During his time in Major League Soccer (MLS) with LA Galaxy, a reporter challenged him by suggesting that Carlos Vela, playing for Los Angeles FC, had better stats. Without hesitation, Ibrahimović responded, "Yes, I am by far the best". Then, he added, "How old is Carlos Vela? 29? And he's playing in MLS at the peak of his career? When I was 29, where was I? In Europe. Big difference" ([ESPN FC, 2019](#)).

He frequently declared himself the best player in the world, with one notable exception. In 2017, while at Manchester United, Ibrahimović was asked who the best striker in the Premier League was. Surprisingly, he mentioned Romelu Lukaku and Sergio Agüero instead of himself. When the interviewer questioned why he did not choose himself, Ibrahimović replied, "Lions don't compare themselves to humans" ([Alexander, 2017](#)).

On another occasion, while walking around Manchester United's training ground with Thierry Henry—the legendary French striker turned Sky Sports pundit—Ibrahimović was confronted with a curious observation. Henry pointed out that the walls of the facility were adorned with images of Manchester United's greatest legends, yet Ibrahimović's image was conspicuously absent. Without hesitation, Ibrahimović delivered a response in his signature style: "You know why? Because they still don't know how God is looking". What he obviously meant was: they still do not know what God looks like ([Sky Sports Retro, 2023](#)).

These witty, self-assured remarks became a hallmark of Ibrahimović's career. While they often left reporters stunned, they also entertained and revealed his playful side, as he frequently smiled after delivering such comments. This blend of arrogance and humor shaped his public persona, making him one of the most distinctive figures in football—besides, of course, being a fantastic player on the pitch for almost 25 years.

This unique persona leads to the central research question of this article: When such an athlete endorses products and services, do the advertisements adapt to the player's personality, or does the player adapt to the brands?

In this study, we seek to answer this question. First, we provide a literature review on athlete brand models, with a particular focus on the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). This model will then be adapted to Ibrahimović, using his autobiographies and related documentaries as primary sources.

Finally, we will conduct a content analysis of commercials featuring Ibrahimović to assess how well these advertisements align with his distinctive, often rebellious personality. Do these commercials reflect Ibrahimović's unique brand as much as his public persona does? Can it happen that advertisers are willing to let the athlete's brand take precedence over the product itself? These are the questions we aim to explore. Based on our findings, we will also reflect on the broader implications for sports marketing and the use of celebrities in sports advertising. Understanding the balance between an athlete's personal brand and the product being promoted can provide valuable insights for marketers looking to leverage star power effectively without losing sight of the brand message.

This is important because brands today face an increasingly complex challenge in aligning their identity with high-profile athletes who possess strong, independent personal brands. While athlete endorsements have long been a powerful tool in marketing, companies now grapple with the dilemma of how much control they should maintain over their brand image versus how much they should adapt to the athlete's established persona.

This issue is particularly relevant in cases like Ibrahimović's, where the endorser's personality is so dominant that it risks overshadowing the product or service being advertised. Marketers must carefully balance brand consistency with the advantages of leveraging an athlete's charisma, relatability, and fan engagement. Some brands may find it difficult to integrate the athlete into their existing brand identity, while others may choose to reshape aspects of their marketing to align more closely with the athlete's unique style. These uncertainties highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how brands can effectively collaborate with star athletes in ways that enhance rather than dilute their marketing messages (Yu, 2005; Koernig & Boyd, 2009; McGhee, 2012; Hodge, 2015; Kunkel et al., 2018; Taniyev & Gordon, 2022; Jeon, 2024; Solberg Söilen, 2024; Raithel et al., 2025; Szabó, 2025).

2. Literature Review

Sports marketing is a dynamic and rapidly evolving phenomenon that captures the interest of both practitioners and academics. As the field grows, an increasing number of textbooks have been published, reflecting the expanding body of knowledge and the complexity of the industry (Beech & Chadwick, 2007; A. Smith, 2008; Bruton, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2015; Cornwell, 2020; Ennis, 2020; Tan, 2020; Coombs & Harker, 2021; Dees et al., 2021; Pitts, 2021; Schwarz et al., 2022; Bruhn & Rohlmann, 2023; Fullerton, 2023; A. C. T. Smith et al., 2024). Closely related to sports marketing is sports branding, which focuses on the creation and management of a distinct and recognizable identity for sports organizations, athletes, and related products (Bouchet et al., 2013; Lee & Alessandri, 2018; Lee, 2018; Pritchard & Stinson, 2013; Stavros & Smith, 2020; Leng & Zhang, 2023). Similarly, football marketing and football branding have become a focal point within sports marketing, leading to the publication of books that explore its unique strategies, challenges, and commercial significance in the global sports landscape (Desbordes, 2006; Hopkins, 2010; Chanavat et al., 2017).

The concept of athlete stardom has been explored extensively within sports studies and football studies, where scholars highlight the interplay between athletic performance and public persona. Andrews and Clift (2016) emphasize the importance of context, intertextuality, and reflexivity in shaping the star identities of footballers, arguing that football stardom is constructed not only through athletic achievements but also through media narratives and public engagement.

The transformation of successful athletes from mere sports figures to influential global brands is one of the defining trends in modern sports marketing. Over the past few decades, professional athletes have transcended their roles as competitors, leveraging their personal appeal to build powerful, marketable identities akin to traditional product and corporate

brands. This shift is driven by the convergence of sports, entertainment, and commerce, allowing athletes to generate significant economic value beyond their athletic performance (Rein et al., 2006; Karg & Funk, 2014; Fetchko et al., 2018; Păsărin et al., 2021; Karg et al., 2022; Gülay, 2023). In this evolving landscape, “sportainment” has emerged as a key concept, where the fusion of sports and entertainment enhances fan engagement and brand experience. As sport organizations adapt, strategic marketing efforts increasingly focus on creating immersive, spectacle-driven experiences that extend beyond the game itself (Balkam, 2019; Richelieu & Webb, 2021; Kaser & Oelkers, 2021). As the competitive landscape in the sports industry intensifies, athletes are increasingly recognizing the value of cultivating a favorable brand image to gain a competitive edge (Skinner et al., 2018; Dašić et al., 2021). Branding with athletes leverages the global appeal and cultural significance of athletes to enhance brand visibility and influence consumer behavior (Li et al., 2025). As noted by Lu (2023), successful athletes often embody club pride and national pride, as well as symbolizing achievement, making them valuable assets for commercial partnerships.

The evolution of athletes from mere sports figures to globally recognized personal brands has become a defining feature of modern sports marketing. Several athletes have successfully established themselves as marketable entities, leveraging their on-field performance, unique personas, and strategic brand partnerships. One of the most prominent examples is Michael Jordan, whose collaboration with Nike led to the creation of the Air Jordan brand, transforming athlete endorsements into a long-term business empire. Similarly, Cristiano Ronaldo has extended his CR7 brand beyond football, building a presence in fashion, fitness, and hospitality. His massive social media following enhances his commercial value, making him one of the most sought-after endorsers globally. In tennis, Serena Williams has cultivated a personal brand that blends athletic excellence with advocacy for gender equality and racial justice. Her impact extends beyond sports into business ventures and philanthropy. LeBron James has built an empire around his name, with investments in media production (SpringHill Company, Hollywood, CA, USA), philanthropy, and brand partnerships that extend beyond basketball. Meanwhile, Tom Brady has used his career longevity and discipline to launch the TB12 brand, focusing on health and performance training.

These athletes illustrate the power of personal branding, showing that success in sports can translate into enduring commercial and cultural influence. Their ability to engage with diverse audiences across sectors underscores the importance of personal branding, not only for financial gain but for sustaining relevance post-retirement (Thomson, 2006). In this regard, athlete branding extends beyond endorsements to include social media presence, public image, fashion, philanthropy, and also entrepreneurial ventures, reflecting a multi-dimensional approach crucial for maintaining consumer/fan loyalty and influence (Green, 2016; Hasaan et al., 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2016; Na et al., 2019; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2020; Kunkel et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Cardella et al., 2021; Um, 2022a; Bredikhina, 2023; Gülay, 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2023; Biz & Schubert, 2024; Magano et al., 2024; Tanvir et al., 2024; Pedersen et al., 2025).

The foundation of athlete branding is deeply rooted in traditional brand management theories, particularly those focusing on brand equity. Two seminal frameworks underpin much of the literature: Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller's (1993) Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model.

Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1991) emphasizes five key elements contributing to brand equity—brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, and proprietary assets. These elements are equally applicable to athlete brands, where attributes such as performance, integrity, and uniqueness enhance brand equity. Keller's CBBE Model extends this by focusing on consumer perceptions, suggesting that strong, favorable, and

unique brand associations drive brand equity (Keller, 2003). This means that athletes must cultivate distinct personal narratives that resonate emotionally with their audiences, reinforcing positive brand associations. The frameworks of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) laid the groundwork for understanding athletes as brands, highlighting the interplay between performance, image, and consumer perception.

Building on these frameworks, Thomson (2006) introduced the concept of human brands—individuals who create marketable identities by engaging with consumers on emotional and symbolic levels. Athletes align closely with this concept, as their brand value often hinges on relatability, authenticity, and personal engagement. Arai et al. (2014) define athlete brands as the public personas of individual athletes who generate symbolic meaning and market value through their personal attributes and professional achievements. This aligns with the broader notion of human brands, where individuals extend their influence beyond their core competencies (Törőcsik, 2018; Han et al., 2021; Pomirleanu et al., 2023; Szántó, 2023).

Sigmundsson (2024a, 2024b) focused on how people become experts and, through that process, develop into human brands. Sigmundsson and Elnes (2024) explored the relationship between passion and expertise, developing a model that identifies key factors contributing to exceptional performance. Their study, based on interviews with 23 experts and in-depth analyses of figures such as Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Darwin, and Zlatan Ibrahimović (!), highlights five essential components for becoming an expert: focused training (deliberate practice), passion for achievement, perseverance (grit), a growth-oriented mindset, and mentorship (follow-up support).

Several conceptual models have been developed to capture the multifaceted nature of athlete brands, especially footballer brands. The first of these works were written by Milligan (2004) and Papp-Váry (2009), who referred to David Beckham as the pioneer, the first truly global footballer brand. Beckham's brand transcended football, extending into fashion, endorsements, and philanthropy. Milligan's book, "Brand it Like Beckham" (2004), provides an in-depth analysis of Beckham's transformation, framing his career as a case study in personal branding. Milligan highlights Beckham's ability to diversify into multiple sectors without diluting his core identity. Collaborations with product and services brands exemplify strategic co-branding, reinforcing Beckham's appeal across demographics and industries. As Milligan argues, Beckham's success was not just the result of athletic prowess but a carefully curated brand image, managed with the same discipline as product and corporate brands. Milligan notes that Beckham's fashion choices, media appearances, and philanthropic ventures were aligned with a broader brand narrative of dedication, authenticity, and aspiration. This reflects the principles of Keller's Brand Equity Model (Keller, 1993), where emotional resonance and symbolic associations play a pivotal role in sustaining brand value. Milligan underscores three pillars underpinning Beckham's brand equity:

- Dedication and Professionalism—Beckham's commitment to excellence and resilience on the field fostered a narrative of reliability and authenticity.
- Iconic Style and Fashion—His sartorial choices and involvement in fashion distinguished him as a trendsetter, enhancing his aesthetic brand dimension.
- Family and Personal Values—Beckham's role as a devoted family man solidified his brand as relatable and trustworthy, amplified by his relationship with the one of the Spice Girls, Victoria Beckham.

By focusing on Beckham's ability to transcend football, Milligan also underscores the importance of brand elasticity—the capacity to diversify into multiple sectors without diluting core identity (Monga & John, 2010).

[Papp-Váry \(2009\)](#) extends this analysis, emphasizing the importance of uniqueness in personal branding. According to him, a “magic moment” in Beckham’s career was his iconic goal against Wimbledon in 1996. This lob from the halfway line not only cemented his status as a footballing prodigy but also became one of the most replayed goals in sports history. [Papp-Váry \(2009\)](#) and [Vincent et al. \(2009\)](#) also highlight Beckham’s authenticity and relatability, suggesting that his ability to navigate media scrutiny and controversies further enhanced his brand resilience. They also note that what made Beckham a truly global brand was that Beckham’s influence was not limited to football enthusiasts but extended to diverse consumer segments. In the commercial world, the Beckham brand has taken on “multiple personalities” or identities ([Vincent et al., 2009](#)).

In another work by [Papp-Váry \(2011\)](#), after analyzing advertisements featuring sports celebrities, outlines the characteristics of the ideal athlete endorser, identifying excellence in their sport, relevance to the target audience, public likability, positive image, and physical attractiveness as critical attributes for brand alignment.

[Alcott \(2023\)](#) highlights how star studies, as applied to Gareth Bale, offer a nuanced interpretation of football stardom. Alcott argues that the on-field performance of footballers is inseparable from their off-field persona, suggesting that successful athlete brands are those that integrate both dimensions seamlessly.

[Lu \(2023\)](#) expands on the pivotal role of brand image in influencing consumer purchasing decisions. Lu’s study highlights five key sources of brand identity—functionality, social status, emotional connection, value–function balance, and trust—demonstrating how athletes reinforce these dimensions through excellence and authenticity.

Using data collected through online surveys, [Lu \(2023\)](#) examines the influence of Gu Ailing, the youngest Olympic champion in freestyle ski. The results reveal that Gu’s appearance and lifestyle exert a significant positive effect on consumer interest, while athletic performance, somewhat surprisingly, shows a weaker correlation. These findings challenge conventional assumptions that athletic excellence is the primary driver of consumer interest, suggesting that aesthetic appeal and personal branding play equally, if not more, important roles.

Compared to previous works, [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#) present one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding athlete brands through the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). The model conceptualizes athlete brand image through three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. In the next chapter, we will explore the case of Zlatan Ibrahimović with the help of this model. At this point, it is important to highlight the three foundational pillars:

- Athletic Performance: This dimension encompasses an athlete’s on-field capabilities and achievements. Sub-components include athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry. Athletic expertise signifies individual success, skills, and overall proficiency, aligning with the notion that winning and exceptional performance drive brand equity ([Gladden & Funk, 2001](#); [Gladden, 2015](#); [Pifer et al., 2015](#)). Competition style reflects the unique manner in which athletes perform, fostering fan identification and loyalty. Sportsmanship highlights ethical behavior and integrity, reinforcing trustworthiness—a critical element in brand credibility ([Ohanian, 1990](#); [Boroujerdi et al., 2024](#)). Rivalry, a unique facet in sports branding, intensifies fan engagement by creating compelling narratives around competitive relationships ([Richelieu & Pons, 2006](#); [Hickman & Stoica, 2025](#)).
- Attractive Appearance: Physical attractiveness and personal style contribute to the visual appeal of athlete brands. This dimension functions as a “trademark”, differentiating athletes through unique visual cues ([Storie, 2008](#); [Shank & Lyberger, 2014](#)). The sub-components include physical attractiveness, body fitness, and symbolic traits

(e.g., signature gestures, hairstyles). Research indicates that attractive endorsers exert greater influence on consumer behavior (Joseph, 1982; Kok Wei & Li, 2013; Schouten et al., 2021). Athletes leverage their appearance to enhance brand recall and foster stronger consumer connections. Hoegel et al. (2016) expand on this within the context of professional football, demonstrating how consumer segments, differentiated by age and gender, prioritize various footballer attributes. Their research highlights that male fans gravitate toward experience and performance on the field, while female fans are more drawn to the player's personality and exemplary behavior.

- Marketable Lifestyle: Off-field attributes such as personal narratives, social engagement, and interactions with fans shape this dimension. Sub-dimensions include life story, role-model behavior, and relationship effort. Athletes' life stories resonate deeply with consumers, fostering emotional connections and enhancing brand loyalty (Escalas, 2004). Role-model behavior underscores ethical and philanthropic activities, contributing to an athlete's positive image. Relationship effort reflects direct engagement with fans and media, amplifying brand reach and authenticity (A. C. T. Smith et al., 2017; Kassing, 2023; Glebova, 2024).

As we can see, Arai et al.'s (2014) model underscores the importance of consistency between on-field performance and off-field persona. Athletes who seamlessly integrate these dimensions are better positioned to sustain long-term brand equity, even during performance fluctuations. This holistic approach not only enhances individual athlete brands but also generates value for sponsors and affiliated organizations (Linsner et al., 2021).

It is important to highlight that authenticity strengthens trust and engagement (Brown & Anderson, 2023). A study by Hasaan and Fişne (2021) found that fans are drawn to athletes who exhibit consistency between their public personas and personal lives. This alignment enhances perceived authenticity, boosting fan loyalty and sponsorship appeal.

Kucharska et al. (2020) expand on this by demonstrating that personal brand authenticity significantly influences fan loyalty and engagement with football as a whole. Their research suggests that when top football players project authentic personal brands, spectators identify more strongly with them, fostering greater attitudinal and behavioral loyalty toward the sport. This highlights the importance of athletes' perceived sincerity and relatability, reinforcing the notion that branding is not solely driven by performance but by the values and identity an athlete embodies (Carlson & Donavan, 2013).

To empirically test the MABI model, Arai et al. (2013) developed the Athlete Brand Image Scale (ABIS). The scale, validated through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, provided robust evidence supporting the three-dimensional structure of the MABI model. Findings indicated that while athletic performance and marketable lifestyle had the greatest impact on brand equity, physical attractiveness played a supplementary role. Notably, the "life story" sub-dimension emerged as a critical factor in distinguishing high-profile athletes, indicating that personal narratives resonate strongly with consumers. Lu (2023) also highlights the importance of crafting marketing narratives that integrate athletes' life stories, thereby fostering deeper emotional connections with consumers. People are more likely to identify with brands that reflect their values and aspirations. This applies not only to the athlete but also to the product and service brands they endorse. The Match-up Theory suggests that the success of brand endorsements depends on the alignment between the spokesperson's image and the brand's attributes (McDaniel, 1999; Um, 2022b).

In conclusion, the MABI model bridges the gap between celebrity endorsement literature and athlete branding, providing a structured approach for marketers, agents, and athletes to enhance brand value. However, there are still only a few case studies demon-

strating the adaptation of this model. Therefore, this article will apply the MABI framework to the case of Zlatan Ibrahimović.

3. Materials and Methods

As it was mentioned above, the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), developed by [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#), provides a comprehensive framework to analyze athlete brands through three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Each dimension contains sub-dimensions that reflect the multifaceted nature of athlete brand image, as seen on Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of athlete brand image dimensions.

Dimension	Definition	Sub-Dimension	Definition
Athletic performance	An athlete's sport performance related features	Athletic expertise	An athlete's individual achievement and athletic capability (winning, skills, proficiency in their sport)
		Competition style	An athlete's specific characteristics of his/her performance in a competition
		Sportsmanship	An athlete's virtuous behavior that people have determined is appropriate (fair play, respect for the game, integrity)
		Rivalry	An athlete's competitive relationship with other athletes
Attractive appearance	An athlete's attractive external appearance	Physical attractiveness	An athlete's physical qualities and characteristics that spectators find aesthetically pleasing
		Symbol	An athlete's attractive personal style and trademark
		Body fitness	An athlete's body fitness in his/her sport
Marketable lifestyle	An athlete's off-field marketable features	Life story	An appealing, interesting off-field life story that includes a message and reflects the athlete's personal value
		Role model	An athlete's ethical behavior that society has determined is worth emulating
		Relationship effort	An athlete's positive attitude toward interaction with fans, spectators, sponsors, and media

Source: [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#).

This framework was applied to Zlatan Ibrahimović, one of the most distinctive and commercially influential footballers of the 21st century. Given the importance of accurately capturing the essence of his personal brand, this study prioritized primary and authentic sources that provide direct insights into his career, personality, and self-representation. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of how Ibrahimović constructs and communicates his brand identity, multiple sources were examined, including documentaries, autobiographies, and media appearances.

Among the most valuable sources are the documentaries *Becoming Zlatan* ([Lagercrantz & Gertten, 2015](#)) and *My Name is Zlatan* ([Segers & Vigarani, 2021](#)), both of which offer a detailed portrayal of his personal and professional trajectory. These documentaries chronicle his rise from a talented but controversial young player to a global football icon,

revealing key aspects of his personality, such as his confidence, resilience, and willingness to defy expectations. They provide a rich visual and narrative context for understanding how Ibrahimović presents himself to the world and how this self-representation influences his marketability.

In addition to these visual narratives, Ibrahimović's autobiographies serve as primary texts for analyzing his personal brand. His written works, including *I Am Zlatan Ibrahimović* (Ibrahimović & Lagercrantz, 2013), *I Am Football* (Ibrahimović, 2018), and *Adrenaline—My Untold Stories* (Ibrahimović, 2022), function as strategic self-branding tools, allowing him to shape his own story and reinforce key aspects of his public persona. These books not only document his career but also reflect his carefully curated identity, emphasizing his self-assurance, humor, and at times, provocative nature. The significance of these texts lies in their ability to convey Ibrahimović's voice directly, without the mediation of third-party interpretations, making them invaluable for understanding how he positions himself within the sports and commercial landscape.

A particularly telling example of his self-representation appears on the cover of *Adrenaline—My Untold Stories* (2022), where the phrase "From the bestselling author, I Am Zlatan Ibrahimović" is prominently displayed. This seemingly playful yet deliberate choice encapsulates his self-mythologizing approach, reinforcing the idea that his name alone carries significant brand equity. This type of self-referential humor and confidence is a recurring element in Ibrahimović's branding, contributing to his status as an athlete who is not just known for his performance on the pitch but also for his distinctive personality and ability to command attention in the media.

After adapting the MABI model, the research seeks to answer how well Ibrahimović's advertising appearances align with this framework. Does his unique personality come through as distinctly in commercials as it does in his personal brand? Do advertisers prioritize showcasing Ibra's one-of-a-kind character? Or are they even willing to place the product or service brand in the background, acknowledging that the true brand here is the player himself?

To examine this, we gathered all commercials featuring Ibrahimović that were available on YouTube and subjected them to a qualitative content analysis. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of the ways in which Ibrahimović's persona is represented in advertising and how it interacts with the branding messages of the products and services he endorses. The study sought to identify whether his established public image—characterized by confidence, humor, and rebellion—was consistently maintained in these advertisements or whether brands attempted to mold his persona to better fit their marketing narratives.

The commercials were watched multiple times by the main author of this study and his students, ensuring a more rigorous and structured analysis. The inclusion of multiple viewers enabled a more comprehensive assessment, reducing the risk of individual bias and increasing the reliability of the interpretations. The examination of the advertisements was conducted in a systematic manner, focusing on both verbal and non-verbal communication, narrative structures, thematic elements, and brand–athlete dynamics. Each commercial was analyzed in detail, with particular emphasis placed on the extent to which Ibrahimović's persona was foregrounded, the degree of alignment between his brand identity and the product/service being advertised, and whether his presence enhanced, complemented, or dominated the commercial's intended message.

A systematic process was employed to ensure consistency in the analysis. Relevant portions of each commercial were transcribed, with Ibrahimović's dialogue, expressions, and gestures documented to capture his linguistic and visual representation within the advertisement. Particular attention was given to repeated motifs, stylistic choices, and rhetorical strategies that reinforced his personal brand. The study also considered the

broader context of each advertisement, including the industry, the target audience, and the positioning of the endorsed brand, to determine whether Ibrahimović's presence strengthened or overpowered the brand's messaging.

By utilizing a qualitative approach, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Ibrahimović's athlete brand is leveraged in advertising and how his persona influences the overall reception of the commercials in which he appears. This methodology enables an exploration of how different brands incorporate Ibrahimović into their marketing narratives and whether his distinctive presence aligns with, enhances, or disrupts the brand's intended communication.

Through this analysis, the study contributes to the broader discussion on athlete branding in advertising, particularly in cases where the endorser's identity is so strong that it shapes or even overshadows the brand being promoted. The research provides insights into whether advertisers strategically adapt their messaging to accommodate Ibrahimović's dominant personality or whether they allow him to take center stage, making his persona the focal point rather than the product or service itself.

4. Results: The Adaptation of the MABI Framework for Zlatan Ibrahimović and Its Reflection in Advertisements

As it was mentioned above, the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), developed by [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#), provides a comprehensive framework to analyze athlete brands through three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Each dimension contains sub-dimensions that reflect the multifaceted nature of athlete brand image.

4.1. Athletic Performance

This dimension reflects Ibrahimović's on-field abilities and accomplishments, highlighting his extraordinary career achievements, unique playing style, and intense competitive nature.

4.1.1. Athletic Expertise

Ibrahimović's career spans over 24 years, during which he has played for some of the world's most prestigious football clubs, including Ajax, Juventus, Internazionale, Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain, Manchester United, LA Galaxy, and AC Milan. He scored 62 goals in 122 appearances for the Swedish national team, making him Sweden's all-time leading goal scorer. As [Andersson et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight, Zlatan Ibrahimović is Sweden's greatest male footballer of all time and has already been honored with a statue commissioned by the Swedish FA and created by sculptor Peter Linde in 2017. When expanding the perspective to Scandinavia, some experts consider Zlatan Ibrahimović from Sweden and Michael Laudrup from Denmark to be the greatest soccer players in the region's history ([Frank, 2021](#)). In 2014, Ibrahimović was ranked the second greatest Swedish athlete of all time by *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden's leading newspapers, following tennis legend Björn Borg. However, Ibrahimović humorously remarked, "As far as I'm concerned, coming in second is like coming in last. With all my respect for the other athletes, I'd have called first place for Ibrahimović, then in the second place Ibrahimović, third place Ibrahimović, fourth place Ibrahimović and fifth place Ibrahimović". And Björn Borg's response? "Ibra is a funny guy, a lovely individual. And anyway he's better known around the world than Ikea, and a lot more famous than I was back in the day" ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), pp. 138–139).

4.1.2. Competition Style

Ibrahimović's flair on the pitch is characterized by numerous "magic moments". One of his most famous goals came in 2004 during Ajax's match against NAC Breda, where

he dribbled past almost the entire defense, including the goalkeeper, to score ([Eredivisie Archief, 2019](#)). Another standout moment occurred during his debut for LA Galaxy in 2018. Trailing 3-1, Ć entered as a substitute and scored from 40 m out, then eventually secured a 4-3 victory with a header ([Major League Soccer, 2018](#)). His most iconic goal, however, was a 30 m bicycle kick against England in 2012, earning him the FIFA Puskás Award that year ([GOAL, 2012](#)). As he described it in his book “Adrenaline” ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 23): “There’s a little bit of everything in that goal: courage, imagination, acrobatics, strength, risk, and arrogance. Just about everything. I am that bicycle kick”. The final score was 4-2 in favor of Sweden, and a detail often overlooked is that Ibrahimović scored all four (!) goals. This match solidified his signature move—the bicycle kick. In situations where most players would head the ball, Ibrahimović frequently opted for a bicycle kick. As he writes in his book (2022): “When it comes to bicycle kicks, my love of martial arts (and especially taekwondo) plays a role. It’s given me agility, acrobatic skills and flexibility. It’s taught me movements that aren’t common in football: kicking or stopping the ball six feet in the air, or striking it with a back-heel” ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 23).

Such breathtaking moments on the field have earned him the nickname “Ibracadabra”, a play on words combining his surname and the magical incantation “abracadabra”. The term reflects his seemingly supernatural ability to create goals out of nothing, leaving both fans and opponents in disbelief. This nickname gained popularity early in his career, particularly during his time at Ajax, when his unpredictable dribbles and audacious goals made him a standout figure in European football. Over the years, “Ibracadabra” has come to symbolize not just his technical skill and creativity but also his larger-than-life persona. Whether it was his outrageous volleys, impossible angles, or signature taekwondo-influenced finishes, Ibrahimović consistently lived up to the mystical aura surrounding his name.

This extraordinary presence on and off the pitch is precisely why, in December 2012, Sweden officially added the verb ‘to Zlatan’ to its national dictionary. The Swedish Language Council recognized the term, as it had become increasingly popular in everyday conversations, used to describe an act of outlandish talent or sheer dominance. Interestingly, the word was first coined on *Les Guignols*, a satirical puppet show on the French channel Canal Plus, where the characters were in awe of Ibrahimović’s performances for Paris Saint-Germain. The original French term, *zlataner*, was later adapted into Swedish as *zlatanera*, and was officially defined as “from the French: to dominate on and off the field”. While many footballers have had their names associated with signature moves, having one’s brilliance encapsulated in a verb is an honor that remains uniquely Zlatan’s ([James, 2012](#)).

4.1.3. Sportsmanship

Ibrahimović deeply respects the game, but is known for his outspoken personality and occasional confrontations with opponents, referees, and journalists. Despite his remarkable career, he acknowledges that his candid nature may have cost him the Ballon d’Or. His passion for football remains unwavering, evident in his continued performance at an elite level until his retirement at 42. And he retired from AC Milan, not from a lesser-known or non-European club.

4.1.4. Rivalry

Ibrahimović thrives on competition and relentlessly pursues excellence. As he states in his book, “Adrenaline”: “I want to be the winner, every time”. ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 34), “I always give 200 percent at everything I try to do” ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 93), and “In training I’m always the tough guy—I bust everybody’s balls” ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 13). As the title of his book suggests, Ibrahimović constantly seeks adrenaline. In

terms of competition, alongside Messi and Ronaldo, Ibrahimović has remained at the top of football for over 20 years. He had few conflicts to mention: (1) Marco Materazzi—Ibrahimović waited five years to retaliate for an injury he sustained from Materazzi. (2) Romelu Lukaku—Lukaku angered Ibrahimović by declaring himself “the true king of Milan” after joining Internazionale, while Ibrahimović was playing for AC Milan. (3) Pep Guardiola—Ibrahimović’s biggest clash was with his former Barcelona coach: “The only problems I ever had were with Pep Guardiola, but they were his problems with me, not mine with him, and I never even knew exactly what those problems were” ([Ibrahimović, 2022](#), p. 11). Ibrahimović felt stifled at Barcelona and was unable to thrive under Guardiola.

The “Dare to Zlatan” philosophy also encapsulates his approach to rivalry. The “Dare to Zlatan” slogan is not just about playing football—it is a mindset, a way of approaching life with fearless confidence. It states ([Unisport Store, 2021](#)): “To be Zlatan, you have to break a few rules and make a few enemies. Strike without fear and without hesitation. Embrace the chaos, listen to instinct, and never play it safe. You have to learn to be loved, hated, and everything else in between. To be Zlatan, you must summon the courage to put it all on the line. And dare to take the chances they can’t anticipate. So you can be the thing they never saw coming. Dare to Zlatan”. This attitude perfectly reflects Ibrahimović’s career-long approach to rivalry. He does not just accept competition—he seeks it, thrives in it, and uses it to elevate himself beyond his peers. He does not shy away from confrontation; instead, he sees it as an essential part of becoming legendary.

4.2. Attractive Appearance

Ibrahimović’s physical attributes, distinctive personal style, and symbolism contribute significantly to his brand image.

4.2.1. Physical Attractiveness

Standing at 195 cm, Ibrahimović’s tall, muscular physique exudes strength and athleticism. His background in martial arts, particularly taekwondo, enhances his agility and flexibility, allowing him to execute acrobatic moves uncommon in football. This training plays a role in his trademark bicycle kicks and unconventional playing style.

4.2.2. Symbol

Ibrahimović’s personal style is unique but understated compared to fashion-conscious athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo. While he began his career in tracksuits, his wife, a model, has influenced his fashion sense over time. His tattoos are significant identifiers ([Davies & Hirji, 2021](#)), including the “Ibrahimović code” on his wrist, representing his family’s birthdates, and a red dragon on his torso, symbolizing his fierce personality. His confidence extends to material possessions, exemplified by his EUR 650,000 Ferrari and other cars, and his house in Stockholm, originally built as a church in the late 19th century. As he quipped in his book, “Adrenaline” (2022, p. 130), “I mean, after all, where does a god live? In a church”.

4.2.3. Body Fitness

Ibrahimović’s longevity in professional football defies expectations. While most players retire by 35, he joined Manchester United at that age—and that was not his last club. He continued his career at LA Galaxy, but his agent convinced him that he was far too great of a player to retire in America. As a result, he returned to Europe, eventually leading AC Milan back to prominence and winning the Italian championship, the Scudetto, in the 2021–2022 season, their first since 2010–2011. His dedication to physical fitness, influenced by martial arts, plays a crucial role in maintaining his elite status.

4.3. Marketable Lifestyle

Ibrahimović's off-field persona, personal story, and interactions with fans and media further enhance his brand value.

4.3.1. Life Story

Ibrahimović's journey from a challenging upbringing in Malmö's Rosengård district to global football stardom is central to his brand narrative. Born to Bosnian and Croatian immigrant parents, his childhood was marked by poverty and hardship (Oonk, 2021; Johansson et al., 2023). As he recounts (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 162), "Every day was a battle against poverty and shame". Ibrahimović has openly admitted to stealing bicycles during his youth, a reflection of the difficult circumstances he faced. His resilience and determination to succeed against the odds resonate with fans worldwide. "Without football, I'd have been a nobody", he admits (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 47).

4.3.2. Role Model

Although Ibrahimović's outspoken nature occasionally sparks controversy, his personal life reflects a grounded and stable figure. He has been in a relationship with his wife since the age of 21, and the couple has two sons, both of whom are now pursuing football careers. Despite his brash public persona, there are no major scandals associated with his personal life. Ibrahimović portrays himself as a role model who encourages self-confidence and perseverance: "It's enough to be myself, and I'm perfect the way I am" (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 141).

4.3.3. Relationship Effort

Ibrahimović actively engages with fans through books, documentaries, and social media, solidifying his global fanbase with charisma and humor. Reflecting on the unveiling of his statue in Malmö, he quipped, "Kids, tomorrow you have my permission to stay home from school. Come and see me, and say hello". (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 26). He also added, "If you go to New York, you see the Statue of Liberty. If you come to Sweden, you see the Statue of Zlatan" (Serrano, 2019). However, the statue was later torn down by Malmö fans when Ibrahimović became part-owner of Hammarby and publicly stated his ambition to make the latter club the most successful in Scandinavia.

Ibrahimović's confrontations are not limited to the pitch. Following a heated Bordeaux-PSG match, he infamously told the referee, "France, you piece-of-shit country, you don't deserve me and you don't deserve PSG". (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 35; Torres comps, 2015). The remark sparked national outrage, drawing criticism even from political figures such as Marine Le Pen.

His relationship with journalists has often been strained, as he candidly notes in his book, "Adrenaline": "I'm not going to change, and if I have something to say, I'll say it" (2022, p. 36). Conversely, Ibrahimović shines in entertainment shows, particularly in the United States, where his playful and humorous side captivates audiences. He has always been a natural showman, effortlessly drawing attention with his charisma and confidence. In Italy, his role as one of the hosts of the Sanremo Music Festival demonstrated his ability to entertain beyond sports. Though Ibrahimović played for Italy's three biggest clubs—Juventus, Internazionale, and Milan—his Sanremo appearance made him truly beloved by the Italian public. As he observed, "They weren't applauding the god of San Siro, but rather the man of Sanremo" (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 65).

His mastery of social media further amplifies his brand, providing him with a direct channel to engage with millions of fans. According to Statista.com, Ibrahimović ranked among the top 10 footballers on Instagram in 2023, while eDigital Agency listed him in the

top 10 on TikTok as well. This immense following grants brands unparalleled access to consumers through Ibrahimović's persona.

In summary, it can be said that Ibrahimović embodies the "outlaw" archetype, as described by Jungian psychology (Mark & Pearson, 2001). His message to fans and readers in the first page of "Adrenaline", encapsulates this persona: "To everyone who likes to overturn the usual rules and expectations... your vision of the world can be unique like mine" (Ibrahimović, 2022, p. 1).

What he does is anything but usual—more often, it is distinctly unusual.

After all, what other player takes out a full-page ad in a major newspaper, The Los Angeles Times, just to write: "Dear Los Angeles, You're welcome!"—all because he transferred from Manchester United to LA Galaxy? (Serrano, 2018) Not long after, billboards appeared across the city, simply stating ZLATAN, with the LA in his name highlighted to emphasize the abbreviation for Los Angeles.

When Ibrahimović bid farewell to the club at the end of 2019, he posted on social media: "I came, I saw, I conquered. Thank you @lagalaxy for making me feel alive again. To the Galaxy fans—you wanted Zlatan, I gave you Zlatan. You are welcome. The story continues... Now go back to watch baseball". This playful jab hinted that Major League Soccer (MLS) wouldn't be quite the same without him (The Guardian, 2019).

Playing for PSG, in March 2016, after Paris Saint-Germain secured the Ligue 1 title, Ibrahimović humorously remarked on his future with the club: "I don't believe they can change the Eiffel Tower for my statue, even the people behind the club. But if they can, I will stay here—I promise you" (B-Youtuber's TV Official, 2016).

Similarly, during the 2018 World Cup, which Sweden qualified for but the then 38-year-old Ibrahimović was not selected to join, he quipped: "A FIFA World Cup without me is one not worth watching".

Another notable moment from his time in Los Angeles was his Instagram message to basketball legend LeBron James: "Now LA has a God and a King. Zlatan welcomes @kingJames". The message suggested that with Ibrahimović and LeBron in town, Los Angeles now had both divine and royal representation. In response to this, LeBron James sent Ibrahimović a signed Lakers jersey. True to form, Zlatan signed the jersey himself and sent it back to LeBron. This gesture generated significant media attention, with numerous articles covering the lighthearted exchange (Sportbible, 2023).

Of course, while these statements and actions are often humorous, they can sometimes come across as arrogant or self-centered. Yes, there were moments when Ibrahimović's behavior, on and occasionally off the pitch, was questionable—as he openly acknowledges in his autobiographies. This may explain why he has not been showered with as many sponsorship deals or advertising collaborations as some less controversial players. Nevertheless, he has little reason to complain. As the following examples show, the brands that chose to partner with him often embraced his bold personality, sometimes even elevating it above their own.

4.4. Zlatan Ibrahimović's Persona in Commercials

As noted in the Methodology section, all available commercials featuring Ibrahimović were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The main author and students viewed each ad multiple times, examining verbal and non-verbal communication, thematic elements, and brand–athlete interaction to assess how his persona was represented. The findings from this analysis will be presented in this section.

The magnitude of Ibrahimović as a player is well illustrated by his appearance in Nike's 2006 Joga Bonito campaign at the age of 25, alongside a 21-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo, under the guidance of the legendary Eric Cantona. The campaign, which aimed

to celebrate the beauty and flair of football, features Cantona as a charismatic host who challenges football stars to showcase their skills. In this particular ad, Ibrahimović and Ronaldo show off their signature tricks in a locker room before heading onto the pitch. As the two players demonstrate their dazzling footwork, Cantona famously remarks, “Who wins? I don’t know” ([Nike Football, 2011](#)). This campaign was significant for Nike, as it not only showcased two of the most marketable young footballers of the time but also emphasized creativity, competition, and individuality—values closely associated with the Nike brand—while both players were still in the early stages of their careers. The playful nature of the ad resonated with younger audiences, reinforcing Nike’s image as the brand for bold, stylish athletes who play with flair.

A year later, in 2007, Ibrahimović appeared in a MediaSet commercial that brought humor and lightheartedness to football advertising. In the ad, Ibrahimović attempts his thousandth “around the world” trick—juggling the ball and looping his foot around it—right in front of football icon Pelé. The moment feels monumental, as Pelé watches intently, symbolizing the passing of greatness from one footballing era to another. However, just as Ibrahimović is about to finish the 1000th trick, Filippo Inzaghi slides open a metal door and casually walks in, disrupting Zlatan’s rhythm and forcing him to start over ([Mediaset, 2007](#)). This humorous, tongue-in-cheek approach highlighted the playful side of professional football, making the ad memorable for audiences. For MediaSet, the commercial’s lighthearted tone and inclusion of football legend Pelé helped attract viewers across different age groups, capitalizing on nostalgia while entertaining younger fans. Ibrahimović’s reaction to the interruption—half frustration, half amusement—mirrored his real-life persona, reinforcing his image as a confident yet relatable star. By blending humor with star power, MediaSet succeeded in creating an ad that not only entertained but also underscored their association with top-tier football content.

In 2015, while playing for PSG, Ibrahimović starred in a commercial resulting from the collaboration between the team and telecommunications company Ooredoo. The ad creatively depicts a fully packed stadium with fans submitting digital requests to the players through an interactive messaging platform. The crowd cheers as messages like “Thiago Silva, score a header”, or “David Luiz, make a tackle”, flash across the screen. When it comes to Ibrahimović’s turn, the message displays: “Ibra volley sick”. Both Ibrahimović and the crowd look puzzled until it becomes clear that the fan had mistyped the final word. Once corrected to “Ibra volley kick”, Zlatan executes a perfect volley, delighting the audience ([Ooredoo, 2015](#)). This campaign was a prime example of Ooredoo’s ability to merge football culture with technology, reinforcing the company’s innovative brand image. The commercial’s focus on fan interaction showcased Ooredoo as a tech-savvy company that empowers fans to feel closer to their favorite players. By centering the ad around Ibrahimović’s iconic taekwondo-inspired volleys, Ooredoo leveraged his reputation for athleticism and flair, aligning their brand with excellence and entertainment.

In a Nivea Men commercial released in early 2014, Zlatan Ibrahimović and his PSG teammates jog through the streets of Paris, showcasing their athleticism and camaraderie. As they pass by, two women notice them from afar and express how wonderful it would be to obtain autographs from the players. A young man nearby overhears the conversation and seizes the opportunity. Without hesitation, he swiftly grabs a notebook and pen from one of the women and dashes after the players. Ibrahimović, amused by the boldness, signs the paper. However, when the young man returns the notebook to the woman, she discovers not Zlatan’s signature but the young man’s own name and phone number scribbled across the page. The ad concludes with the tagline: “Always be sure of yourself”. As the scene closes, Ibrahimović gestures to the woman, subtly encouraging her to call the young man ([Nivea Men, 2014](#)). This commercial was part of Nivea Men’s campaign

as the official supplier of Paris Saint-Germain, featuring other PSG stars such as Thiago Silva, Salvatore Sirigu, Maxwell, and Blaise Matuidi. The lighthearted nature of the ad was designed to align with Nivea Men's core message of confidence and self-assurance, using humor and charm to convey that success often comes from boldness and belief in oneself. By placing Ibrahimović at the forefront, Nivea Men capitalized on his status as a charismatic leader, not just on the pitch but off it. The ad resonated well with audiences because it blended everyday interactions with star power, making the brand feel more approachable and authentic. It also subtly reinforced the connection between personal grooming and self-confidence, a key pillar in Nivea Men's marketing strategy. Ibrahimović's involvement added credibility and appeal, enhancing the brand's image in both the sporting and lifestyle sectors.

While the previous advertisements were notable for featuring Ibrahimović alongside other players, the Nike "Dare to Zlatan" campaign took his stardom to another level by building an entire campaign around him alone. This rare approach signified Nike's belief in Ibrahimović's marketability as an individual, emphasizing his unique persona and ability to inspire fans globally. Nike's brief to the advertising agency was clear: position Zlatan Ibrahimović as the world's most risk-taking footballer. The campaign sought to highlight his fearless playing style, audacious goals, and unshakable confidence (Petri, 2025). The campaign's slogan, "Dare to Zlatan", defied direct translation, roughly meaning "Dare to be Zlatan" or "Dare to act like Zlatan", tapping into the player's confident, larger-than-life personality. One of the most memorable ads from the series depicts Ibrahimović juggling a ball atop a volcanic island before executing a flawless scissor kick, accompanied by the tagline "Get better with pressure". Another spot, titled "Fear Nothing", places him in a dramatic, icy landscape, kicking a ball beside a massive Siberian tiger—a nod to his fearless reputation. The third episode, "Trust your instincts!", portrays Ibrahimović blindfolded, dribbling a ball through lightning strikes and relying solely on intuition to avoid danger. As the storm clears, he stares up at the sky and, in typical Zlatan fashion, shouts his own name: "Zlatan!" (Nike Football, 2014). This campaign was a massive success for Nike as it emphasized individualism, confidence, and the ability to thrive under pressure—values closely aligned with the brand's identity. By framing Ibrahimović as a mythical figure who could conquer extreme environments and physical challenges, Nike reinforced the idea that greatness is achieved by pushing boundaries. For Nike, aligning their products with Ibrahimović's bold and rebellious persona allowed the brand to engage younger audiences who admired not just his skills but his fearless attitude. The over-the-top visuals and dramatic flair of the campaign also generated significant social media traction, creating a viral element that amplified Nike's message globally. According to Macuga and Kim (2021), "Dare to Zlatan" is a phrase that truly encapsulates Zlatan Ibrahimović's persona. After moving to the United States and scoring his first goals for Los Angeles Galaxy, he further reinforced his brand identity with a bold marketing move—a billboard stating "Welcome to Zlatan", cleverly emphasizing "LA" to highlight both his name and his arrival in Los Angeles.

In another innovative collaboration, Ibrahimović traded his football kit for a white robe embroidered with "Zlatan The One" in a campaign for Microsoft's Xbox One. In the ad, the "One" cleverly referred to both the gaming console and Ibrahimović himself, reinforcing the idea of being the best or the only choice. The commercial portrays Zlatan seated regally on a throne, playing Xbox with one hand, seemingly uninterested in the competition. A young boy, at home playing FIFA, receives a notification indicating he has been invited to a match by Zlatan. Overwhelmed by excitement, the boy nervously asks if it is really Zlatan. Ibrahimović responds affirmatively but, after the boy scores a goal, quips, "I must disappoint you; you're not playing with the real Zlatan" (Xbox One, 2013). The ad's

playful nature and the use of Zlatan's signature humor resonated strongly with younger audiences, blending gaming culture with football stardom. By featuring Ibrahimović's relaxed, cheeky demeanor, the campaign reinforced the fun and competitive spirit of Xbox gaming. The authenticity of the collaboration was further strengthened by Ibrahimović's real-life passion for gaming, as detailed in his autobiography, where he admitted to staying up late playing Xbox—sometimes to the detriment of his training. This genuine connection between Ibrahimović and the product created a stronger emotional bond with consumers, driving home the message that even global football stars unwind with Xbox, bridging the gap between celebrities and everyday fans. For Microsoft, this campaign helped position Xbox One as not just a gaming console but part of a lifestyle shared by high-profile athletes and celebrities. By leveraging Ibrahimović's star power and charisma, Microsoft successfully expanded its reach among football fans and gamers, reinforcing the idea that Xbox was the ultimate choice for entertainment.

While Zlatan Ibrahimović is not Sweden's most-capped player, his 122 appearances for the national team solidify his legendary status in Swedish football history. This iconic standing has made him a natural choice for Swedish brands aiming to leverage national pride and align themselves with Ibrahimović's larger-than-life persona. In 2014, Volvo capitalized on this by featuring him in their Volvo XC70 commercial, a campaign that transcended traditional automotive advertising to become a patriotic tribute to Sweden itself. Dubbed "the most dramatic car ad you will ever see" by USA Today (Schwartz, 2014), the two-minute advertisement showcases Sweden's breathtaking snowy landscapes, symbolizing resilience, strength, and the rugged beauty of the nation. The Swedish national anthem, reimagined by renowned producer Max Martin, plays in the background as Ibrahimović dives into icy waters, sprints through the snow, and stalks a deer in the wilderness—only to release it unharmed. Ibrahimović's family—his wife, model Helena Seger, and their children—also appear in the ad, further grounding the campaign in personal, relatable elements. The ad concludes with the tagline, "Made by Sweden", encapsulating the essence of the commercial and portraying Ibrahimović not just as an athlete but as a symbol of the country's tenacity and excellence (Volvo, 2014). For Volvo, this campaign was a masterstroke. By featuring Ibrahimović, a figure synonymous with ambition and success, the brand reinforced its image as a product of Swedish innovation and endurance. The ad effectively blurred the lines between personal branding and corporate identity, making Volvo a part of the Swedish national narrative. The emotional connection established through Ibrahimović's portrayal elevated Volvo's status beyond that of a car manufacturer, positioning it as a brand that embodies the spirit of Sweden itself. The commercial's cinematic quality and dramatic storytelling further distinguished Volvo from competitors, driving brand awareness not only domestically but also internationally.

On 22 June 2016, Sweden's match against Belgium marked what was believed to be Ibrahimović's farewell to the national team. To commemorate this pivotal moment, Volvo crafted an emotionally charged campaign for their V90 model, aptly titled "Epilogue". The ad begins with a scene of Swedish fans applauding Ibrahimović as he leaves the pitch, despite Sweden's 1-0 loss and subsequent elimination from Euro 2016. The emotional weight of the moment is palpable, with the focus shifting to the parking lot, where Ibrahimović's wife and children await him. Together, they drive in the Volvo V90 to Rosengård, the Malmö neighborhood where Ibrahimović's football journey began. The climax of the ad occurs when Ibrahimović arrives at Zlatan Court, a football pitch bearing his name. Holding his iconic Swedish national team jersey emblazoned with the number 10, he carefully hangs it on the fence, symbolizing the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. At the end, he embraces his two sons, and the ad concludes with the words: "Where one story ends another begins" (Volvo, 2016a). This heartfelt moment seamlessly tied Ibrahimović's

personal narrative to Volvo's brand ethos, reinforcing themes of legacy, perseverance, and forward momentum. For Volvo, "Epilogue" was more than just an advertisement; it was a story that bridged the past and the future. By focusing on Ibrahimović's roots and personal journey, Volvo positioned itself as a brand that honors heritage while driving innovation. The campaign resonated with audiences who saw Ibrahimović as a national hero, enhancing the emotional appeal of the Volvo V90. This alignment between athlete and brand cultivated deeper loyalty among consumers, particularly those who admired Ibrahimović's rise from humble beginnings to global stardom (Florin, 2021a).

The earlier part of this series, titled "Prologue", served as a prelude to "Epilogue", adding further depth to the narrative arc. In this installment, Ibrahimović drives to the stadium for his final match, reflecting on his life and career through an introspective voiceover. "I come from a different place. My mother is from Croatia, and my father comes from Bosnia. I grew up in this tiny suburb in Sweden. I didn't have much—just my restless mind and big dreams. I didn't think like them. I worked harder than anyone. In Ajax, Juventus, Inter, Barcelona, Milan, and Paris. I listened, but I didn't always follow. I knew what was right for me. If there's anything I've learned, you don't get chances—you take them. You go your own way but never forget where you come from" (Volvo, 2016b). The "Prologue" ad, much like its successor, masterfully wove together themes of ambition, identity, and resilience. Volvo's decision to center the campaign on Ibrahimović's reflections reinforced the brand's core message of staying true to one's roots while forging ahead. The deeply personal and poetic narrative humanized Ibrahimović, making him relatable to viewers and amplifying Volvo's emphasis on craftsmanship and self-belief. This segment resonated particularly well with younger audiences and aspiring athletes, for whom Ibrahimović's story served as inspiration. By producing a series that spanned "Prologue" and "Epilogue", Volvo demonstrated the power of long-form storytelling in advertising. The layered campaign not only strengthened Volvo's association with Ibrahimović but also created a sense of continuity, reinforcing customer loyalty and brand recognition over time. The emotional arc of Ibrahimović's journey mirrored Volvo's messaging, positioning the brand as a steadfast companion through life's various transitions.

A similar collaboration emerged with Stockholm-based Vitamin Well in 2014, where Ibrahimović launched his own lemon-cactus-flavored vitamin drink. More than just an endorsement, this partnership reflected his personal brand, reinforcing his image as an entrepreneur and national icon. In 2016, Vitamin Well released a striking ad featuring Ibrahimović delivering a powerful monologue: "So you think that I'm done. That my career will soon be over. You don't know me. All my life I had to fight. No one believed in me. So I had to believe in myself. Some people wanted to break me. But they only made me stronger. Others wanted to exploit me. They only made me smarter. And now you think I'm done. To all of you I only have one thing to say: I'm not like you. Because I'm not you. I am Zlatan Ibrahimović. And I am just warming up" (Vitamin Well, 2016). The minimalist ad focuses entirely on Ibrahimović's words, creating a raw, intimate feel that resonates deeply with audiences. The campaign seamlessly aligned Vitamin Well with qualities like resilience, confidence, and ambition—traits synonymous with Ibrahimović. The ad's simplicity and authenticity strengthened Vitamin Well's identity as more than just a health drink—it became a symbol of perseverance and strength. Ibrahimović's direct involvement not only in the ad but in product development added credibility, fostering consumer trust and loyalty. The campaign expanded Vitamin Well's visibility, tapping into Ibrahimović's widespread appeal and reinforcing the brand's connection to personal empowerment.

Perhaps even more intriguing was the "Zlatan@Work" series on Vitamin Well's YouTube channel (2018). In this unconventional campaign, Ibrahimović takes on the role of an interviewer, surprising unsuspecting job applicants during their interviews at

the company's headquarters. The series, filmed in a hidden-camera style, captures the genuine reactions of candidates as they suddenly find themselves face-to-face with one of the most iconic footballers in the world. Throughout the seven-episode series, Ibrahimović's questions range from lighthearted to deliberately challenging, blending humor with the intimidating aura he is known for. He frequently puts applicants on the spot by asking them to name their favorite football player, playfully raising an eyebrow if they hesitate to say "Zlatan". In another recurring moment, he quizzes them on the flavors and names of Vitamin Well products, testing their knowledge in unexpected ways. One memorable exchange showcases Ibrahimović's signature blend of humor and arrogance. He asks a candidate, "Do you believe in God?" The nervous applicant replies, "Eh, not really". Without missing a beat, Ibrahimović follows up, "So you do not believe in Zlatan?" The applicant quickly responds, "That I do for sure!" (Vitamin Well, 2018). The hidden-camera format, coupled with Ibrahimović's unpredictable personality, made the campaign an instant hit. It not only entertained but also subtly reinforced Vitamin Well's brand identity by associating it with Zlatan's bold, playful image. The campaign's success lay in its ability to humanize both the brand and the athlete, creating viral moments that resonated with audiences far beyond the world of football. The unconventional format and Ibrahimović's involvement helped position Vitamin Well as a brand that values confidence and humor, traits that directly align with the footballer's persona.

In 2018, Visa leveraged Ibrahimović's absence from the World Cup to craft a bold and unforgettable campaign. After being left out of Sweden's squad at 38, Ibrahimović's response became iconic: "A FIFA World Cup without me is not worth watching". Visa's commercial opens with Ibrahimović at a press conference, repeating this line before declaring: "But a lion cannot miss their hunt. I will qualify on my own and I will dominate!" When questioned about following the same rules as other players, his response perfectly embodies his persona: "Rules apply to average players. I am Zlatan". The ad concludes with Ibrahimović boarding a bus wrapped in his image alongside a lion, driving home Visa's slogan: "Visa lets you be there for the World Cup" (Visa, 2023). Visa brilliantly turned Ibrahimović's exclusion into a humorous yet empowering narrative that resonated with football fans globally. Ibrahimović's charisma and wit not only entertained but reinforced Visa's image as bold, forward-thinking, and globally connected. The campaign's viral nature and wide appeal made it a standout in World Cup advertising, keeping Visa at the center of football's biggest stage despite Ibrahimović not being on the pitch.

In the same year, 2018, Zlatan Ibrahimović appeared in one of the most bizarre yet fitting commercials of his career. The advert, created for the betting company Bethard, heavily played on Zlatan's self-proclaimed "lion" persona (Bethard, 2018). The commercial opens with ominous music as a mysterious figure leaps and crawls through a burning, dilapidated warehouse. Flames illuminate a path leading to a statue of a lion, standing imposingly at the corridor's end. Without hesitation, the figure pulls out a bazooka and fires directly at the statue. As the stone shatters into dust and debris, Zlatan Ibrahimović emerges from beneath the rubble—chiseled, unscathed, and roaring, embodying the lion he often compares himself to. The commercial then takes an unexpected turn. From the smoke steps another figure—Dragomir Mrsic, a Bosnian–Swedish actor with a past as intriguing as Zlatan's own. The two men exchange a few tense words in Bosnian, locked in a dramatic standoff. Yet, in a surreal twist, they abandon their rivalry and instead sit down for a calm, civilized afternoon tea. Mrsic's involvement added an unusual but fitting layer to the advertisement. Known for his role in the Swedish crime thriller *Easy Money* (*Snabba Cash*), Mrsic's background was far from ordinary—he was once a real-life bank robber. In the 1990s, Mrsic participated in a high-profile Swedish bank heist and served time in prison before reinventing himself as an actor. His tough, gritty persona became

his trademark, making him the perfect complement to Zlatan's untamed, larger-than-life image. The Bethard campaign, driven by the slogan "Winners Dare More", was crafted to reflect Zlatan's relentless ambition and fearless personality. In true Zlatan fashion, he embraced the campaign with a signature quote: "I don't follow the rules. I make them. I am not like you. I am Zlatan". This was not the only Bethard commercial featuring Ibrahimović and Mrsic—the campaign included several films, each amplifying the duo's intense yet playful dynamic, further reinforcing Bethard's bold, rebellious brand identity. According to [Goedecke \(2021\)](#), the assertion that the roaring, oil drums, and fires, all elements typically associated with hypermasculine action-movie performances, are perceived as "cheesy" makes the main commercial particularly distinctive. This self-aware and somewhat ironic portrayal not only differentiates it from conventional gambling advertisements but also signals a broader shift in the representation of masculinity within gambling commercials. By incorporating elements that acknowledge and even play with traditional masculine tropes, the advertisement aligns with postfeminist representations of men, where notions of masculinity are both referenced and subtly redefined.

Ibrahimović's unique approach to activism also sets him apart. One of the most powerful examples of this was his involvement in the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) "805 Million Names" campaign ([Florin, 2021b](#)). On 14 February 2015, during a Paris Saint-Germain vs. Caen match, Ibrahimović scored a karate-style goal and then removed his shirt, revealing tattoos of the names of 50 starving children. This striking moment was part of a larger campaign to raise awareness about global hunger. In the accompanying campaign video, Ibrahimović narrates: "My name is Zlatan Ibrahimović. Wherever I go, people recognize me. They call my name, they cheer for me. But there are names no one cheers for... Carmen, Rahma, Antoine, Lida, Chheuy, Mariko... If I could, I would write every single name on my body. But there are 805 million people suffering from hunger in the world today. Too many of them are children". As the video progresses, Ibrahimović emphasizes the scale of the issue, urging viewers to act: "I have supporters all over the world. Beginning today, I want the support to go to the people who really need it. So whenever you hear my name, you will think of their names. Whenever you see me, you will see them" ([World Food Programme, 2015](#)). For the World Food Programme, this campaign exemplified the power of aligning with a high-profile athlete who could bring widespread attention to humanitarian causes. Ibrahimović's global fame, coupled with his bold, emotionally charged message, created a campaign that resonated far beyond the world of football. The authenticity of his involvement—symbolized by physically marking his body with the names of real children—brought the issue to life in a way that was impossible to ignore. By linking his personal brand with a humanitarian cause, Ibrahimović reinforced his image as more than just an athlete—he became a voice for the voiceless. This campaign became one of the most memorable athlete-led humanitarian efforts, showcasing the potential of personal branding to influence social issues and reinforcing Ibrahimović's reputation as a fearless, unconventional figure willing to use his platform for impact. As [Florin \(2021b\)](#) emphasizes, a brand is not merely the result of advertising but also serves as a tool to promote advertising itself. In this way, the advertisement, in its narrower sense, becomes intertwined with the broader function of advertising, which seeks to influence and reshape values, including opinions, attitudes, and behavior.

Even in his 40s, Zlatan Ibrahimović remained an active and dominant force on the pitch, winning Serie A with AC Milan and cementing his place in history as the oldest goalscorer in the Italian first league. His extraordinary longevity and peak physical fitness captivated global audiences, attracting attention from major brands eager to align with his resilience and athleticism. One standout collaboration emerged with H&M for their H&M Move collection, a campaign aimed at promoting movement and fitness across all ages.

In the commercial, released in 2022, the legendary Jane Fonda video-calls Ibrahimović, encouraging him to join her in a light workout and mimic her famous aerobic routines. When she praises him, “Beautiful, Zlatan, beautiful moves”, Ibrahimović grins and replies with his trademark humor, “Moves? I’ll show you moves!” He then launches into a series of intense, acrobatic exercises, effortlessly outshining the simple routines Fonda demonstrates. With a playful smirk, Fonda quips, “Not bad for someone your age” ([H&M Move, 2022](#)). This campaign reinforced H&M’s message that movement and fitness are for everyone, regardless of age. By pairing Ibrahimović with Jane Fonda, the ad blended humor with inspiration, appealing to a broad audience. The collaboration highlighted Ibrahimović’s athleticism and Fonda’s timeless appeal, positioning H&M Move as a brand that transcends generations.

However, not all of Ibrahimović’s ventures mirrored this level of success. His personal sportswear brand, A–Z by Zlatan, launched with bold ambitions and aggressive marketing in 2016, aimed at democratizing athletic wear with the slogan “It’s not about having the right shoes, but having the right mindset”. Despite his star power and strong initial sales, the brand struggled to maintain momentum, closing after just two years in 2018. Analysts pointed to an oversaturated market and the challenge of competing with established giants like Nike and Adidas.

While A–Z ultimately faltered, Ibrahimović’s failure was far from a setback to his brand. His ventures continue to shape his image as more than just an athlete—he is a fearless entrepreneur, willing to take risks and embrace challenges. This authenticity and relentless self-belief, even in the face of commercial missteps, have only strengthened his global appeal. Zlatan Ibrahimović’s legacy—both on and off the pitch—continues to grow, solidifying his status as not just an elite footballer but a transcendent cultural icon whose influence stretches far beyond the world of sports. Whether through advertising, activism, or business, his persona remains synonymous with confidence, resilience, and the relentless pursuit of greatness.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex interplay between athlete brands and commercial advertising, as exemplified by Zlatan Ibrahimović. By applying the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) to Ibrahimović, this research highlights how his distinctive personality, athletic prowess, and media presence align with the three core dimensions outlined by [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#): athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. This section reflects on these results, comparing them with existing literature and identifying both parallels and unique divergences that distinguish Ibrahimović’s brand.

The results affirm that Ibrahimović’s public persona epitomizes the synergy between athletic performance and marketable lifestyle, two key pillars of the MABI framework. His on-field success, characterized by acrobatic goals and longevity, seamlessly translates into off-field marketability. As [Rein et al. \(2006\)](#) emphasize, athletes who consistently perform at the highest level develop a form of “hero capital” that enhances their branding potential. Ibrahimović’s career, spanning over two decades and multiple top-tier clubs, mirrors this observation, reinforcing the idea that sustained excellence solidifies athlete brand equity.

However, Ibrahimović’s brand diverges in notable ways from traditional athlete endorsements. [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#) posit that while athletic performance is critical, it must be complemented by a polished, relatable image. Ibrahimović’s outspoken, often provocative communication style deviates from this norm, embodying what is described as the “outlaw” archetype. Unlike David Beckham, whose brand thrives on professionalism and family values ([Milligan, 2004](#)), Ibrahimović leverages his controversial persona to captivate audiences, suggesting that authenticity, even when polarizing, can be a powerful branding tool.

The significance of authenticity is further underscored by [Kucharska et al. \(2020\)](#), who argue that authentic athlete brands drive not only personal identification but also loyalty to the broader sport. Ibrahimović's unfiltered persona exemplifies this phenomenon. Fans do not merely follow Ibrahimović for his skills but for the values and character he represents, mirroring the loyalty-building mechanisms described by [Kucharska et al. \(2020\)](#). Ibrahimović's brand bridges the gap between sports entertainment and personal connection, reinforcing how athlete endorsements are increasingly personality-driven. As [Alexander and Rosen \(2022\)](#) highlight, the dual role of athletes as both competitors and entertainers fosters a dynamic where personal narratives, controversies, and athletic achievements coalesce into a marketable brand. Ibrahimović's larger-than-life persona exemplifies this phenomenon, reinforcing the argument that in modern sports marketing, the spectacle surrounding an athlete can be as valuable as their athletic contributions.

The findings of this study further align with [Alcott's \(2023\)](#) assertion that the relationship between an athlete's on-field performance and off-field persona forms the essence of their overall brand image. Athletic performance remains the cornerstone of Ibrahimović's brand. His spectacular goals, such as the 2012 bicycle kick against England, exemplify the athletic expertise dimension of the MABI model. This aligns with [Gladden and Funk's \(2001\)](#) assertion that memorable performances foster stronger emotional connections with fans. However, the rivalry component of the MABI model finds a unique application in Ibrahimović's career. Unlike conventional rivalries confined to the pitch, Ibrahimović's competitive nature extends to verbal exchanges with peers and media figures. His confrontations illustrate how rivalry can transcend sports, contributing to the athlete's broader narrative and enhancing brand visibility.

Ibrahimović's physical attributes and distinctive style also contribute significantly to his marketability. While [Arai et al. \(2014\)](#) highlight the importance of physical attractiveness in athlete branding, Ibrahimović's appeal lies more in his symbolic traits—his tattoos, iconic bicycle kicks, and towering presence. This parallels the findings of [Joseph \(1982\)](#), [Kok Wei and Li \(2013\)](#), and [Schouten et al. \(2021\)](#) who emphasize that perceived uniqueness can amplify an athlete's influence, even if traditional notions of attractiveness are secondary. Ibrahimović's self-referential humor, evident in commercials and public appearances, reinforces his brand as larger-than-life, diverging from the more calculated image management observed in athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi.

[Arai et al. \(2013\)](#) emphasize that an athlete's off-field persona is crucial for sustaining brand equity. Ibrahimović's autobiographies, documentaries (e.g., "Becoming Zlatan", "I am Football", "My Name is Zlatan"), and social media presence reflect this dimension, aligning with [Escalas \(2004\)](#), [A. C. T. Smith et al. \(2017\)](#), [Kassing \(2023\)](#), and [Glebova \(2024\)](#), who underscore the significance of narrative processing in building consumer connections. Unlike athletes who rely heavily on curated social media content, Ibrahimović's unfiltered posts and spontaneous remarks cultivate an image of authenticity, enhancing fan loyalty.

Additionally, Ibrahimović's ventures into entertainment, including his role in the Sanremo Music Festival and the movie "Asterix & Obelix: The Middle Kingdom", highlight the blurring boundaries between sports and popular culture. This echoes [Thomson's \(2006\)](#) concept of "human brands", where individuals leverage their public personas to engage audiences across multiple domains. However, Ibrahimović's case demonstrates that such diversification need not dilute the core athletic brand; instead, it reinforces his multidimensional appeal.

When juxtaposed with other athlete brands, Ibrahimović's trajectory reflects both commonalities and distinctive elements. Like Michael Jordan and Serena Williams, Ibrahimović leverages his personal narrative to cultivate a strong brand identity. However, whereas Jordan's brand emphasizes excellence and aspiration ([Rein et al., 2006](#)), Ibrahimović's brand

thrives on irreverence and unpredictability. This divergence underscores the flexibility of the MABI framework, suggesting that athlete branding need not conform to a singular mold but can adapt to the unique attributes of individual athletes.

Moreover, Ibrahimović's case challenges the conventional wisdom that brands must overshadow endorsing athletes. As seen in campaigns for various brands, Ibrahimović's persona often eclipses the products he promotes. This inversion redefines traditional endorsement dynamics, highlighting the evolving nature of athlete advertising.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the interplay between athlete branding and commercial advertising, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research relies on qualitative content analysis, which, while effective in identifying recurring themes and brand positioning strategies, does not quantitatively measure consumer perceptions or the direct impact of Ibrahimović's endorsements on brand equity. The lack of quantitative audience data means that while patterns in Ibrahimović's brand representation have been identified, the study does not provide empirical evidence regarding how different consumer groups interpret or respond to these branding efforts. A mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys, sentiment analysis, or experimental research, could provide a more comprehensive assessment of how audiences perceive his brand and how it influences consumer behavior.

Another limitation is the single-case focus on Ibrahimović, which, while offering depth, limits generalizability. Ibrahimović presents an especially compelling case due to his strong and unconventional personal brand, but the extent to which his branding approach applies to other athletes remains uncertain. Future research could compare his branding approach with other globally recognized athletes, including those with different brand archetypes, communication styles, and endorsement strategies. This would help determine whether the observed patterns in athlete branding are unique to his persona or part of broader trends in sports marketing.

Another potential research direction is to explore the long-term evolution of athlete brands, particularly in post-retirement phases. While many studies focus on athlete branding during active careers, fewer examine how retired athletes maintain, adapt, or reinvent their brand identities. Given that Ibrahimović has been a marketable figure for over two decades, his transition into post-retirement branding could provide valuable insights into the sustainability of athlete brands beyond their competitive years. A longitudinal study tracking the branding strategies of retired athletes and their continued endorsement value would be particularly useful.

Moreover, the use of neuromarketing techniques, such as eye-tracking, biometric feedback, and emotion recognition, could offer deeper insights into how audiences engage with athlete endorsements. These methods would allow researchers to measure subconscious reactions to commercials, identifying which elements—whether Ibrahimović's presence, the brand message, or product placement—capture the most consumer attention. This would help brands optimize their endorsement strategies by pinpointing the most effective branding elements in athlete-driven advertising campaigns.

In conclusion, while this study provides a strong foundation for understanding athlete branding through the case of Ibrahimović, further research integrating quantitative, comparative, and experimental methodologies would deepen our understanding of how athlete brands function within commercial marketing. Broadening the scope beyond a single athlete, expanding the dataset, and incorporating consumer perception analysis could enhance our knowledge of how sports figures shape modern branding dynamics.

7. Conclusions

While Zlatan Ibrahimović officially retired from professional football in the summer of 2023, his presence in the public eye shows no signs of diminishing. His dynamic personality, magnetic appeal, and immense social media following make him an attractive prospect for advertisers seeking to engage broad audiences. As demonstrated in this study, Ibrahimović is more than a footballer; he is a brand in his own right—an athlete whose persona often eclipses the products he endorses.

Retirement from the pitch does not equate to fading from the spotlight—if anything, Ibrahimović’s influence seems to be expanding into new arenas. His captivating personality continues to make him a compelling choice for brands, with the added advantage of his global reach. His autobiography, “I Am Zlatan”, became a bestseller not only in Sweden but internationally, reinforcing his standing as a cultural icon beyond the realm of sports. Documentaries such as “Becoming Zlatan” (2015) and “I Am Zlatan” (2021) offer deeper insights into his life, while his recent ventures into film—appearing in “Asterix & Obelix: The Middle Kingdom” (2023) and voicing the lead in Netflix’s “The Soccer Football Movie” (2022)—highlight his ability to transition into mainstream entertainment.

Despite being a polarizing figure at times, Ibrahimović commands one of the largest followings in global sports, even post-retirement. His candid and often humorous remarks resonate widely, keeping him a prominent media presence. Whether referred to as Zlatan, Ibra, or simply Ibrahimović, his brand continues to symbolize strength, confidence, and perseverance.

His ability to seamlessly navigate between athlete and entertainer, coupled with his bold, unapologetic communication style, cements his status as one of the most marketable athletes of his generation. Ibrahimović’s collaborations with brands reflect not only his athletic prowess but also his public image. Advertisers recognize the unique value he brings, often embracing his rebellious, self-assured nature as part of their campaigns. This phenomenon, where the athlete’s personal brand takes precedence over the product, underscores the power of authenticity and charisma in modern marketing.

Beyond advertising, Ibrahimović’s engagement with popular media—from live television appearances to playful social media exchanges with other athletes—demonstrates his versatility and enduring relevance. His humorous, often provocative remarks continue to captivate audiences, ensuring his legacy persists well beyond his playing days. Whether through entertainment, philanthropy, or entrepreneurship, Ibrahimović’s influence spans across multiple domains, reinforcing the idea that successful athlete branding hinges on authenticity, confidence, and the courage to challenge conventions.

As we reflect on Ibrahimović’s career, it becomes evident that the brands he partners with are not merely leveraging his image—they are aligning with a cultural force whose larger-than-life persona resonates globally. This study highlights the evolving role of athletes as brands, suggesting that in cases like Ibrahimović’s, the line between athlete and product blurs, resulting in powerful, memorable advertising campaigns. His journey serves as a testament to how personal narratives and individual charisma can elevate athlete branding, offering valuable insights for marketers and brand managers navigating the intersection of sports, entertainment, and commerce. Ibrahimović’s career illustrates how transcending the role of athlete and embracing personal authenticity cultivates not only fan loyalty but also sustained engagement with football as a discipline.

This study provides valuable insights into both the theoretical and practical dimensions of athlete branding. From a theoretical standpoint, Ibrahimović’s case reinforces the significance of personal branding, demonstrating how an athlete’s persona can extend beyond their sporting achievements and become a dominant force in advertising. The findings align with the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), confirming that athletic per-

formance, attractive appearance, and a marketable lifestyle collectively shape an athlete's commercial appeal. However, Ibrahimović's brand also challenges conventional endorsement theories, as his personality often overshadows the products he promotes, indicating a shift toward consumer-driven branding where audiences engage with individuals rather than corporate messaging.

For practitioners, particularly marketers, advertisers, and brand managers, Ibrahimović's branding offers crucial lessons. His case underscores the growing importance of authenticity in sports marketing—brands that embrace an athlete's distinctive persona rather than attempting to mold them into conventional endorsement roles are likely to create more engaging and memorable campaigns. His collaborations demonstrate that strong personal narratives can enhance brand visibility and consumer connection, making authenticity a critical component of long-term brand success. Furthermore, his diversification into entertainment, media, and even personal business ventures highlights how an athlete's marketability can be extended beyond their playing career, offering brands sustained association benefits.

Another key takeaway from this study is the role of strategic communication in athlete branding. Ibrahimović's bold, often provocative messaging keeps audiences engaged, demonstrating how an unconventional approach can enhance visibility and memorability. This suggests that brands willing to take creative risks and align with strong personalities can achieve greater differentiation in competitive markets.

Overall, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how athlete brands function in commercial settings, offering insights for both academics and industry professionals navigating the intersection of sports, entertainment, and commerce. Ibrahimović's case illustrates that in modern sports marketing, the athlete can become more important than the product or service brand, reshaping the traditional dynamics of sponsorship and endorsement.

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