

Interconnection between religiosity and sports communication on social media: an Indonesian Muslims' perspective

Interconexión entre religiosidad y comunicación deportiva en las redes sociales: la perspectiva de los musulmanes indonesios

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Abstract. Religion shapes beliefs, values, and normative social systems in society. Religiosity often becomes a driving factor for Muslims in making preferences for sports. Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim societies in the world, is deemed to have the potential for sports communication with Islamic values. Social media allows athletes to develop a specific image through common religious values with their fans. This study aimed to measure the effect of religiosity and athlete brand image on the intentions of Indonesian Muslim fans to follow the athlete's Instagram account with a religious image. A cross-sectional survey in Indonesia was conducted with 1245 football fans. The collected data was analyzed using Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling with SmartPLS software. The result indicated that religiosity and athlete branding image could predict Muslim fans' intention to follow the Instagram accounts of religious football athletes. This finding suggested the importance of strategic management of athlete branding image through social media accounts, such as developing an image by religious approach among Indonesian Muslim fans.

Keywords: Religiosity, Indonesian Muslim society, brand image, social media, digital generation.

Resumen. La religión da forma a las creencias, los valores y los sistemas sociales normativos de la sociedad. La religiosidad a menudo se convierte en un factor que impulsa a los musulmanes a elegir los deportes. Se considera que Indonesia, un país con las sociedades musulmanas más grandes del mundo, tiene potencial para la comunicación deportiva con valores islámicos. Las redes sociales permiten a los atletas desarrollar una imagen específica a través de valores religiosos comunes con sus fanáticos. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo medir el efecto de la religiosidad y la imagen de marca del atleta sobre las intenciones de los fanáticos musulmanes indonesios de seguir la cuenta de Instagram del atleta con una imagen religiosa. Se realizó una encuesta transversal en Indonesia con 1245 aficionados al fútbol. Los datos recopilados se analizaron utilizando el modelado de ecuaciones estructurales de mínimos cuadrados parciales con el software SmartPLS. El resultado indicó que la religiosidad y la imagen de marca del atleta podrían predecir la intención de los fanáticos musulmanes de seguir las cuentas de Instagram de atletas de fútbol religiosos. Este hallazgo sugirió la importancia de la gestión estratégica de la imagen de marca de los atletas a través de cuentas de redes sociales, como el desarrollo de una imagen mediante un enfoque religioso entre los fanáticos musulmanes indonesios.

Palabras clave: Religiosidad, sociedad musulmana indonesia, imagen de marca, redes sociales, generación digital

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Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in human life since the dawn of civilization. Although secularization issues in some parts of the world have been overwhelmingly on surge, we still consider the role of religion as a crucial entity in society. It plays a prominent role in society's beliefs, values, and social normative systems formation. A lot of studies demonstrated the link between religious values and individual judgment. We consider religiosity a stronger predictor of societal values than any other predictor (Arli, 2017).

Religion is often associated with religiosity. Religiosity is a cultural identity inherent to a community or group identity (Mundiri & Tohet, 2018). Internalization and role expectations offered by religion will shape self-identity. This religious self-identity influences one's ethical behavior (Yahya, Yean, Johari, & Saad, 2015); thus, religiosity influences human attitudes towards fellow humans of either the same or different religions. We define religiosity as the belief that a

person has in God and influences individual beliefs and behavior (El-masry, 2016). We can understand another explanation of religiosity or religious orientation as the extent to which a person lives his religious beliefs and behaves under his religious values.

We can divide motives for religiosity into intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. Individuals with strong intrinsic religiosity live under the teachings of their religion. Meanwhile, other social determinants, such as personal needs and social goals influence them to participate in religious activities (Arli & Tjiptono, 2018). Empirical study shows that religiosity positively affects one's intention to do certain action. Religiosity also drives human behavior (David & Lawal, 2018). Along with the need to reach the market through religious elements, eventually, marketing considers religion as a significant factor that influences consumers' ethical judgments, so numerous companies and brands incorporate religious concepts into their communication methods and styles (Septianto, Tjiptono, Paramita, & Chiew, 2021). However, so far religiosity and aspects related to athletes have not been

widely researched (Wandik et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Attribution Theory

Our research is related to the Interconnection between Religiosity and Sports Communication on Social Media. Attribution Theory is one of the theories recommended by Abeza & Sanderson (2022) to become a theory that underpins research related to Social Media in Sport Studies. Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) contains a description of the process of how individuals explain the causes of events (Goodrich & Ramsey, 2012) and behaviors (Schaefer, Terlutter, & Diehl, 2019). This theory has been used to explain individual attitudes towards a sports brand (Kim, Overton, Bhalla, & Li, 2020). Based on previous research, we use Attribution Theory to explain how fans behave towards athletes who have a certain brand image.

Furthermore, the presence of social media has changed the scope and speed of communication. Now interactions between individuals through social media go beyond simple social communication activities. This phenomenon occurs throughout the world and in various industries, including sports (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). Various sports studies have examined the role of athletes as entities that have a certain influence on their fans. To answer calls from Abeza et al. (2019) to study further regarding athletes who can act as influencers on social media, in this research, we attempt to explore more deeply one of the demographic factors (religiosity) that fans have as supporters to follow their favorite athletes who have a certain brand image.

Indonesian Societies and Sports

Indonesia is a country that prioritizes social values. Various factors influence the perspective of Indonesian society from various aspects. For example, gender and religion contain certain meanings and values that become part of society's culture (Sepdanius et al., 2024). Although sport is initially associated with health, education, and entertainment, it has become a cultural aspect that expresses certain meaning in the society (Omobowale, 2009). The religious identity also affects sports all over the world across religions. For example, the behavior of soccer players who imaginarily make the sign of the cross or pray in an Islamic way before entering the field shows they believe in the presence of God in the game (Syahputra, 2016). Football players not only show behavior with religious identity but also occur in various sport matches on a local to international level.

Several studies link aspects of religiosity to sports. Some explain that sport-religion relationship has resulted in religious values permeating and underpinning sport activity. In recent years, ideological sport values experience a resurgence, causing further development of this relationship and its broader potential to include aspects of service, outreach, and sport mission (Parker & Watson, 2014).

Like religion, sport also plays a significant role in the socialization of values, attitudes, and beliefs from generation to generation. It can be a personal and social identity; thus,

it can function as a nation's unifier, igniting the flames of nationalism and patriotism (E. Joseph, 2012). The literature mentions several studies that religion and sports share common grounds upon achieving goals, such as being a religious icon (Trothen, 2019). Religious liturgy displays religiosity in the sports industry (e.g., football), with various symbols, identities, and meanings in the game.

We found religiosity in football with several religious expressions of football players. One of them is taking a group prayer before the match starts (Jona & Okou, 2013), gestures that reflect gratitude after scoring a goal, to the expression of victory on the field (Akgül & Karafil, 2022). A number of football players also displayed religiosity, including taking a part in social actions uncovered off the pitch (Mazurkiewicz, 2019).

Asia as the cradle of the world's religions holds popular religious traditions and embeds diverse religious practices in the daily lives (Goh, 2009). Indonesia, one of the most populous Muslim countries in Southeast Asia, has football as its most popular sport, besides badminton. As in other countries, Islamic religiosity in sports comes in many shapes and sizes (Cheng, 2019), and so does it in Indonesia.

Religiosity, Athlete Brand Image, and Social Media

Sports have an important role in forming and recognizing social identity (Purnomo et al., 2023), religion is one part of social identity, and on the other hand social media can massively disseminate information regarding religious expressions by content. Expressions of religious identity are also found in the engagement of an athlete's social media account in the comments and emoticons given by fans; for example, a fan from Indonesia expresses his identity and belief as a Muslim by term "haram, kiai" on Mohammad Salah's Instagram account. The comment expresses his disapproval of a December 25, 2020, post containing a Christmas-themed photo of the Liverpool player and his family. It indicated that the Egyptian player has a brand image as an obedient Muslim from the perspective of his fans, so they considered inappropriate to participate in celebrating other religious holidays.

Several works of literature have investigated the link between religiosity and brand consumption (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Currently, sports have become a potential worldwide industry. We know several athletes to have become advertising stars, brand ambassadors, and even influencers. They are actively introducing several products and brands, either sports or non-sport. They also play an active role in promoting certain brands under their image as athletes.

Some popular football athletes attract fans' attention from different countries. Even someone with little interest in football can become a fan and supporter of a football athlete. One expression of fan support is to follow their idol athlete's Instagram social media account. The action to follow an idol's social media account begins with intention. We consider intention a strong signal about the behavior that one will take (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020).

Fans make a football athlete their idol for various reasons, one of which is the religiosity depicted by the athlete

on and off the field. One admires another for values he/she believes important. Therefore, a fan who admires an athlete with a religious image has a religious attitude in different forms and at certain levels.

Several researchers have carried religiosity out of the measurement. One study used a measurement scale based on five dimensions of religiosity (religious beliefs, religious exclusivity, external practice, personal practice, and religious salience) for 21 items (Pearce, Hayward, & Pearlman, 2017). The religiosity measurement in this study adopted several dimensions from the study. We adopted the intention measurement items from similar studies that use the same concept (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017). Thus, the first proposed hypothesis is:

H1. Fan's religiosity positively influences the Intention to follow the Instagram account of football athletes with religious images.

There is a concept of athlete's brand image used in the previous research. Every athlete, especially the popular ones, has their own brand image from the perspective of their fans. The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) shows important dimensions in predicting various forms of consumer attitudes towards athlete brands (Arai & Chang, 2015), thus, guidance on how athletes can brand themselves (Na, Kunkel, & Doyle, 2020), so it can be understood that a strong athlete brand image is more important than athletes who are relatable (Kunkel, Biscaia, Arai, & Agyemang, 2020).

Athlete brand image (ABI), is the public's perception of athlete brand attributes which can encourage consumer/fan attitudes towards athlete brand extensions, athlete teams, sports events and merchandise, as well as the intention to donate for the sake of athletes and psychological commitment to athlete brands (Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2019). Furthermore, previous research developed MABI into MABI via Social Media to explore consumer engagement with athletes on social media. This research identifies frontstage, backstage, and offstage components by adding offstage content dimensions to the model (Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2022), adding elements of sport attributes (Kunkel, Doyle, & Na, 2022), or identify it with off-field image and on-field image factors (Kunkel et al., 2020). Based on this literature, it is known that MABI has undergone various developments, including the development of the use of methods in researching MABI. As an example, there is also research related to MABI which uses qualitative methods with data collection techniques through interviews with a number of Muslim female athletes and also expert focus groups (Hasaan, Berndt, & Fişne, 2024). In this research, we also adopted dimensions that have been used in previous research, such as: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). This time, we use a quantitative approach to answer a number of research questions and show some evidence for the proposed hypothesis.

Therefore, the next hypotheses are:

H2. Fan's religiosity has a positive effect on athlete's brand image.

H3. The brand image of an athlete has a positive effect on fan's Intention to follow his or her Instagram account.

We realize and fully agree with Kunkel et al.'s (2020) statement that research using branding theory to explain these various phenomena still requires further research development to better understand fans' reactions to athletes and related entities, so although we use the MABI dimensions proposed by Arai et al. (2014) we develop the model by placing MABI as a mediating factor. Several stimulants influence every intention. Each stimulating factor can strengthen the other's influence or vice versa. As a factor, religiosity can also influence certain attitudes and actions mediated by other aspects (Hamzah, Suandi, Hamzah, & Tamam, 2014). Therefore, this study proposes the athlete brand image as a factor mediating other factors. The following are the hypotheses:

H4. Athlete's brand image can positively mediate the effect of fan's religiosity on the intention to follow his/her Instagram account.

According to Hasaan, Javani, Fişne, & Sato (2020), the similarity of hometown, country and religion can foster feelings of commonality and closeness, and proximity helps create relationships. Athletes consider various factors including religiosity in their branding efforts (Hasaan et al., 2024). Furthermore, in marketing communications activities, demographics (including age, gender, income, religion, education level, etc.) are a common way to segment audiences (Coombs & Harker, 2022). On the other hand, an athlete often needs spectator support (e.g. among the fan community). Communities consist of a group of people who have the same interests (entities related to race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion), thus allowing fans to often establish relationships with athletes who share the same religious beliefs or other entities and provide their support (Hasaan, Agyemang, Biscaia, & Kerem, 2018).

Previous studies on religion and the media mostly examined media activities in religious institutions, including the effectiveness of religious media content on audiences, or the impact of religious information conveyed through the media on individuals' daily lives. In the majority, the results show that media is used and significantly influences relationships, interactions, aspirations and communication. On the other hand, Indonesia is the second country with the largest Muslim population in the world after Pakistan. Indonesia is also in the top 10 countries with the most social media users in the world. So Islamic content often appears in Indonesian people's posts on various social media. Muslim values and identity are also reflected in the comments they make on the social media accounts of their favorite athletes.

The massive emergence of various information media platforms based on communication technology presents new challenges for the field of sports (Hafiar, Budiana, Mirawati, Abdullah, & Purnomo, 2024; Sofyan et al., 2024), and the growth of internet-based communication media with various features demonstrated a different development direction. In fact, a study states that new media is considered to have changed individuals' spiritual and religious experiences

(Syahputra & Hafiar, 2019). Social media does not only function as a communication tool to exchange information but is also merged as an inseparable part of the daily life of contemporary society (Fakhrurroji, 2021). It includes fans' activities in seeking information about their idolized religious athletes. Studies focusing on religious identity, community, and internet usage have presented various forms of religiosity. How media technologies shape religious beliefs and practices has also been a growing interest among communication scholars (Bunt, 2009), including those involving brand image building by Instagram.

Every religion and its adherents will have different characteristics. Previous research explores religiosity in sports in the Western context, with Christianity as the dominant religion studied. Hence, this research aimed to answer the call for research to consider the role of religiosity in sports involving all religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism) (Noh & Shahdan, 2020), so this study took the population of the football fan community from among Muslims.

Media exposure and digital generation differences

In the marketing industry, segmentation by targeting specific demographic groups is a part of the strategy. Several studies in the business field show generational differences in consumption preferences (Parry & Urwin, 2011). We categorize generational differences into Baby boomers, Generation X (Gen X), Generation Y (Gen Y), and Generation Z (Gen Z). We have exposed Gen Y and Z to the digital world from an early age and are therefore referred to as digital natives. Unlike the previous generations, Baby boomers and Gen X, who are familiar with the digital world after becoming adults, they are called digital immigrants (Betz, 2019). This research limits the investigation to Gen X and Gen Z as representatives of the digital natives and digital immigrants. Another reason is that these two generations pose different perspective on the use of technology and information (Dida, Hafiar, Kadiyono, & Lukman, 2021).

Gen X was born between 1965 and 1979. Representatives of this generation have an active role in today's social and business life. On the other hand, Gen Z was born between 1995-2009, comes from a good socioeconomic background, and lives in an urbanized city where access to information and communication technology is easily available (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017), and was born immersed in the digital culture (Ropotin, Arriagada, & Asensio, 2022).

In the digital era, we can do marketing activities through social media, such as Instagram, to introduce products or brands. Instagram has developed a global community with over 500 million daily active users. Millennials (Gen Y) and Post-millennials (Gen Z) are the dominant users of the Instagram platform (Lu & Lin, 2022). Greater use of social media (e.g., Instagram) allows for more exposure (Sheldon, Rauschnabel, & Honeycutt, 2019). Some researchers include aspects of media or information exposure because they believe it to be a factor behind beliefs and to maximize the predictive ability of the model proposed in their research (Hafiar, Prastowo, Limilia, Amin, & Solihin, 2023;

Witzling, Shaw, & Amato, 2015). Therefore, this study includes the variables of the level of information exposure and digital generation X and Z, with the following hypotheses:

H5. There is a difference in the effect of fan's religiosity on the intention to follow the Instagram accounts of an athlete for high media exposure groups in generations X and Z

H6. There is a difference in the influence of fan's religiosity on the intention to follow the Instagram accounts of athletes for the low media exposure groups in generations X and Z

H7. There is a difference in the influence of athlete's brand image on the intention to follow his or her Instagram account for high media exposure groups in generations X and Z

H8. There is a difference in the effect of athlete's brand image on the Intention to follow the Instagram account of athletes for low media exposure groups in generations X and Z.

Materials and Methods

This study used cross-sectional survey to collect data using the online questionnaire. We distributed questionnaires via Google Forms to several football fan groups with the following condition: Muslims born in 1965-1979 and 1995-2009, and those who have an Instagram account. This study used G*power analysis to determine the minimum sample size. With seven predictors, to expect an effect size of .15 (medium), an alpha error of .05, and statistical power of .80, the minimum sample size required is only 103. When we distribute the questionnaire, which took place for three months from November 2022 – January 2023, 1245 eligible respondents completed the questionnaire. Thus, our study with a sample size of 1477 will yield statistical power > 80%, which means it is statistically convincing enough as a research finding (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019; Hair & Sarstedt, 2019). This study employed SmartPLS Software to test the model and answer the proposed hypotheses. Convergent and discriminant validity are standard to assess validity, while the reliability testing used Cronbach alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). The measurement model was evaluated with PLS-Algorithm while the bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples and a 5% significance level was applied to assess the structural model and multi-group analysis.

Regarding the measurement, previous studies examine religiosity use measurement scales based on the four dimensions of religiosity with 20 items (S. Joseph & DiDuca, 2007), four dimensions of religiosity with 24 items (DiDuca & Joseph, 1997), and five dimensions of religious commitment (Finney, 1978). This study employed a measurement scale based on the dimensions of religious beliefs, religious exclusivity, and external practice adopted from previous research (Pearce et al., 2017). Measurement of an athlete brand image is based on the dimensions of its formation: athletic

performance, attractive appearance, and marketable life-style (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013). We adopted the intention measurement items from similar studies that used the same concept.

Results

Measurement model

The measurement model in this study did not meet convergent and discriminant validity problems. The outer loading of all items in Figure 1 and the AVE values of all constructs in Table 1 showed a value that met the threshold, 0.7 or 0.5 and 0.5, respectively, so all construct and measurement items were convergently valid (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). In addition, the Fornell-Larcker value of the measurement constructs in Table 1 also demonstrated that the correlation value between certain constructs is always greater than that of the construct with other constructs so that the measurement construct measures what it should measure (Hair et al., 2017); therefore all constructs were valid.

Table 1. Discriminant Validity, Convergent Validity and Reliability

Construct	Fornell-Larcker Value		
	Religiosity	Athlete brand image	Intention to follow
Religiosity	0.724		
Athlete brand image	0.219	0.805	
Intention to follow	0.250	0.510	0.945
AVE	0.524	0.648	0.894
Cronbach's Alpha	0.906	0.938	0.941
Composite Reliability	0.916	0.948	0.962

Structural Model

We proposed one hypothesis to test the effect of athlete brand image on intention to follow. We also proposed four hypotheses to test the effect of religiosity on intention to follow, directly or mediated by athlete brand image. The structural model evaluation in Table 2 shows the effect significance of the hypothesized relationship. The results show that the direct effect of religiosity ($\beta = .192, p < .001$) and athlete brand image ($\beta = .474, p < .001$) on fan's intention to follow the athlete's Instagram accounts is positively significant. Likewise, the direct effect of religiosity on the athlete brand image is positively significant ($\beta = .219, p < .001$). Therefore, H1, H2, H3 are supported.

Table 2. The structural model evaluation

Hypothesized relationship	β	Result
H1: Religiosity \rightarrow Intention to follow	0.192***	Supported

Table 3. Multi-group analysis

Group	Hypothesized relationship	β -diff (Gen X - Gen Z)	p-Value (Gen X vs Gen Z)	Decision
High-Exposure	H5: Religiosity \rightarrow Intention to follow	0.280	0.033	Supported

H2: Religiosity \rightarrow athlete brand image	0.219***	Supported
H3: Athlete brand image \rightarrow Intention to follow	0.474***	Supported
H4: Religiosity \rightarrow Athlete brand image \rightarrow Intention to follow	0.104***	Supported
Significant at $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01, **$ and $p < 0.001***$.		

Furthermore, H4 is also supported because the results showed that the effect of religiosity on the Intention to follow Instagram accounts mediated by the athlete brand image ($\beta = .104, p < .001$) is statistically significant. In addition, it also revealed that the total effect of religiosity on Intention to follow ($\beta = .296, p < .001$) is still lower than the effect of athlete brand image on Intention to follow ($\beta = .474, p < .001$). To simplify the results, we display the result of each hypothesized relationship and the evaluated model in Table 2 and Figure 1. Overall, the model we evaluated explained 29.4% of the variance in the intention to follow athletes' Instagram accounts, which is substantial according to Cohen's rule (Cohen, 1988).

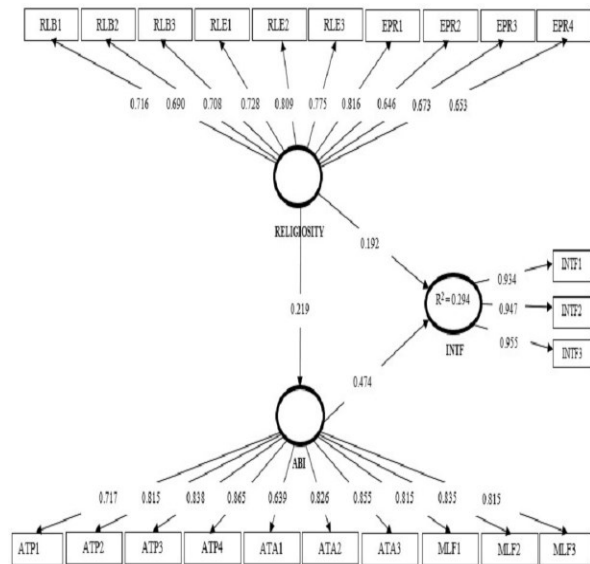


Figure 1. Structural and Measurement Model

Multi-group Analysis

To get an answer to the differences in the significance of the influence of the tested variables on different test groups, we applied multi-group analysis. Table 3 provides the results of the multi-group analysis. The statistical comparison results available in Table 3 reveals significant differences in the direct effect of the two variables, religiosity, and athlete brand image, on intention to follow among Generation X and Z in both high-exposure and low-exposure groups. Thus, H5, H6, H7, and H8 are supported.

	H7: Athlete's brand image → Intention to follow	-0.296	0.044	Supported
Low-Exposure	H6: Religiosity → Intention to follow	0.280	0.041	Supported
	H8: Athlete's brand image → Intention to follow	-0.296	0.044	Supported

Discussion

We found that religiosity can predict the intention to follow the Instagram accounts of religiously imaged football athletes. The result strengthens the finding of the previous research that religiosity can influence attitudes toward marketing products and brands with certain issues in sports (McKelvey, 2004). We also found that athletes' brand image can predict the Intention to follow the Instagram accounts of religiously imaged soccer athletes. This finding is in line with that of the previous research that satisfaction with the content displayed on a brand's Instagram account has a direct and positive effect on the Intention to follow and recommend the account (Casaló et al., 2017).

This research expands knowledge regarding athlete branding images displayed through social media and encourages fans' intentions to support athletes who have certain impression management (e.g. religious athletes). The form of support in question is following athletes' social media which is driven by similarities between athletes and fans. This knowledge leads to several implications for athletes and management who do proper brand management through Instagram accounts. The results of this study can help athletes to ensure that the content they create can improve their image among their followers through the dimensions of athletes' brand image. Besides the highlighting aspects of athlete brand image, athletes and their management can also consider the technical quality of the content (shooting and editing) because Instagram is a social media that focuses on visuals and aesthetics to strengthen followers' love with the brand (Casaló et al., 2020).

Meanwhile the implications from theoretical perspectives showed that among the two proposed constructs, athletes' brand image is more influential on the intention to follow the Instagram accounts of religiously imaged football athletes than religiosity. It confirms that Instagram can be an echo chamber (Parmelee & Roman, 2020) to create and develop the popularity of an athlete. Therefore, every athlete developing a brand through Instagram must be more careful in presenting the information. The media presentation of unrealistic physical appearance and performance creates certain negative effects (Sheldon et al., 2019), such as excessive expectations from fans. Hence, demands arise that are detrimental to the athletes themselves.

One's belief affects the Intention to follow certain action or thing (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010), so an athlete must maintain an attitude to keep fans' trust on and off the field. Maintaining the trust may consider the type of product endorsed by an athlete as religiosity can influence people's view towards products (tobacco, alcohol, gambling) that sponsor sports (McKelvey, 2004). How the construct is measured determines the religious perception of the fans. For example, belief in God and the frequency of religious

behavior (Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021). Fans with a certain level of religiosity favor athletes who support a certain brand. So, developing a brand identity associated with religiosity is highly prominent for an athlete because growing up in a religious family determines the faith-based identity formation (Newman et al., 2021).

Further, some studies find generational differences in certain measures. Some have produced opposite findings from those predicted based on general generational stereotypes (Parry & Urwin, 2011). However in principle, differences in digital literacy affects each digital generation's attitude toward the use of technology and information (Betz, 2019). Generation X tends to be skeptical and conservative while Millennials and Generation Z are more pragmatic in their tendency to certain things. On the other hand, sports also cannot avoid stereotypes (Whiteside & Hardin, 2010). Thus, understanding the stereotypes of each digital generation's character should be on concern upon developing communication strategies to reach more fans. Finally, exposure to information from different channels can drive intentions (Witzling et al., 2015), so athletes and management developing brands need to consider different channels to achieve their target segments, including those from different digital generation groups.

We realize the limitation of this research. First, this research distributes questionnaires via online questionnaires distributed via Google Forms to several groups of football fans with certain conditions. Future research is expected to collect more representative samples including fans and athletes from various sports and use different methods (e.g. offline surveys), or use other data collection techniques and in accordance with other research approaches (e.g. qualitative and mixed methods). Second, relate to religiosity measurement. Critics mention the lack of measurement of unconventional or non-institutional religious practices, so there is a need to develop, test, and validate a more systematic religiosity scale (Pearce et al., 2017). Therefore, future research is advised to cover more varied religiosity measurement scales. Third, this research also only targets the interest of fans from certain digital generation groups towards athletes with certain brand images. So we hope that there will be further research targeting fans and athletes from various different digital generation groups towards athletes with different brand images.

The last discussion is related to Indonesian Muslim societies. As a country with a large population and the most Muslims worldwide, Indonesia is a potential area to market certain products and brands identical to Islamic values. However, this potential must be handled carefully. Some studies have presented several data on the religious sensitivity of Indonesian Muslim societies. Various horizontal conflicts have adorned the history of religious development in Indonesia. Some cases have ended up in the reconciliation

stage, but some still leave sparks, unextinguished completely. One thing that should be underlined in designing an athlete brand image management strategy on social media is not to violate cultural norms, especially religious values. A study exemplifies certain riots mobilized on social networking sites (Hasangani, 2022). Similar issues have colored Indonesia because of religious sentiment.

Social friction based on values and differences is common. The good news is Indonesia is one of the models of a country that can handle the friction of thoughts about the state and religion that occurs among people without serious conflicts (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019). Moreover, Indonesia is a very multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious country. It induced by the good relationship among people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Indonesian Muslim societies hold certain values that can be an entry point for successful business communication in sports. In fact, by analogy, the number of green buttons is far more than that of red buttons.

Therefore, upon promoting a brand, including that related to sports in Indonesia, communication actors should consider aspects of social and religious values that apply and develop among Indonesian Muslim societies. The point is to press the "green" button to grab their attention, support, and participation in the brand but avoid the "red" button that provokes them to act otherwise.

Conclusion

The large number of Muslim societies in Indonesia is a potential market for sports brands. Every brand that develops a certain image must consider social factors from the target public, including religiosity. This research concluded that the branding image of an athlete can predict fans' intention to follow his or her Instagram account. Branding image can mediate the influence of fans' religiosity to follow the Instagram accounts. The shared religiosity values between the athlete and the fans still need another driving factor, the athlete branding image on the social media account.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between the direct effect of the religiosity factor and athlete brand image in generations X and Z in both high-exposure and low-exposure groups to follow the Instagram accounts of football athletes with religious images. This finding shows the importance of athlete branding image management strategies through social media accounts. This study shows that sport is inseparable from religion, especially in countries with strong religiosities, such as Indonesia. In addition, it proves that the socio-cultural aspect of society is a fundamental aspect to consider when it comes to developing a particular sport brand.

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Ethical Clearance Statement

This research was carried out based on research ethics approval obtained from the Padjadjaran University Ethics Committee with number: 746/UN6.KEP/EC/2022.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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