Sports celebrities and advertising on Instagram: a case study of brand sponsorship in Spain

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Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this paper, which analyses the use of sports celebrities in advertising discourse, is to understand the strategic use to which brands put them in their commercial and corporate communication on Instagram.

Design/methodology/approach – To this end, a content analysis was performed on the Instagram posts of the brands Santander, Movistar, Red Bull and Iberdrola during the period 2021-2022.

Findings – The results indicate that, strategically speaking, these brands use the celebrity endorsement strategy to pursue emotional objectives and to adopt a position depending on the type of user. Likewise, these findings show that they single out uniqueness as the principal celebrity characteristic, while also mainly leveraging sports values, especially competence. These values represented by sports celebrities are markedly social in nature, which implies that they enjoy a degree of public recognition that is transferred to the brand to which they lend their image.

Research limitations/implications – The conclusions connect celebrity endorsers with strategic branding issues and aspects of sports.

Originality/value – An empirical approach is followed here to study the representation of sports celebrities in the advertising of well-known brands linked to the sports world.

Keywords Sports celebrities, Sports values, Celebrity endorsement, Brand strategy, Instagram strategy

1. Introduction
The use of social networks is changing in response to the needs and objectives of their users (Van Dijck, 2013). Specifically, Instagram is a platform that people use for self-representation and for expressing themselves (Van Dijck, 2008; Caldeira, 2016; Rettberg, 2018; Feher, 2021). Accordingly, this social network is an ideal communication tool for brands in that it facilitates the establishment of social relationships, serves as a bridge between users and offers them opportunities for socialisation and creating online communities (Serafinelli, 2017). One of the communicative strengths of Instagram is the power of the image, for on this platform images are essential for social interactions: they circulate among individuals and groups to establish and strengthen links (Van Dijck, 2008), hence the platform’s communication potential.

Celebrities have been used uninterruptedly as endorsers in the evolution of advertising (Segrave, 2005). Brands exploit celebrities to associate themselves with the values that the latter possess (Erdogan and Baker, 2000) in relation to any type of product (West and Orman, 2003, p. 117). This strategy, which has even been implemented in non-commercial
settings such as the political sphere (Fernández Gómez et al., 2021; Bartoszewicz, 2019; Oliva et al., 2015; Street, 2004), forms part of more general trends in which brands capitalise on the public’s desire to be entertained (Wood et al., 2016, p. 2). Given that they figure among the most prominent celebrities, sportspeople have a very important specific weight in advertising (Carlson and Donavan, 2008; Ruihley et al., 2010). Accordingly, the aim here is to take an empirical approach to the study of the representation of sports celebrities in the advertising of well-known brands in the sports world, based on a content analysis of Instagram posts and in line with recent research on the use of celebrities by brands on online platforms, as these serve as communication tools for building brand image and customer loyalty (Gómez et al., 2019). In line with applied research (Erfgen et al., 2015; Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta, 2010; Scheidt et al., 2018; Wang and Kim, 2020), the issue of the strategic use of sports celebrities in advertising is also addressed.

The main research objective is to understand the strategic use to which brands put sports celebrities in their commercial and corporate communication in Spain. Whereas the specific objective is to study how they use sports celebrities to design their social media strategies, specifically, on Instagram. Instagram was chosen because it is the most effective social networking site in Spain, with the highest interaction and engagement rates (IAB Spain, 2022). By means of a content analysis, the presence and strategic implications of the use of sports celebrities were examined. The conclusions link the endorsement strategy to strategic branding issues and aspects of sports.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Celebrity endorsers in online advertising

Recent research has focused on celebrities in the digital space, specifically on social media, for they offer brands interesting opportunities for creating value and for building brand image and customer loyalty (Gómez et al., 2019). Enquiries have also been made into online platforms (Sutia et al., 2023), the adoption of a gender perspective (Marhaeni et al., 2022) and the exploitation of the private lives of micro-celebrities (Klostermann et al., 2023), plus their authenticity (Balaban and Szambolics, 2022) and user responses (Ouvrein et al., 2023). Other studies have compared the presence of celebrities in the conventional media to influencers (Robinot et al., 2023); in fact, the comparative study performed by Hussain et al. (2022) focuses on Instagram.

Instagram serves to connect users, while offering them interesting opportunities for socialisation and for creating online communities (Serafinelli, 2017). As a network devoted more to entertainment than to information (Lee et al., 2015), it offers brands the opportunity to reach their audiences, for it generates high levels of interactivity and engagement (Bodaghi and Oliveira, 2022; Dhanesh et al., 2022) between the former and the latter. In this vein, there is a proliferation of studies of celebrities on Instagram, like that performed by Lee et al. (2021) on the impartiality of celebrity opinions, plus plenty of enquiries into effectiveness in relation to congruity and self-expression (Lee et al., 2022), the emotional and rational mechanisms used by brands (Ahmadi et al., 2023) and the consumer-brand relationship of young Instagram users (Copeland et al., 2023). On a more positive note, Hooi Ting et al. (2023, p. 1) conclude that the use of celebrities helps to increase the effectiveness of ad stimuli which, in turn, enhances the cognitive and affective ad involvement and flow of consumers to influence their purchase behaviour.

Celebrities are people who receive plenty of media coverage, attract the attention of the general public and possess a constructed public personality (cfr. Street, 2004, p. 437; McKernan, 2011, p. 192), representing a type of value that can be publicly recognised as important and significant (Marshall, 2014, p. 7). Celebrities are paradoxically depicted as people who are special and ordinary at the same time (McKernan, 2011, p. 201). They
combine appealing qualities and must cope with day-to-day problems, breaking down
the cultural and social barriers isolating them from consumers (cfr. Furedi, 2010, p. 493).

The idea of famous people making endorsements to help brands to sell their products has
formed part of advertising since the end of the nineteenth century (Erdogan, 1999). Although
most celebrities come from the world of cinema and television, there are also sportspeople,
politicians and businesspeople who possess this status (Tellis, 1998; McCracken, 1989).
Today, the number of celebrities involved in advertising has swiftly increased (see Erdogan,
1999; Fox, 1997; Tellis, 1998; Apejoye, 2013; Bergkvist, 2017; Fernández Gómez et al., 2022).
In the academic literature, different celebrity classifications have been proposed (e.g. Pringle,
2004; McCracken, 1989), as well as reviews (Erdogan, 1999; Bergkvist and Qiang Zhou, 2016)
and many approaches to the phenomenon in advertising: from an economic (Agrawal and
Kamakura, 1995) and procedural perspective (Erdogan and Baker, 2000), the possible
erosion effect of celebrities on the brands that they endorse (Ergen et al., 2015), their
multiplicity (Hue and McDonald, 2002) and the use of dead celebrities (Petty and D'Rozario,
2009). Additionally, quite a few psychological studies have been performed on endorser
effectiveness from behavioural (Friedman and Friedman, 1979), cognitive (Petty et al., 1983)
and cultural perspectives (Banister and Cocker, 2014). More generally, Fernández Gómez et al.
(2022) have studied the use of the celebrity endorsement strategy in Ibero-American
advertising.

This study is based on the definition proposed by McCracken: “[...] the celebrity endorser
is defined as any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on
behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement” (1989, p. 310). According
to this definition, the role played by celebrities in endorsement can be regarded as an aspect
inherent to advertising (Segrave, 2005). Given that “celebrity endorsement is, in fact, a special
instance of a more general process of meaning transfer” (McCracken, 1989, p. 313), it involves
a fundamental semiotic procedure of endorsement, encapsulated in McCracken’s (1988, 2005)
Meaning Transfer Model (hereinafter MTM), which focuses on the symbolic attributes of
endorsers and on the meaning that they transfer to the product. The research conducted by
McCracken (1989) engendered three approaches to the celebrity figure (Batra et al., 1996;
Tellis, 1998) relating to the concepts of credibility (Hovland and Weiss, 1951-1952),
attractiveness (Kahle and Homer, 1985) and the MTM (McCracken, 1989; Escalas and
Bettman, 2017; Knoll et al., 2017).

The MTM helps to explain the complexity of the consumer society (McCracken, 1988),
as well as the process by which the symbolic properties of the celebrity are transferred to
the consumer good and from this to the consumer (McCracken, 1989). This theory revolves
around establishing three locations of meaning, namely, the culturally constructed world,
the consumer good and the individual consumer, plus two tools for transferring these
meanings: from the world to the good and from the good to the individual (McCracken,
1988, p. 72).

According to McCracken, meaning is encountered in its original form in the “culturally
constituted world”, that is, the daily experience of each culture in which the cultural
categories and principles that organise the world of a community are to be found
(cfr. McCracken, 1988, pp. 72–77). There are two tools – advertising and fashion – for
transferring the meaning inherent to this world to the good. Advertising presents these
meanings in the specific context of an ad and its ability to transfer meaning lies in the
establishment of a symbolic equivalence. To complete this transfer process, it is necessary
to select the cultural categories and principles closest to the intended meaning of the
product, while audiences should be able to decode the message satisfactorily, for this
enables them to attribute certain properties of the cultural world to the product being
advertised (cfr. McCracken, 1988, pp. 77–79). Specifically, “endorsement gives the ad
access to a special category of person from the culturally constituted world [...].
Celebrities deliver meanings of extra subtlety depth, and power” (McCracken, 1989, pp. 314–315).

The second location of meaning has to do with consumer goods as bearers of cultural meaning (cfr. McCracken, 1988, p. 83). The tool employed to transfer meaning from the good to the consumer takes the shape of rituals, defined as a symbolic action involving “social interaction devoted to the manipulation of the cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication” (McCracken, 1988, p. 84). Rituals serve to affirm, allocate or revise symbols and meanings, for they are a tool for manipulating cultural meaning (1988, p. 84).

The third location of meaning are consumers, who represent the end of the process of meaning transfer. For McCracken, this meaning is used to define and orient the individual in terms of self-definition, throughout the appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods (1988, p. 88). To achieve this, he notes, “consumers must claim, exchange, care for, and use the consumer good to appropriate these meanings” (1989, p. 317).

In the case of celebrities, these would represent the cultural categories and principles employed in the ad in question, which are chosen because they are close to the intended meaning of the product, specifically, “the choice of particular celebrities is based on the meanings they epitomize […]. An advertising campaign must then identify and deliver these meanings to the product” (McCracken, 1989, p. 316). Indeed, the endorsement process depends on the symbolic properties of the celebrity endorser (1989, p. 310) and, at the same time, “the effectiveness of the endorser depends, in part, upon the meanings he or she brings to the endorsement process” (McCracken, 1989, p. 312).

In view of the foregoing, following Henneberg and Chen (2008), the transfer process can be characterised as follows: “forming of celebrity image” → “meaning transfer from celebrity to product” → “meaning transfer from product to consumer”; a mechanism that “works irrespective of the degree of ‘matching’ between celebrity and product characteristics […].” (p. 21). So, celebrities serve as links between “the materiality of production and culturally contextualized meaning of consumption and its relation to collective identity” (Marshall, 2014, p. 245). According to Dwivedi et al. (2015, p. 457), culturally valued meaning may be transferred from a celebrity endorser to the endorsed brand, thereby imbuing it with favourable meanings (or added values) and, as a result, positive consumer perceptions of an endorsed brand express this in endorsed brand equity.

2.2 Advertising, sports and sports celebrities

Sports possess a crucial particularity for fans and the business that they generate: they involve feelings and emotions, whether these be towards specific sports, teams or sportspeople, who fans consider to be worthy of admiration to the point of forging close emotional ties with them (Del Castillo, 2016; Kończak, 2021; Brooks et al., 2021). The popularity and growth of social networks like Instagram and TikTok have changed the way in which sports fans communicate with teams, sportspeople and other fans, now fostering more relationships between them and engaging new market segments (Mastromartino et al., 2024). Sports brands, from clubs to major sports event, through individual sportspeople, are currently putting social networking sites to a strategic use with the aim of strengthening their relationship with their audiences (Naraine and Bakhsh, 2022; Ballesteros-Herencia, 2021; Wang, 2023; Doyle et al., 2022).

In the sports world, the dynamic and interactive content of social networking sites helps to increase their visibility, to maintain an interactive relationship with their fans, or to overcome the geographical barriers of that relationship by using digital content to promote themselves (Parganas et al., 2017; Benito-Colio et al., 2022; Escalas and Bettman, 2017).
Although sports are often presented as products, an aspect determined by the consumers who follow them (Desbordes et al., 2001; Jackson et al., 2004), they are not solely based on competition, results or fan sentiment but also possess values like equality, tolerance, courage, honesty, loyalty and respect (Gutiérrez Sanmartín, 2003; International Olympic Committee, 2017; Zagalaz Sánchez, 2015). It is no coincidence that a significant part of advertising uses this rich set of values, in addition to the positive attitudes of sports celebrities in their private lives in the context of social networks, to build brand identity (Ferreira et al., 2022).

Thanks to their omnipresence in the media, sports celebrities have become influential public figures in the entertainment world (Lines, 2001; Leng and Phua, 2022; Nicholson, 2006; Brooks et al., 2021). Unlike other celebrity collectives, they are considered to be more authentic (Rodríguez et al., 2022) and more down to earth, as occurs with many Olympic athletes when they post personal content on Instagram to connect with the public and to attract fans, such as sharing personal stories, photographs and videos, generating interesting content and live streaming (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Kalam et al., 2024; Sharifzadeh et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). The participation of athlete endorsers is an efficient marketing strategy for helping companies and organisations to increase the visibility of their brands (Kunkel et al., 2019; Kim and Na, 2007; Koo, 2022; Von Felbert and Breuer, 2022), in some cases resorting to mega-athlete influencers. Many organisations exploit the image of sports celebrities to improve their own (Sassenberg, 2015), employing that image in ad and sponsorship campaigns to arouse interest and engage consumers (Sassenberg et al., 2018; Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2011). Broadly speaking, they are very successful elite sportspeople, many of whom obtain a higher income from this activity than from their sports contracts (Stone et al., 2003). Sportspeople have historically figured among the most popular celebrities in advertising (Shanklin and Miciak, 1997), the huge impact that they have had on the economy and business world being evidenced by mega-athlete influencer success stories like those of Michael Jordan, Roger Federer and David Beckham (Dix et al., 2010).

By and large, sports celebrities are used when there is a link between a product and a sport or when a company or institution wants the public to relate that product to that sport and an active and healthy lifestyle (Banyte et al., 2011; Behnoosh et al., 2023). Likewise, the “global commercialization of professional sporting … has established a symbiotic relationship between fans, sponsors, and celebrity athletes that has elevated sport celebrities as promotional entities” (Mobberley and Vredenburg, 2023, p. 345). In any case, the credibility of sports celebrities is essential when implementing the endorsement strategy. Based on Ohanian’s (1990) source credibility model, “the credibility of sports celebrity endorsements is based on trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise” (Shezi, 2022). Trustworthiness has to do with the brand recall of consumers, whereas the attractiveness refers to physical aspects, determined in turn by similarity, familiarity and sympathy. In this respect, Banyte et al. (2011) observe that this is not a decisive factor when sports celebrities are very well known, it being more important that the target audience trusts and respects them.

As to women, however, the reason for using them in advertising has more to do with their physical attraction than with their achievements, more often than not exerting a greater influence on male consumers, as was the case with Anna Kournikova (Granleese and Shen, 2009; Frank and Mitsumoto, 2023). With regard to expertise, this refers to the ability and experience of sponsors with sports celebrities (Shezi, 2022). In relation to social networks, the follower counts of sportspeople are not only an indicator of their popularity but also offer them strategic opportunities for building the brands that they endorse and with which users probably interact (Bredikhina et al., 2023; Na et al., 2020).
Lately, the presence of sports celebrities in advertising has increased more than that of any other celebrity category, for they allow “to improve consumers’ product recall and positively influence their brand choice behaviour” (Ruihley et al., 2010, p. 133). According to Rai et al. (2021), celebrity athlete star power can increase consumers’ believability towards the endorsed brand. Indeed, they transfer the recognition that they receive from consumers to the product that they are endorsing, thus becoming specifically associated with the brand image (Sassenberg, 2015) through values such as character traits, personality and success (Kończak, 2021) – as set out in McCracken’s (1988, 2005) aforementioned model – all of which enhances the positive image of companies. Likewise, “Sports celebrities who highly engage consumers through social media can promote stronger engagement with the endorsed brand, and this effect is positively moderated” (Ferreira et al., 2022, p. 259). An opinion shared by Kalam et al. (2024), who examine the trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise of celebrities as the main aspects that prompt followers to engage in their social media posts and to form a positive brand attitude. Notwithstanding this, recent studies, like that performed by Ahmadi and Leaemson (2022), question the credibility of sports celebrities as compared to influencers in the specific case of Instagram. In addition to positive associations, sports celebrities can give meaning to very ordinary products (Dix et al., 2010). As a matter of fact, the sportsperson who has the status of both celebrity and hero (North et al., 2005) becomes “an authentic role model and bearer of cultural significance with a mythical character” (Rodríguez et al., 2022, p. 4). In a study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of well-known US sports sponsors, Shuart (2007, p. 13) drew a distinction between a hero, celebrity, sport hero, sports anti-hero and celebrity endorser.

Although the use of sports celebrities is important in advertising aimed at sports fans (Ruihley et al., 2010; Von Felbert and Breuer, 2021), in mass advertising famous sportspeople serve as role models for the young, influencing their lifestyles and consumption patterns (Lear et al., 2009) and playing an important role in their socialisation as consumers (Dix et al., 2010). As they are expected to encourage propriety, however, not all sports celebrities feel comfortable with being role models (Leng and Phua, 2022). Accordingly, many brands break off relations with them because of their misconduct (Shuart, 2007). However, the very prospect of bad behaviour or contract termination is leveraged by advertisers because they believe that it offers opportunities for media coverage and even because specific consumer groups find it appealing (Ruihley et al., 2010; Sassenberg et al., 2018). This was the case of Nike’s partnering with Eric Cantona, notwithstanding the fact that he had assaulted a fan in 1995.

To this should be added that as both followers and sports celebrities are interacting more frequently on social networks, when the latter misbehave, this can give rise to adverse reactions among followers and, consequently, have a negative impact on the brands and products endorsed by those celebrities (Sassenberg et al., 2018). In contrast, for Hussain et al. (2023) the negative publicity of celebrities does not affect the brand attitude of consumers either directly or through the moderating factors of social media involvement, identification and brand commitment. Their study shows that only internal and external attributions were shown to moderate the effect of such negative publicity on brand attitude; in other words, negative publicity does not affect the feelings of consumers towards brands.

3. Purpose and research questions

The aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the strategic use to which brands put sports celebrities in their commercial and corporate communication on Instagram. This study is based on the following research questions:
RQ1. How did the brands analysed here put sports celebrities to strategic use in their communication on Instagram?

RQ2. How did these brands adopt decisions on goal setting and brand positioning?

RQ3. Which were the most predominant forms of endorsement in the brands’ communication on Instagram?

RQ4. Which functional characteristics of sports celebrities stood out in the brands’ communication on Instagram?

RQ5. Which sports values were embodied by the sports celebrities used by the brands on Instagram?

4. Method

In line with similar studies (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016) enquiring into celebrity endorsements in advertising, a descriptive and quantitative methodology was employed here, including a content analysis of a representative sample of posts. Given its descriptive, synoptic and systematic capacity (Baxter and Babbie, 2004), content analysis is an accurate and objective method (Krippendorff, 2004) in keeping with the aims of this study.

4.1 Sample selection

Specifically, a quantitative content analysis was performed on 466 Instagram posts published by the brands under study during the period 2021–2022 [1]: Santander, Movistar, Iberdrola and Red Bull (Table 1). Those brands with the highest profile as sponsors in Spanish sports [2], according to the 2021 Sports Sponsorship Barometer (Barómetro del Patrocinio Deportivo) (SPSG Consulting, 2022), were selected.

4.2 Coders and reliability

The analysis was conducted by five coders between 1 December 2022 and 15 January 2023 [3]. An inter-rater reliability test, according to Krippendorff’s (2004) alpha values, was run on four posts randomly selected from the sample, obtaining a value of $\alpha = 0.9$. As to interrater reliability, a reliability test was run obtaining percent agreements equal to or greater than 90% for all the variables, which can be considered as acceptable in content analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brands analysed</th>
<th>Total no. posts</th>
<th>2021 Sports celebrity appears</th>
<th>Weight (%)</th>
<th>Total no. posts</th>
<th>2022 Sports celebrity appears</th>
<th>Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santander</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11.58%</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movistar</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12.55%</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iberdrola</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>27.76%</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>21.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Bull</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>32.71%</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total posts</td>
<td>1,571</td>
<td>258</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,561</td>
<td>208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total analysed</td>
<td>466</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors own creation

Table 1. Number of posts analysed
4.3 Codebook

The operationalisation of the variables analysed (Table 2) was performed in the following way. In line with Percy and Elliot (2009) and Harrison (1989), positioning is understood here from two main perspectives: that based on the attributes and benefits of the product and that focussing on the consumer. In the words of Harrison (1989), “product positioning concepts center on the product or service. They position the product factually, in terms of what it will do, how it is made, its ingredients, its superiority over competition, its uses and applications” (p. 23). In the same vein, Percy and Elliott (2009) hold, “With a product-benefit-oriented positioning the product is the hero of the positioning, and the positioning will be defined by specific benefits related to the product, not the user. In a product-benefit-oriented positioning, product characteristics are the message; in a user-oriented positioning, user characteristics are the message” (p. 177). On the contrary, in consumer positioning “the user is the focus, not the product” (Percy and Elliot, 2009, p. 176): it focuses “on the people who use the product or service. They position it in terms of its users, what

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic aspects of the</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>(1) Cognitive; (2) Affective; (3) Conative; (4) Hybrid; and (5) Others</td>
<td>Fernández Gómez et al. (2022) following Tellis (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brand</td>
<td>Positioning</td>
<td>(1) Product attributes; (2) Consumer; (3) Quality/price; (4) Competence;</td>
<td>Fernández Gómez et al. (2022) following Aaker and Myers (1982) and Wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Use/application; (6) Product class; (7) Cultural symbols; and (8) Others</td>
<td>(1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of the</td>
<td>Forms of</td>
<td>(1) Explicit mode; (2) Implicit mode; (3) Imperative mode; and (4) Co-present</td>
<td>Fernández Gómez et al. (2021) following McCracken (1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>celebrity</td>
<td>endorsement</td>
<td>mode</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>(1) Unique and extraordinary character, charisma; (2) Ordinariness, normality,</td>
<td>Fernández Gómez et al. (2021) following Henneberg and Chen (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>characteristics</td>
<td>characteristics</td>
<td>authenticity, human dimension, familiarity, personal issues of the celebrity;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of</td>
<td>Sports values</td>
<td>(3) Fame, (4) Objectiveness; (5) Knowledge, expertise, competence, experience,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports</td>
<td></td>
<td>authority; (6) Trustworthiness, credibility; (7) Scandal; and (8) Others</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1) (Interpersonal) morals: responsible, obedient, polite, controlled, liberal,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>accommodating, honest, affectionate, tolerant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) (Interpersonal) skills: cheerful, ambitious, competent, creative,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>independent, intelligent, rational, fair play, courageous</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Personal: comfortable life, happiness, pleasure, inner balance, exciting</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>life, social recognition, freedom, self-esteem, wisdom</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Social: peaceful life, family support, national security, sense of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>accomplishment, equality, external salvation, friendship, pleasant world,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>affective maturity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Methodology: variables analysed  
Source(s): Authors own creation
sort of people they are, what kind of lifestyle they enjoy, the occasions the product fits into” (Harrison, 1989, p. 23).

This approach can be supplemented by those taken by Aaker and Myers (1982) and Wind (1982), who introduce different positioning strategies that help to operationalise the concept here: (1) Using product characteristics or customer benefits (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 135); (2) Positioning by product user or user category (Wind, 1982, p. 80) “is to associate a product with a user or a class of users” (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 139); (3) Positioning by price-quality in which the price serves to guide the strategy, a higher one being associated with a premium product and a lower one with discounts (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 137); (4) Positioning by competitor – “an explicit or implicit frame of reference is one or more competitors” (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 140); (5) Positioning by use or application, according to which the brand is associated with the moment when the product is consumed or used (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 137); (6) Positioning by product class “to make critical positioning decisions that involve product-class associations” (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 139); (7) Positioning by cultural symbols consisting of identifying “something that is very meaningful to people that other competitors are not using and associate the brand with that symbol” (Aaker and Myers, 1982, p. 140); and (8) Others or what Wind (1982, p. 81) calls “hybrid bases” in reference to other strategies that are not clearly defined or involve mixed approaches.

The objectives category is borrowed from the “tactical goals” classification proposed by Tellis (1998), understanding that “the term tactical is used to refer to an immediate or short-term perspective” (p. 28). In this respect, the objectives were divided into three main categories: (1) Cognitive goals of promotion whose purpose is to “draw attention to the brand or the ad, inform consumers about it, and remind them about it. Drawing the attention of consumers in the very first step a promoter needs to take” (Tellis, 1998, p. 28); (2) Affective goals whose aim is “to increase consumers’ liking for the brand and improve their attitude toward it. […] Feelings that ads can arouse in consumers” (Tellis, 1998, p. 28); and (3) Conative goals whose objective is “to persuade consumers of the merits of a brand, reduce dissonance about it and instill loyalty for the brand […]. Promotion needs to instill loyalty for a brand among new buyers, and retain it among regular buyers” (Tellis, 1998, p. 28).

With respect to issues directly related to celebrities, the intention is to analyse the extent to which brands attempt to convince their celebrities to make explicit or more suggestive endorsements, resorting to McCracken’s (1989) four modes of celebrity endorsement: (1) Explicit mode (“I endorse this product”); (2) Implicit mode (“I use this product”); (3) Imperative mode (“You should use this product”); and (4) Co-present mode (i.e. in which the celebrity merely appears with the product).

Lastly, to study empirically “[…] how social groups actually consume celebrity and the meanings they attach to celebrity” (McKernan, 2011, p. 201), in relation to the representation of celebrities, a series of potentially functional/strategic characteristics of celebrity endorsers were operationalised on the basis of categories deriving from the different modes of celebrity endorsement – according to the classification proposed by Henneberg and Chen (cfr. 2008, p. 20) – to which were added aspects of celebrity theory (cfr. West and Orman, 2003, pp. 21, 103 and 112; Henneberg and Chen, 2008, pp. 6 and 23; Marsh et al., 2010, p. 324; McKernan, 2011, pp. 192 and 210; Marshall, 2014, pp. xxiv and xx; Wheeler, 2013, p. 225; Wood et al., 2016, p. 15; Petrovová and Eibl, 2019, p. 6), adapting them to the object of study, the context of Spanish sports and the situation analysed here (Fernández Gómez et al., 2022): (1) Unique and extraordinary character, charisma; (2) Ordinariness, normality, authenticity, human dimension, familiarity, personal issues of the celebrity; (3) Fame, (4) Objectiveness; (5) Knowledge, expertise, competence, experience, authority; (6) Trustworthiness, credibility; (7) Scandal; and (8) Others.
Lastly, as for sports values, the aim of the quantitative methodology employed was essentially to perform a thematic analysis based on empirical evidence illustrating the main values underpinning the identity of the brands analysed here. These values relating to the sports world were contextualised for the object of study. In this regard, “A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personality or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5, own emphasis).

In his theory of human values, Schwartz (2012) proposes a universal model that describes the 10 main values guiding human behaviour: power, achievement, hedonism stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. This classification is framed in the tradition of Rokeach (1973), who divided these values into two categories: terminal values and instrumental values.

Much ink has been spilt about the link between these proposals and the commercial field in the literature on marketing and communication (Luna and Gupta, 2001), which in this study is grounded in Batey’s (2016) conception of brand values based on human values. The humanisation of brands also has a long tradition, rooted in motivational research, enquiries into this aspect being particularly plentiful with respect to personality branding models (Fernández Gómez, 2021). In this connection, it is currently rare to encounter brands that have not followed this trend of resorting to intangible values rooted in the aforementioned humanisation of brands, for the purpose of forging emotional ties with their target audiences (Heding et al., 2020). The operationalisation of this notion of brand values with sports values was based on Gutiérrez Sanmartín (2003) who, drawing from Rokeach (1973) and Schwartz (2012), establishes the following organisation: (1) (Interpersonal) morals: responsible, obedient, polite, controlled, liberal, accommodating, honest, affectionate, tolerant; (2) (Interpersonal) skills: cheerful, ambitious, competent, creative, independent, intelligent, rational, fair play, courageous; (3) Personal: comfortable life, happiness, pleasure, inner balance, exciting life, social recognition, freedom, self-esteem, wisdom; and (4) Social: peaceful life, family support, national security, sense of accomplishment, equality, external salvation, friendship, pleasant world, affective maturity.

5. Results
5.1 Strategic aspects of brands: objectives and positioning
With respect to the strategic issues analysed here, emotional objectives (81.97%) predominated, followed by the cognitive (14.59%) and hybrid (2.36%) kind (Figure 1).
Analysing this aspect by brands (Table 3), both Red Bull (100%) and Iberdrola (74.47%) pursued emotional objectives, whereas Santander (56.41%) and Movistar (57.76%) focused on the cognitive kind. It is remarkable that pursuing emotional objectives was secondary for Movistar (28.45%), which was also the case with Iberdrola as regards cognitive objectives (20.67%). In the case of Santander, this was not so clear in that the brand defined all types of objectives including, in addition to the cognitive type (56.41%), the affective (10.26%), conative (2.56%) and hybrid kind (28.21%). In this connection, Red Bull was the brand that defined its objectives most coherently.

The prevailing type of brand positioning was consumer-based (80.04%), followed by that based on product attributes (16.74%) (Figure 2).

As with the objectives by brands (Table 4), the positioning of Red Bull (100%) and Iberdrola (71.73%) was consumer-based, which was also consistent with the general tendency in this study, whereas Santander (69.23%) and Movistar (67.24%) focused on product attributes. Examining the results by brand (Table 4), despite placing the spotlight on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Santander</th>
<th>Movistar</th>
<th>Iberdrola</th>
<th>Red Bull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>56.41%</td>
<td>57.76%</td>
<td>20.67%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>10.26%</td>
<td>28.45%</td>
<td>74.47%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conative</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>9.48%</td>
<td>3.34%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>3.45%</td>
<td>1.22%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Authors own creation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Santander</th>
<th>Movistar</th>
<th>Iberdrola</th>
<th>Red Bull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product attributes</td>
<td>69.23%</td>
<td>67.24%</td>
<td>23.71%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>19.83%</td>
<td>71.73%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality/price</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use/application</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product class</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural symbols</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
<td>12.93%</td>
<td>4.56%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Authors own creation

Figure 2. General positioning

Table 3. Objectives (by brands)

Table 4. Positioning (by brands)
attributes, Movistar also resorted to consumer positioning (19.83%), whereas Iberdrola opted for attribute positioning (23.71%) to the same degree. As before, Red Bull was the brand that defined a more robust and congruent consumer positioning. Yet again, Santander was the brand with a patchier positioning, with a large proportion of cases that did not correspond to clear categories (30.77%).

5.2 Aspects of the celebrity: forms of endorsement and celebrity characteristics

Accounting for 88.84% of the sample, the co-present mode of endorsement was the most prevalent type (Table 5).

The fact that the use of the imperative (6.01%), implicit (3.86%) and explicit (1.29%) modes was negligible implies that the most evident and direct mode of endorsement was generally avoided. The brands analysed here specifically followed this tendency, except for Red Bull in its use of the co-present mode (100%) and Santander which resorted to the co-present (38.46%) and imperative (33.33%) modes to practically the same degree. In the analysis by brands (Table 6), Santander employed both the explicit (25.64%) and implicit (2.56%) modes of endorsement considered here. Similarly, Movistar used above all the co-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of endorsement</th>
<th>Imperative</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
<th>Implicit</th>
<th>Co-present</th>
<th>Overall total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.01%</td>
<td>1.29%</td>
<td>3.86%</td>
<td>88.84%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Celebrity characteristics</th>
<th>Overall total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>71.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinariness</td>
<td>7.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame</td>
<td>4.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>0.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>10.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall total</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports values</th>
<th>Overall total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>73.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>5.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>10.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall total</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 5. Use of celebrities by brands (general)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of endorsement (by brands)</th>
<th>Santander</th>
<th>Movistar</th>
<th>Iberdrola</th>
<th>Red Bull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>25.64%</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>15.52%</td>
<td>5.47%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-present</td>
<td>84.19%</td>
<td>55.17%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Authors own creation
present mode (55.17%), followed by the explicit mode (24.14%), the imperative mode (15.52%) and, as with Santander, the implicit mode to a much lesser degree (5.17%). More coherently, Iberdrola used the co-present mode (84.19%), while using the rest much less frequently (never above 10%). All considered, as already noted, Red Bull was the brand that resorted most to the co-present mode of endorsement.

With respect to celebrity characteristics, it is important to note uniqueness (71.24%), followed at a fair distance by knowledge (10.94%) and ordinariness (7.30%). The rest of the characteristics considered here obtained values lower than 4.1%. In relation to the brands, they all followed this pattern in which uniqueness was the most prominent value, Iberdrola being the clearest case (79.64%). As before, Santander was the only brand that did not follow the general trend, for second to uniqueness (41.03%), objectivity (35.9%) was the main characteristic. As with the rest, the brand placed special emphasis on uniqueness (41.03%), but also underscored objectivity (35.9%), a quality that was practically ignored by the other brands (Red Bull, 0%; Iberdrola, 0.30%; and Movistar, 0.86%). On the contrary, knowledge, which was a characteristic underscored by Red Bull (24.09%) and Movistar (15.52%) and to a lesser extent by Iberdrola (5.47%), was not mentioned at all by Santander. It warrants noting that ordinariness was a characteristic that was used, albeit more infrequently, by all the brands, especially by Movistar (16.38%), followed at a distance by Santander (7.79%), Iberdrola (7.60%) and Red Bull (6.57%) (Table 7).

5.3 Aspects of sports: sports values
Lastly, in relation to sports values, the brands resorted most to competence (75.39%), followed by the social (10.94%), moral (10.30%) and personal (5.36%) kind. Specifically, all the brands underscored the value of competence (approx. 70%), above all Red Bull (82.48%).

Beyond the general data, with regard to the results by brand (Table 8) Movistar, Red Bull and Santander highlighted, in addition to competence, social (Santander, 23.08%; Movistar, 14.66%; Red Bull, 8.03%) and personal values (Movistar, 11.21%; Red Bull, 6.57%;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Santander</th>
<th>Movistar</th>
<th>Iberdrola</th>
<th>Red Bull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>41.03%</td>
<td>48.28%</td>
<td>79.64%</td>
<td>51.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinariness</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
<td>16.38%</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
<td>6.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4.31%</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
<td>9.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>35.90%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15.52%</td>
<td>5.47%</td>
<td>24.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>4.31%</td>
<td>1.52%</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10.26%</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Authors own creation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Santander</th>
<th>Movistar</th>
<th>Iberdrola</th>
<th>Red Bull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.72%</td>
<td>13.36%</td>
<td>2.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>71.79%</td>
<td>72.41%</td>
<td>69.60%</td>
<td>82.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>11.21%</td>
<td>4.86%</td>
<td>6.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>23.08%</td>
<td>14.66%</td>
<td>12.16%</td>
<td>8.03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Authors own creation

International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship
Santander, 5.13%). On the contrary, Iberdrola preferred moral values (13.36%) – while also alluding to the social kind (12.16%) which were practically (Movistar, 1.72%; Red Bull, 2.92%) or totally non-existent (Santander) in the rest of the brands.

6. Conclusion and implications
In relation to RQ1 (How did the brands analysed here put sports celebrities to strategic use in their communication on Instagram?), the findings indicate that emotional objectives (Plates 1 and 2) clearly predominated, coinciding with the usual affective link between fans and great sports celebrities, noted by Del Castillo (2016) and Kończak (2021). In keeping with objectives of this type, broadly speaking consumer-based positioning (Plate 3) predominated. Nevertheless, it can be observed how Santander and Movistar (Plate 4), both more traditional companies associated with a product vision, were more inclined to pursue cognitive objectives and product attribute positioning; so, when using celebrities, they focused on information simply because well-known people were involved (Lines, 2001; Leng and Phua, 2022), with an eye to improving the product recall of consumers and positively influencing their brand choice (Ruihley et al., 2010, p. 133). In addition, the specific context of Instagram, which has led to new forms of socialisation and leisure (Serafinelli, 2017; Lee et al., 2015), allows to foster affective aspects and to place the spotlight on the user, especially in the case of sports celebrities with a more discrete media presence or associated with more modern sports, such as the extreme kind sponsored by Red Bull (e.g. snowboarding, base jumping, climbing, etc.).

Plate 1.
Santander post.
Affective objective

Source(s): Instagram
Plate 2. Iberdrola post. Affective objective

Plate 3. Red Bull post. Consumer-based positioning
These results are in line with recent studies like that performed by Kalam et al. (2024), enquiring into how the trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise of celebrities prompt followers to engage with their social media posts and to form a positive brand attitude.

Concerning RQ2 (Which were the most predominant forms of endorsement in the brands’ communication on Instagram?), the findings show that it was the co-present mode (Plate 5 and 6) that predominated in the Instagram posts of the four brands. This is in line with the theory proposed by Tellis (1998) and with the results of more recent empirical studies like that performed by Fernández Gómez et al. (2022), who assert that this mode predominates in celebrity endorsement campaigns in general. It was Iberdrola and Red Bull that gave priority to this mode of endorsement, which evinces their strong relationship with the sports celebrities endorsing their products and with sports in general. This is borne out by authors who claim that the brands that use sports celebrities are linked to sports (Banytè et al., 2011), for both Red Bull and Iberdrola are important sports sponsors (extreme sports and football, respectively), although this is also the case with Movistar (e-sports). Likewise, the results of this study reflect Santander’s use of the imperative mode, revealing how sports celebrities recommend consumers to use the products that they are endorsing (Patil, 2019), as evidenced by the post with Xavi Hernández promoting his football campus (Plate 7). The most direct modes of endorsement – explicit and implicit – were observed more often in those brands linked to product
management, namely, Santander and Movistar (albeit to a lesser degree than other modes), perhaps seeking to associate the trustworthiness of the sports celebrities with the brand (Shezi, 2022), for they are services (banking and telecommunications) that require extra trust on the part of the consumer.

With respect to RQ3 (Which functional characteristics of sports celebrities stood out in the brands’ communication on Instagram?), the results of this study indicate a clear predominance of the characteristic of uniqueness (Plate 8), highlighting the fact that the sports celebrities are special people in their own right because of their achievements (Furedi, 2010; Rodríguez et al., 2022). This explains why brands prefer sports celebrities over other types, for this particularity elevates sportspersons to the category of role models, which, together with their authenticity (in contrast to film stars, for example) gives them greater legitimacy than other celebrity categories to endorse products, in consonance with the conclusions of Rodríguez et al. (2022). This legitimacy also stems from knowledge, a celebrity characteristic that only Santander (Plate 9) considered to be relevant, which chimes with the bank’s preference for cognitive objectives and product attribute positioning. Ordinariness was a characteristic that Movistar, Iberdrola and Red Bull (Plate 10) employed, albeit to a lesser extent, to demonstrate a greater proximity to consumers by showing how celebrities prepare for competitions, celebrate their victories.
or reveal their weaknesses; in sum, showing their human side and breaking down cultural and social barriers (Furedi, 2010). These findings contrast with those of recent studies, such as the one performed by Fernández Gómez et al. (2022), which imply that for celebrities in general, familiarity is underscored in 76.9% of the cases and uniqueness in only 51.9%. Likewise, the results coincide with those obtained by Shezi (2022), who notes that the credibility of sports celebrity endorsements is based on trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise.

With respect to RQ4 (Which sports values were embodied by the sports celebrities used by the brands on Instagram?), according to the findings of this paper, competence (Plate 11) was the most frequently used value by the brands, for it allows to connect the customary hero status of sports celebrities in their public conduct with the brand, as noted by North et al. (2005) and Rodríguez et al. (2022). Indeed, owing to the fact that sports celebrities achieve fame by their own merits, their cultural prominence is important and, through the meanings that are generated in sports, they end up creating a cultural significance for very ordinary products (Rodríguez et al., 2022) through social (Plate 12), moral (Plate 13) and personal values (Plate 14).

The transfer of this cultural meaning of the celebrity (McCracken, 1989) to the brand is exemplified by Rafa Nadal (Plate 15) who presents himself as an ambassador of a
common cause supported by Santander. The inner workings of endorsement have been recently described by Schartel Dunn and Nisbett (2023), who claim that when consumers perceive a social issue to be important, their perception of brands advocating for it increases; this relationship is strengthened if the celebrity affiliated to the brand and social position is liked by the consumer. It has been shown that celebrities transfer the recognition that they receive from consumers to the endorsed product and become associated with the brand image, thus enhancing the positive image of the company (Sassenberg, 2015; Kończak, 2021).

The findings reveal that social skills like familiarity (Shezi, 2022) allowed Santander in particular (but also Movistar and Red Bull) to reinforce the credibility of sports celebrities, transferring this to the endorsed product. In point of fact, the bank’s strategy was aimed at earning the trust of consumers, an essential aspect in the financial sector. As the same importance was also attached to moral values, this implies that, above all in the case of Iberdrola, the positive behavioural patterns of sports celebrities were exploited, as observed by Lear et al. (2009) and Dix et al. (2010). This is in keeping with Iberdrola’s strategy, revolving around emotional aspects and the construction of a sustainable world, presenting itself as a brand concerned for future generations. It was personal values, aimed at enhancing consumer recognition, that appeared to a lesser extent, with Movistar attaching the greatest importance to them. As observed by Kończak (2021), the brand uses...
aspects inherent to sports celebrities, like character, probably down to the fact that it associates the way of being of sports celebrities with its campaigns.

In conclusion, as to the strategic use to which the brands analysed here put sports celebrities, it can be observed how they exploited them on Instagram to attract the attention of the public through entertainment, as noted by Erdogan and Baker (2000), Lee et al. (2015) and Wood et al. (2016). The results of this study show that the aim of this exploitation was to associate the brands with the sports values that the celebrities represented, chiefly their moral (responsibility) or social character (equality, friendship).

As these values represented by sports celebrities are socially significant, they earn them public recognition that is then transferred to the brand to which they have lent their image, in line with the literature review (McCracken, 1989; Sassenberg, 2015; Kończak, 2021). The results of this paper are in line with those of Rai et al. (2021), who conclude that celebrity advertisement is valuable for transferring the sports celebrity image to the endorsed brand image. Through the values of competence of the sports celebrities chosen by them, the brands intended to imbue themselves with courage and creativity.
(Red Bull), independence (Iberdrola and Santander) or ambition (Movistar). In doing so, the celebrities served as a link between the most material meaning of the product and the collective identity of consumers (Marshall, 2014). As these values represented by sports celebrities are socially significant, the conclusions of this research are in keeping with those of the study performed by Dwivedi et al. (2015, p. 457) on the transfer of culturally valued meaning from a celebrity endorser to the endorsed brand and brand equity.
In light of the results of this study, that link was reinforced by the cultural significance created by those celebrities as role models, as can be observed in the case of sportspeople who give a product or service a cultural significance based on sports values. For instance, Alexia Putellas transferred the cultural values of equality and tolerance to Iberdrola, whereas Carlos Sainz lent his legendary status to Red Bull, thus confirming that sports celebrities can give meaning to very ordinary products (Dix et al., 2010). If the most predominant value was competence, the extraordinary character of sportspeople coinciding with that value was the most predominant characteristic, highlighting their achievements (McCracken, 1989; Tellis, 1998; Furedi, 2010; McKernan, 2011) as special people. The findings show that selecting the characteristics of celebrities and the sports values that they represent was consistent with the strategic decisions adopted by the brands on Instagram, which by and large pursued emotional objectives and consumer-based positioning. In general, the results of this paper are consistent with Rai et al.’s (2021), which show that the characteristics of a celebrity are beneficial when combined with a suitable brand that maintains its credibility in the market; and Dwivedi et al. (2015), who demonstrated the use of celebrity endorsers for brand building purposes, while observing that the congruence of celebrities and the brands that they endorse plays an important role (2015, p. 457).
Plate 12. Iberdrola post. Sports value: social

The limitations of this research include the gender perspective, for it was not established such a differentiation between the sportspeople. Following the line of research of Granleese and Shen (2009), this study could have included gender, an underexamined variable in endorsement literature that reportedly differentiates consumer behaviour (Tzoumaka et al., 2016). In this regard, of the four brands studied here, it was Iberdrola that resorted more to women, owing to the fact that since 2016 it has been a pioneer in the sponsorship of women’s sports in Spain, an aspect that it would be interesting to address in future research. This paper has revealed that there are sports celebrities who are used by more than one brand (Rafa Nadal by Santander and Movistar; Marc Márquez by Movistar and Red Bull). Accordingly, following authors like Kucharska et al. (2020) and Zarkada and Tzoumaka (2020), the results could have been supplemented with an analysis of the personal brands of celebrities with a view to linking them to the image of the brands that they endorse.

This study has several theoretical implications. In relation to research on the process by which the symbolic properties of the celebrity are transferred from celebrity to consumer good and from good to consumer (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Jain and Roy, 2016; Roy and Jain, 2017; Rai et al., 2021), this study contributes to the literature on McCracken’s (1988) MTM, specifically on how brand image is transferred to a product, opening new lines of research on the congruence between celebrity, brand and consumer values. This is also true of the literature on the strategic use of celebrities by brands in the specific case of social networks, particularly Instagram. This research has confirmed that these values represented by sports celebrities are socially significant, earning them public recognition that is then transferred to

Plate 14.
Red Bull post. Sports value: personal

Source(s): Instagram
the brand to which they have lent their image, in line with the literature review (McCracken, 1989; Sassenberg, 2015; Kończak, 2021). As to management implications, the conclusions of this paper suggest that brands should use those celebrities in line not only with their values but also with their type of positioning and communication objectives. These conclusions allow to link brand values to the sports kind through sports celebrities and the socially significant values that they represent. Additionally, this study sheds light on a number of issues related to celebrity management. The idea that the credibility of sport celebrity’s endorsement is based on trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise provides selection criteria for celebrities. Similarly, this paper supports the use of cultural branding strategies. When consumers perceive a social issue as important, their acceptance of brands advocating for it increases. On that basis, brand managers and strategic planners should assume that working on a brand DNA implies that celebrity advertisement is valuable for transferring the image of the celebrity to the endorsed brand image. Such linkage with sport celebrities is not exclusive to big brands or corporations. Sport celebrities can give meaning to very ordinary products and transfer equally valuable brand values to consumers also in the case of minority sports, risk sports or e-sports.

Accordingly, comparative studies could be performed to enquire into the possible differences in the use of celebrity endorsers. Other future lines of research could focus on users with the aim of examining the influence of the advent of the celebrity phenomenon on interactivity and engagement on Instagram, plus purchase intent (Hooi Ting et al., 2023) and celebrity credibility (Shezi, 2022). According to the literature, celebrities are basically used to arouse interest and generate attention (Sassenberg et al., 2018), making the most of the public’s desire to be entertained (Wood et al., 2016), for which reason social networking
sites like Instagram and TikTok, devoted to leisure, may offer interesting opportunities for researching on the use of celebrities on these platforms.

Notes
1. Only those posts in which sports celebrities appeared were analysed.
2. Although Coca-Cola was the highest profile Spanish sports sponsor in 2021, this case could not be analysed as the posts in which sports celebrities appeared during the period 2021-2022 were unavailable.
3. The authors would like to thank Claudia Castillo Molina, David Martínez Bonilla, Francisco Martínez Serrano, Laxmi Rodríguez Parra and Carlota Valdés Cuadrado, all student interns of the Department of Audio-visual Communication and Advertising of the University of Seville, for their collaboration in coding tasks.

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