



## Understanding and overcoming the obstacles in Muslim female athlete branding

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## Understanding and overcoming the obstacles in Muslim female athlete branding

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The increased importance of sports and athlete brands highlights the need for athletes to pay attention to branding, as it has positive impacts. As athletes, Muslim women have not succeeded in building their brands. This research aims to understand the branding challenges facing Muslim female athletes and how these can be overcome.

**Design/methodology** – These branding obstacles and guidelines were explored using qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with Muslim female athletes and focus groups with experts. Data were analysed using open and axial coding to identify the codes.

**Findings** – The study identifies three major obstacles to branding by Muslim female athletes. Self-related obstacles, such as knowledge of brand building, social media, personal pressure, and a lack of role models, impact the brand-building decision. Social-related obstacles (family and society) and sport-related obstacles (participation as women and as Muslims) further complicate this task. Experts provide additional insights regarding these obstacles, suggesting strategies to overcome them.

**Research limitations** – The research focuses on athletes from one geographical area and has limitations associated with using qualitative methods.

**Practical implications** – The study analyses how self-, social-, and sport-related obstacles are faced by athletes. It provides suggestions for federations, sports codes, and other stakeholders to support athletes to overcome these barriers.

**Originality** – This study expands the understanding of the struggles Muslim women, as part of an under-represented group, face in building their brands.

**Keywords** Muslim female athletes, Branding, Obstacles, Female

**Paper type** Research paper

## Understanding and overcoming the obstacles in Muslim female athlete branding

### Introduction

Sport is becoming increasingly commercialised, attracting sponsors, fans, and viewers (Arai *et al.*, 2013). Women's sports are growing (Li *et al.*, 2021) and viewer interest therein is increasing (Mills, 2019), creating opportunities for female athletes to build their brands. Nevertheless, women's sports do not attract the same level of coverage as men's sports (Doyle *et al.*, 2021; Valenti *et al.*, 2018). Attention to women's sports varies across countries due to society's cultural and social attitudes (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2018). Ibtihaj Muhammad (fencing), Sania Mirza (tennis), and Sana Mir (cricket) are examples of well-known Muslim sportswomen, yet there are no Muslim female athletes included on *Business Insider's* list of the 36 most iconic female athletes of the last century or *Forbes's* list of highest-paid female athletes. This has resulted in concerns regarding the under-representation of Muslim female athletes or sportswomen (Samie and Sehlikoglu, 2015).

Athlete branding has been the focus of research in understanding the brand-building process (Hasaan *et al.*, 2018; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012), authenticity (Hasaan and Fişne, 2021), brand image (Arai *et al.*, 2014), and athletes' use of social media in this process (Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011; Sharifzadeh *et al.*, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2020). Research into female athletes has examined their brand identity (Lobpries *et al.*, 2017) and branding on social media (Geurin and Burch, 2017), including Instagram (Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2021) and Facebook (Emmons and Mocarski, 2014). These studies have included a range of sports, including golf (Cortsen, 2013), water sports (Parris *et al.*, 2014), and combat sports (Greenwell *et al.*, 2015). From a brand management perspective, previous research has examined barriers faced by female athletes in establishing their brands which differ from those experienced by men (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018; Peetz, 2019). Research on Muslim women has explored the

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3 sociocultural barriers to brand building (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022; Sadeghi *et al.*, 2018)  
4 and their clothing, including the hijab (Cox *et al.*, 2017; Hamzeh, 2017; Mostafa, 2023) and  
5 the burkini (Sykioti and Stavrou, 2019). Moreover, the challenges of self-presentation  
6 (Basabain *et al.*, 2021) and media coverage (Pfister, 2010; Samie and Sehlkoglou, 2015) have  
7 received some attention. It is important that different stakeholders understand the lived  
8 experiences of Muslim women within their cultural context (Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017), yet  
9 limited attention has been given to the factors that serve as barriers to their brand-building  
10 activities, highlighting additional research opportunities.  
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22 Sports branding research centres on men's sports. As women's sports and female  
23 athletes may be perceived differently, female athletes experience different challenges from  
24 male athletes (Doyle *et al.*, 2021), such as receiving less media coverage (Romney and  
25 Johnson, 2020). Islam encourages participation in sport as it contributes to healthy living but,  
26 as professional athletes, Muslim women experience brand-building challenges from both a  
27 cultural and a religious context (Ziaee *et al.*, 2023). Thus, this study focuses on understanding  
28 the brand-building obstacles Muslim women face, answering the call of Hasaan *et al.* (2016a)  
29 and Sadeghi *et al.* (2018) to investigate this phenomenon.  
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41 By focusing on one community (i.e., Muslim) and gender (i.e., female), this study  
42 contributes to several areas. First, this study assists in understanding the experiences of Muslim  
43 women as athletes (Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017) and their specific branding challenges.  
44 Second, this study contributes to athlete branding by providing a further understanding of the  
45 obstacles facing a group of female athletes, specifically Muslim women (Hussain and  
46 Cunningham, 2022; Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017; Wilson *et al.*, 2013). Third, this study  
47 identifies strategies that could be adopted in overcoming branding obstacles, supported by the  
48 collection of data from diverse sources (Flick, 2004).  
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## Literature review

### *The term “athlete branding”*

Human brands refer to people who are the subject of marketing and communication efforts (Thomson, 2006), which enables athletes to become recognisable figures even outside their specific sports, leading to their development as brands (Walsh and Williams, 2017). Following this rationale, an athlete brand can be defined as the “public persona of an individual athlete who has established their symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (Arai *et al.*, 2014, p. 98) or the personality of an athlete reflected in public (Hasaan and Kerem, 2017).

The composition of the athlete brand includes athletes’ performance and the sport in which they participate, their appearance, their lifestyle, and their media persona (Arai *et al.*, 2014; Hasaan *et al.*, 2018; Kunkel *et al.*, 2022; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012). This means that their sports-related activities and successes are only a part of the athlete brand, requiring athletes to manage both aspects of their sporting life – on-field (sporting success) and off-field (life and marketing) in their branding activities (Arai *et al.*, 2014; Hasaan *et al.*, 2018).

### *The effects of athlete branding*

The athlete brand is important for career success (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2021) and has positive outcomes for athletes, such as increased wages and transfer fees (Parmentier and Fischer, 2012) and sponsorship deals (Hasaan *et al.*, 2018), as their positive attributes are carried over to the brands they endorse (Kakitek, 2018). Athlete brands can differentiate athletes, thus prominent athletes attain visibility, social status, and better financial resources (Taniyev and Gordon, 2019). Strong athlete brands strengthen the association between athletes and their fans (Parmentier and Fischer, 2012), providing reputational benefits. These benefits positively affect the athletes’ brands, team brands, and sponsors (Arai *et al.*, 2014; Hasaan *et al.*, 2018).

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3 Branding can be used to achieve long-lasting success (Arai *et al.*, 2014; Hasaan *et al.*, 2018),  
4 extending the athletes' brands past their active sports careers (Taniyev and Gordon, 2019). This  
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6 leads to the need for athletes to build their brands, where Muslim women encounter several  
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8 challenges.  
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### 11 12 13 14 15 *Muslim female athletes*

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17 Societal issues of gender inequality, status quo, conservativeness, and feminism complicate the  
18 participation of female athletes in sports, making it harder than for men. Viewed as second-  
19 class athletes (Romney and Johnson, 2020), female athletes find themselves the focal point of  
20 gender controversies, which is potentially more relevant in Muslim societies (Hussain and  
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22 Cunningham, 2021).  
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28 The female athlete paradox is relevant – namely that athletes are women (sexual beings)  
29 first, and athletes second (Emmons and Mocarski, 2014), requiring female athletes to bridge  
30 the gulf between their social images as athletes and their positive experience of sport and its  
31 compatibility with womanhood (Cahn, 2015). Muslim female athletes must choose between  
32 being “good women” who stay home and participating in sports (Ratna, 2011).  
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40 Muslim women's participation in sports varies between Muslim countries due to the  
41 different roles of women (Hussain and Cunningham, 2021). For example, in Bangladesh,  
42 women face gender equality and empowerment constraints (Jahromi *et al.*, 2021), with lower  
43 value ascribed to them and their sporting success (Shefali, 2021). In Oman and Pakistan, men  
44 and women have different but equally respected roles (Al-Sinani *et al.*, 2021), yet women's  
45 status and roles are decided by their families (Hasaan and Kerem, 2017). In Western countries  
46 (e.g., Australia), Muslim women have faced harassment from spouses, gender discrimination,  
47 and work-life balance problems during their careers (Hargreaves, 2000). Consequently,  
48 Muslim female athletes often encounter cultural barriers (i.e., the existence of a male-centred  
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3 culture, observance of Islamic principles), social barriers (e.g., family) (Kay, 2006), and other  
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5 cultural factors (i.e., less attention to women's sports) (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2018).  
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8 The participation of Muslim women in sports is further impacted by religious  
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10 interpretations (Walseth and Fasting, 2003), with some viewing sports as not being respectable  
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12 femininity in Arabian Muslim communities (AbdulRazak *et al.*, 2010), though this has not been  
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14 found in all countries (e.g., Turkey) (Turkmen, 2018). These cultural values mean Muslim  
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16 women are less likely to exercise (Hussain and Cunningham, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2015). Moreover,  
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18 the wearing of the hijab and the burkini as sports clothing and governing bodies' views of these  
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20 items impact participation and perspectives of athletes in society (Hamzeh, 2017; Prouse, 2015;  
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22 Sykioti and Stavrou, 2019).  
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26 However, perceptions of obstacles experienced by professional Muslim female athletes  
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28 vary across countries and cultures, highlighting the need to broaden research into diverse  
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30 cultures (Hasaan *et al.*, 2016b; Hussain and Cunningham, 2021, 2022). Obtaining the  
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32 perspectives of athletes and experts in the field can expand the understanding of these obstacles  
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34 and how they affect athlete branding. Considering these aspects, the importance of branding to  
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36 athletes, and the lack of research on branding barriers faced by women (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018)  
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38 – specifically Muslim women – we pose the following research question:  
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43 *RQ1.* What obstacles do female Muslim athletes face in their efforts to become brands?  
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45 With the increased commercialisation of sport, the importance of brand building (Lobpries *et*  
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47 *al.*, 2018; Mills, 2019), and the obstacles impacting branding, various strategies must be  
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49 identified and implemented. Previous studies have illuminated potential strategies in this  
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51 domain. For instance, Kunkel *et al.* (2022) highlighted the positive impact of athletes  
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53 promoting philanthropic activities on their brand image. Other studies emphasised the  
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55 importance of relatable narratives, perceived personas among fans (Taniyev *et al.*, 2022),  
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57 athlete team and league associations (Su *et al.*, 2020), and projecting athletes as role models  
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(Taniyev and Gordon, 2022). In the context of female athletes, Harris and Brison (2022), Lobpries *et al.* (2017) and Shreffler *et al.* (2016) emphasised the significance of performance and assumed attractiveness. Additionally, Lobpries *et al.* (2018) argued that on-field performance is insufficient and that additional aspects are necessary to overcome branding barriers. These strategies can provide guidelines that women athletes may consider online (e.g., social media) and in their society, enabling them to strategically manage their brands (Arai *et al.*, 2013). Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in studies addressing strategies for branding among Muslim women athletes within the context of their culture and society. To fill this void, this research question seeks to explore the strategies that can effectively surmount the obstacles Muslim women athletes face in branding. These strategies can provide guidelines that Muslim women athletes may consider online (e.g., social media) and in their society, enabling them to strategically manage their brand (Arai *et al.*, 2013). To address this, we propose the following research question:

*RQ2.* What strategies could be used to overcome these obstacles?

### *The empirical context*

This study centres on Turkish athletes and followers of the Muslim faith. Turkey is an interesting example, as it became the only Islamic country to grant social, legal, and political rights to women early in the 20th century (Marshall, 2013). Within this context, secular and Islamic feminism emerged as two broad categories of feminism rooted historically in the Middle East and other Muslim countries (Özkazanç-Pan, 2015). Rather than qualifiers for feminism, secular and Islamic feminism represent different discursive modes of identification and identities concerning women, gender relations, and the state (Arat-Koç, 2007). While Turkey has strong European connections, there is still a big gender gap in sports participation,



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3 leadership, coaching, and sports media representation that favours males in the country  
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5 (Kavasoğlu and Koca, 2021).  
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## 10 **Research design**

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12 To achieve the study's goals, an inductive approach using qualitative data collection and  
13 analysis methods was used. This design enables the understanding of phenomena by gaining  
14 in-depth knowledge about the topic (Malhotra *et al.*, 2012). RQ1 was answered using semi-  
15 structured interviews with Muslim female athletes (stage 1) and RQ2 was answered via focus  
16 groups with experts (stage 2). This approach was deemed appropriate for this research, as  
17 exploring in-depth information from multiple stakeholders is useful to understand complex  
18 phenomena (Lune and Berg, 2017).  
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### 30 *Stage 1: semi-structured interviews with professional Muslim female athletes*

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32 A purposeful, convenience sampling technique was employed to select the participants  
33 (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017). Each respondent had to be a Muslim professional female athlete who  
34 had participated in international competitions (i.e., Olympics, Asian Games, Muslim Games)  
35 and played the sport for at least two years.  
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42 An interview guide was developed using athlete branding literature and following the  
43 guidelines of Patton (2014) (see Appendix 1). The semi-structured interviews were conducted  
44 in person (face-to-face) and online (via Skype). Nineteen Turkish Muslim female athletes from  
45 different sporting codes were interviewed, with each interview lasting 60–80 minutes (see  
46 Table I). The interviews were conducted in Turkish and English to enable the participants to  
47 express themselves clearly and language experts then translated these interviews into English  
48 (Squires, 2008). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.  
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6 Data analysis started immediately after the first interview, as it allowed researchers to become  
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8 more familiar with the participants' responses and improve future interview levels (Marshall  
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10 and Rossman, 2014). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for researchers to note  
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12 their initial impressions, which were then discussed (Gale *et al.*, 2013). **Using thematic**  
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14 **analysis**, two-level coding was adopted for data analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). **Open**  
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16 **coding was used for the initial analysis to identify initial themes, whereafter axial coding was**  
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18 **utilised to classify the initial themes into more defined themes, thus combining similar themes**  
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20 **(refer to Figure 1).** For example, reflections from the participants about their personal  
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22 circumstances were classified as self-related issues – for instance, “I did not try to establish a  
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24 brand for myself. I do not use social media too much” (A14). Thus, self-related issues reflected  
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26 participants' comments relating to themselves. Similarly, comments concerning family,  
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28 society, and media were categorised as social-related issues, while those specific to the sport  
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30 and participation as Muslim women were categorised as sport-related issues. The findings  
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32 present participant-centric quotes to support the coding.  
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42 Inter-coder reliability was used to determine the coding agreement between the researchers. A  
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44 final inter-coder reliability of 0.95 measured via Cohen's kappa was obtained. Any  
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46 discrepancies and disagreements were discussed until an agreement was reached (Campbell *et*  
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48 *al.*, 2013).  
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### 53 *Stage 2: expert focus groups*

54 The branding challenges identified by the athletes were used to structure the focus groups that  
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56 explored the experts' perspectives and answered RQ2. A focus group can get information on a  
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3 group's perspectives on certain topics (Ten Have, 2004). Guest *et al.* (2017) concluded that  
4 three focus groups could identify 90% or more of themes. Consequently, three focus groups  
5 were conducted, each comprising six participants chosen because of their sport expertise (see  
6 Table II). This deliberate diversification aimed to capture nuanced and comprehensive expert  
7 opinions from various facets of the sports domain. Four categories of experts were included in  
8 these focus groups, namely academics, sports journalists, professional athletes and referees,  
9 and sports managers. The selection criteria were meticulously applied to ensure participants'  
10 expertise. Academics were included based on a tenure of over three years in a university and a  
11 minimum of two publications. Sports journalists had to have been reporting on sports for at  
12 least five years. Professional athletes and referees were selected if they had more than five  
13 years' experience in their respective sports. Lastly, sports managers were included if they had  
14 over three years in sports management. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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35 Each focus group lasted 120–140 minutes and was conducted by the first author. These  
36 interviews were recorded and transcribed. The same thematic analysis process used for coding  
37 in stage 1 was used in stage 2, namely open coding to develop initial themes and axial coding  
38 to convert initial themes into more defined, concrete themes. However, to keep the unique  
39 aspect of the focus groups, the focus group was the unit of analysis. As in stage 1, inter-coder  
40 reliability was measured via Cohen's kappa (0.91) and disagreements were resolved through  
41 discussion.

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51 To ensure trustworthiness of the research findings, the trustworthiness model (Guba,  
52 1981) was applied using various strategies. Credibility was obtained through prolonged  
53 engagement with the topic and the analysis of data from multiple sources, specifically  
54 interviews and expert focus groups. Transferability was achieved through the provision of a  
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comprehensive and thick description of the data, while dependability was obtained through peer checking and using multiple coders. Confirmability was obtained by reflecting on the possible bias during the research and limiting any effect thereof (Stahl and King, 2020).

## Results

The findings from the athletes (A) and the experts (F, P) regarding the obstacles are presented simultaneously. After a discussion with the athletes about their sports participation, the participants were asked about their personal branding efforts. Although many were unable to do so, some described these as being “known and preferred by everyone” (A12) and a result “of our work and accumulations that we have achieved so far” (A18). The branding obstacles faced by female athletes were grouped into three domains: self-related (i.e., related to the athletes), social-related, and sport-related issues.

*Self-related obstacles.* The knowledge and effort required to undertake branding, social media, personal pressures, and a lack of role models were identified as relevant obstacles to the athletes’ brand-building activities. Knowledge is required to build a brand, yet A19 stated: “girls do not know very well about branding, its concepts, its techniques and its necessity [...] now I realise that branding knowledge is also useful like sporting knowledge for any athlete”. Additionally, a lack of branding effort was identified by the participants, who acknowledged that while they wished to be viewed as brands, they did not put a real effort into establishing themselves as brands. Participants A7 and A8 agreed with A11, who asserted: “I am definitely a brand that has not been fully recognised. However, I cannot say that I am successful in branding.” Moreover, A17 mentioned a lack of the required time needed and perceived negatives associated with brand building and social media. The experts identified a lack of branding knowledge among athletes, which with a lack of education and knowledge identified as a contributor to this situation. Education by “universities, coaches, training grounds and by

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3 federations” (F1, P4; F3, P16) was mentioned as a strategy to overcome this situation, as it  
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5 would benefit the athletes and the sport.  
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8 The participants highlighted social media and its importance to the personal brand.  
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10 They identified the need to be visible on social media as professional athletes as part of their  
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12 brand building (not just having a personal page), with A2 describing it as “essential for  
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14 branding but I do not have a professional page of myself. I only use it for personal purposes”.  
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16 This view was supported by A8. The need to invest a great deal of time in engaging in brand  
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18 activities on social media was identified by several participants, as social media is the most  
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20 effective method for brand building: “I will have to spend a lot of time on social media. That  
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22 is why I prefer not to spend time on branding, as my days are more calm and ordinary” (A17).  
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26 Being exposed to criticism and the comments of others were highlighted by  
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28 participants. Participant A19 described this in the following way:  
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31 When you use social media often, you face a difficult and troubling situation to be  
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33 exposed to the criticism and gaze of people who are malevolent and bad-minded, and  
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35 who have not achieved anything in their own lives. Personally, I always kept my page  
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37 private for this reason.  
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41 The reticence to use social media for branding due to moral policing and abuse was discussed  
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43 in the expert focus group. F3 (P3) stated that “moral policing on social media is [a] big issue  
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45 for any emerging athlete especially when she is a female”, due to the perception that  
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47 participation in sports is not appropriate for women, impacting their branding efforts.  
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50 Moreover, personal pressures presented obstacles to participants’ involvement in sports  
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52 and building professional athlete brands. A10’s father was a coach and A11’s teacher  
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54 encouraged her interest in sports, placing pressure on participation, success, and branding  
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56 activities. Concerning the pressure associated with training, A2 revealed: “I spent two or three  
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58 months each year in China training. I had a difficult training camp away from my country and  
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3 my family.” Consequently, the athletes made questionable decisions regarding their present  
4 and future in light of these pressures, including (not) accepting advertising contracts and  
5 alternate career planning. A4 stated: “I need permission before signing any advertising  
6 contracts. I cannot take decisions on my own.”  
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12 The experts also identified that personal challenges, specifically in Muslim and Eastern  
13 societies, can impact branding efforts:  
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17 Unfortunately, marketing and participating in commercial activities are considered  
18 inappropriate for athletes among fans.... That is why female athletes keep their distance  
19 from marketing activities and branding efforts.... Now, any single person can reach out  
20 to you and criticise you. Therefore, female athletes prefer to adopt a safe path. (F1, P3)  
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27 To overcome this, the importance of “psychological strength” was suggested in conjunction  
28 with guidance from a qualified person (F3, P14).  
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32 Additionally, the participants identified an absence of (Muslim) role models as an  
33 obstacle. They acknowledged that their favourite female athletes were non-Muslims and, as  
34 Muslims, they could not blindly follow these athletes. Reasons for this shortage of Muslim role  
35 models included scarce attention in the media. “I think, Muslim female athletes are fail[ing] to  
36 create a brand. In addition, both national and international media do not help them to establish  
37 a brand” (A2). The possibility of non-Muslim athletes serving as role models elicited divergent  
38 responses, with A18 expressing reservations:  
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49 A Western female athlete may be a role model to Turkish female athletes in some ways  
50 ... sportswise, we can say “yes”, but socially and off the field, it is tricky and  
51 complicated. Their clothing, moral values, and ways of living are somewhat different  
52 from ours.  
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3 Conversely, A10 suggested this was possible, “[A] Western female athlete as a role model for  
4 Muslim female athlete? Maybe. Why not? If she is successful in the sport and well respected  
5 by her character.” Experts acknowledged that there are very few role models available for  
6 female athletes, particularly in Muslim communities, with Western athletes not being viewed  
7 as “exemplary role models for Muslim females ... only a few Muslim names are available as  
8 top female athletes. This results in Muslim female athletes being unsure of appropriate actions”  
9 (F2, P12), which impacts the branding activities undertaken.  
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20 Young Muslim female athletes are not sure how to pursue their brand. They are not sure  
21 what kind of clothes they should wear in public, what to post on social media, or what  
22 they should endorse, and all off-field matters are haunting them. Therefore, the easy  
23 way for Muslim female athletes is to just concentrate on the sport and get a better job,  
24 quit playing and establish an easy, sound career. (F2, P8)  
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32 To overcome this obstacle, Muslim media should more actively promote female athletes, thus  
33 developing them as role models. F3 (P16) provided the examples of Hedaya Malak (Egyptian  
34 Taekwondo practitioner) and Bilqis Abdul-Qadir (American basketball player), who are  
35 “ignored because they cannot fulfil the glamour requirements of the media”, yet attract lots of  
36 attention in the Muslim world, so “it is time to promote them for our future female athletes”.  
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43 *Social-related obstacles.* The second theme concerned obstacles that athletes faced  
44 socially, specifically relating to family, society, media, fans, and other socially connected  
45 persons. Most athletes (A12, A15) faced family issues when they opted to become full-time  
46 athletes, which impacted their brands and branding efforts. A7 explained that factors like “work  
47 and home life, as well as a family responsibility, can negatively affect the continuity of sports  
48 ... that ultimately affects the brand of an athlete”. These family issues were also identified as  
49 impacting branding decisions, with A13 stating that “most of our decisions were to please our  
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3 family and parents. For example, if some big advertising company had come to me and offered  
4 me a good contract, I need permission first”.

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8 Family resistance and social resistance were also identified by the experts as significant  
9 obstacles. F3 (P18) opined: “The family’s view on the participation of women in sports is  
10 generally negative. Some families do not see sports as an income-generating area, and some  
11 families have problems with the clothes worn, especially during sports.”

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17 The impact of society was seen in the athletes’ perceptions of the feedback received  
18 from various groups for being active in sports, which affects their branding. For instance, A6  
19 shared how critics said she could not succeed “in a male-dominated sport as a woman and I  
20 should leave the sport and put my focus somewhere else”. Moreover, A19 expressed: “I was  
21 subjected to hard reactions and criticism of both wearing hijab and being a woman with child.  
22 The problems I experienced outside of sports were bigger than what I experienced in sports.”  
23 The experts suggested that “society generally has a negative view of women’s participation in  
24 sports” (F1, P6). Overcoming this obstacle “will happen only over time, as we have seen in  
25 European societies that gradually they have accepted the fact that females can participate in  
26 sports too” (F1, P6).

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40 Furthermore, the study’s participants mentioned the media negativity they faced during  
41 their careers and towards other female athletes, both as women and as Muslims. The  
42 participants acknowledged that women receive less media coverage and questioned the motives  
43 for this. As A18 suggested, the media are “following you not to give you positive coverage,  
44 but to catch you with some rubbish thing and make a scandal”. For Muslim women, their  
45 clothing attracted media attention:

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When the media realised that I was wearing a headscarf, instead of mentioning my  
achievements, they focused on my hijab and started to write about my hijab tauntingly



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3 and outlandishly. For example, newspaper headings were like this: “She participated in  
4  
5 the award ceremony with her jilbab.”<sup>1</sup> (A5)  
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8 The experts mentioned that the media and media coverage served as obstacles, specifically that  
9  
10 it is “generally under male hegemony” (F2, P7), resulting in limited coverage of female  
11  
12 athletes, thus impacting their branding. Furthermore, the predomination of one sport (football)  
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14 impacts media coverage, with F3 (P13) questioning “whether there is a sports media in our  
15  
16 country. There is more of a football media”. F2 (P7) suggested this can be dealt with by  
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18 requiring “change now and only media owners or government can take initiative in this  
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20 context”.  
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24 *Sport-related obstacles.* Participants highlighted various sport-related obstacles  
25  
26 impacting their branding efforts. These related to partaking in certain sports as women as well  
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28 as to their religion, specifically clothing and food. Some sports are viewed as “male sports”  
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30 (A2), which results in prejudice towards women athlete branding and sports facilities.  
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32 Participant A5 explained that the biggest problem in her career was “the facilities for bocce  
33  
34 sport are inadequate and unfit to work”, impacting sporting and branding success. Representing  
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36 a sport with which the public is unfamiliar also impacts branding, as “representing a less  
37  
38 familiar sport make you less familiar sometimes as well” (A2).  
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43 The experts supported the perception of sports both as women and as Muslims and its  
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45 impact on branding. Sport is considered a “manly thing” (F1, P6) and the type and nature of  
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47 sport impact athletes’ branding efforts, irrespective of gender. F3 (P16) emphasised the  
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49 importance of better facilities to “attract more participants and make better athletes”, as better  
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51 performance can lead to being more positively perceived as a brand. As Muslim families do  
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53 not like women to train with men, they train in separate facilities, which requires additional  
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55 funding. F1 (P1) highlighted the role of “governments and federations to invest in female-only  
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60 <sup>1</sup> Jilbab is a derogatory term used instead of hijab to insult or humiliate a person.

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3 sports facilities ... federations are obliged to provide facilities as well". As F3 (P17) suggested,  
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5 "at a higher level, between countries, sports federations, there should be some solution with  
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7 negotiations. People should understand the boundaries of culture and religion, which are  
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9 changing 'with time'" (F1, P6). F2 (P12) expressed that if athletes are involved with a "popular  
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11 sport, they will become popular easier than an athlete who represents [a] less popular sport",  
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13 as would those playing a team sport, rather than an individual sport. "Intelligent branding  
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15 techniques can overcome obstacles that are attached to sport types" (F1, P6), as is seen with  
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17 athletes like Lance Armstrong, who was able to popularise cycling.  
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22 Clothing for Muslim female athletes has impacted their participation and the  
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24 perceptions of fans and sports authorities and the value of their brand. Participant A4 stated  
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26 that wearing the hijab can "cause problems" for athletes, as "no score [was] awarded by a  
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28 Russian referee" during European-level competitions. An unwillingness to wear shorts could  
29  
30 also result in them "leaving the sport" (A4). In addition, Muslim food requirements (e.g.,  
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32 fasting during Ramadan) were identified as impacting athletes' commitment to becoming top  
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34 sportswomen and top brands. The requirement of food to be Halal meant that athletes had to  
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36 take their own food (A1) and participate in competitions during Ramadan, causing athletes to  
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38 choose whether to fast (A8), with non-participation impacting academic success and brand  
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40 perceptions.  
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45 The F2 experts highlighted the challenges experienced by female athletes linked to their  
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47 faith, including clothing (e.g., a hijab) and diet (e.g., Halal food and fasting during Ramadan),  
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49 which impact their performance and how they are portrayed as a brand and in the media. Action  
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51 by federations regarding clothing and food provision was recommended, especially "as Halal  
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53 food is not a very unique thing any more" (F2, P10). Table III contains additional representative  
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55 quotes from the athletes and the experts.  
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58 [Insert Table III around here]  
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## Discussion

Given the importance of strategic branding for athletes (Kunkel *et al.*, 2022), this study, specifically RQ1, aimed to develop an understanding of the challenges facing Muslim female athletes when building brands. While being aware of the need to develop themselves as brands and the importance of branding for their careers, the participants and experts identified diverse obstacles they have faced. At various stages of their careers, female athletes reflected broad perspectives of their sport and its requirements. The participants were educated, with at least a university degree.

Self-related, social-related, and sport-related obstacles to branding activities were identified. Similar to the research of Mogaji *et al.* (2022), the athletes' *self-related* obstacles included a lack of knowledge and limited branding efforts. As in previous studies (Kenny, 2015), a greater emphasis on branding in the educational curriculum was suggested by the experts, with the role of sports teachers, coaches, and special training programmes being highlighted (Koh *et al.*, 2016). Despite the importance of social media as a brand-building tool (Emmons and MocarSKI, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2020), participants were not utilising social media (i.e., Twitter) for their professional brands, similar to previous research findings (Pegoraro, 2010).

Moreover, the study found that social media is an obstacle to participants and their branding (Almenayes, 2014) due to a lack of **cultural** rules regarding its use (Li *et al.*, 2021) **and how it connects to Islamic teachings. For example, women are encouraged to adhere to modest dress codes, but what is portrayed on social media may conflict with these principles (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2016). Consequently, while a substantial portion of the Muslim population actively engages on social media, many women do so under self-imposed or family-enforced restrictions.** Additionally, religion (e.g., Islam) is negatively related to social media usage **in that** athletes are exposed to social media abuse (Litchfield *et al.*, 2018), which is a

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3 topic largely ignored in research. This underscores the complex interplay of cultural, religious,  
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5 and social factors involved in branding activities and specifically social media use.  
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8 Furthermore, this study identified personal pressures impacting participants'  
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10 motivation to become professional athletes, commit to the sport of choice, and willingness to  
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12 engage in branding. An absence of a clear plan (as the athletes are already considering other  
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14 careers) and no role model to follow were suggested by the athletes as obstacles, resulting in a  
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16 lack of branding efforts. Emotional pressures associated with training, such as homesickness,  
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18 are common but impact continued participation and branding. Therefore, much like Thurber  
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20 and Walton (2012), the experts recognised the importance of prevention strategies to address  
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22 this. In terms of there being insufficient role models among Arab female athletes, the results  
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24 were similar to those of Dun (2016). According to Hallmann *et al.* (2020), role models convey  
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26 important social values, thus a lack of role models as indicated in this study could discourage  
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28 athletes.  
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33 In the context of *social-related obstacles*, family life is often a hurdle for Muslim  
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35 female athletes regarding professionalism and branding. Although parents are a major driver  
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37 to join sports (Chan *et al.*, 2012), strict parents can also discourage female athletes from  
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39 continuing their professional athletics careers (Kay, 2006), thus not supporting their sporting  
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41 careers and professional branding efforts. Previous research has identified society as an  
42  
43 obstacle to female athletes and their branding, as certain Muslim societies do not appreciate  
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45 female sport participation, resulting in these athletes being harassed (AbdulRazak *et al.*, 2010)  
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47 or not being promoted (Ziaee *et al.*, 2023). The media is also to blame, as the under-  
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49 representation of women's sports compared to men's sports (Grubic, 2022; Valenti *et al.*, 2018)  
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51 and the sexualisation of women often result in negative perceptions of athletes in society (Kim  
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53 and Sagas, 2014) and the resultant consideration of social media as a branding alternative.  
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3 The *sport-related obstacles* included sport participation as women and as Muslims.  
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5 Similar to extant research, the participants identified prejudice and discrimination concerning  
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7 participation (Teetzel and Weaving, 2017) and in the media (Elhajjar, 2022; Shifflett *et al.*,  
8  
9 2016) as impacting their branding efforts. The lack of popularity of their sport impacts branding  
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11 (Hasaan *et al.*, 2018), as does the type of sport they partake in, with minor sports not attracting  
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13 media coverage (Fişne and Hasaan, 2020). The need for segregated facilities (Maxwell *et al.*,  
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15 2013) affects the ability to train properly, which impacts sporting success (Öztürk and Koca,  
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17 2017). Muslim female athletes' sports participation presents obstacles, with the dress code and  
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19 food aspects impacting their participation and branding. Finding appropriate dresses and  
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21 sportswear is not always possible for Muslim female athletes (Krisjanous *et al.*, 2022;  
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23 Soygüden, 2020), which can influence their ability to participate in international competition  
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25 (Qureshi and Ghouri, 2011), thereby impacting their success and branding activities.  
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31 As suggested in the focus groups, negotiation and the continued willingness of  
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33 international federations to implement flexible dress codes (including allowing Islamic  
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35 sportswear) are necessary (Maxwell *et al.*, 2013; Rasekh *et al.*, 2019) and undertaken by FIFA,  
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37 which allowed FIFA-sanctioned "safe" headscarves (Prouse, 2015). Muslim female athletes  
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39 mentioned dietary issues as impacting them physically and psychologically, and thus their  
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41 sports performance and career success (Soygüden and Taşkiran, 2019), and ultimately their  
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43 branding. The scheduling of competitions during fasting periods (e.g., Ramadan) also impacts  
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45 athletes (Samie and Sehlíkoglu, 2015), with experts recommending the involvement of  
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47 coaches, managers, and organisations to resolve this issue.  
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52 RQ2 focused on the strategies that could be used to overcome these obstacles at the  
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54 various layers, taken from the perspectives of the expert participants. These are summarised in  
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56 Table IV.  
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59 [Insert Table IV around here]  
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### Theoretical and practical implications

Focusing on one community (i.e., Muslim) and gender (i.e., female), the study has identified specific obstacles that Muslim female athletes perceive as impacting their branding efforts, specifically three layers of challenges, each comprising a range of aspects. Previous research has suggested that sociocultural barriers have been widely researched (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022), yet by expanding and identifying related factors, this study provides a more comprehensive view of these athletes' branding challenges. While they face similar obstacles as Western female athletes, Muslim female athletes' branding activities are complicated by social- and sports-related obstacles for which experts have indicated context-specific strategies not previously highlighted (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018), which contributes to a deeper understanding in a diverse cultural context (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022). Athlete branding can be viewed as a diverse topic (Hasaan *et al.*, 2016), requiring research in different cultures. Given that the study was conducted in Turkey, it contributes to understanding the diverse perspectives in Muslim communities (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022). Female sport is largely ignored in literature (Doyle *et al.*, 2021) and research into Muslim women has also been limited (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022), despite this study's size and potential. This study assists in understanding the experiences of Muslim women as athletes in sports (Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017) and their specific branding challenges from the perspectives of the athletes and sports experts.

Practically, the study contributes to diverse groups. First, the strategies identified apply to the athletes. The athletes acknowledged their lack of time and branding knowledge, and the study proposes actions they can implement to develop their brands. Given the benefits of athlete branding and Muslim female athletes' desire to build their brands, coaches and sports federations can provide training and support to accomplish this and develop the athletes as role models to others. Furthermore, it has been suggested that limited solutions have been offered

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3 to sports managers (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022). Using the data gathered from diverse  
4 sources (Flick, 2004), this study enables managers, coaches, and agents to understand athletes'  
5 positions and provide support in their brand-building activities. There are also implications  
6 from this research for media, which identified as a factor in their portrayal of women (Salem  
7 *et al.*, 2020), Muslim women athletes, and their influence on future athletes. Greater attention  
8 to these athletes in the media is suggested in terms of coverage and the impact of this attention  
9 on the athlete. Additionally, sports federations can benefit from the successful branding of  
10 athletes in sports. Consequently, acknowledging the obstacles and implementing the strategies  
11 identified in the study can also positively impact sports and their ability to attract new  
12 participants. Sports brands and sporting organisations can increase their involvement with these  
13 athletes' branding by covering numerous activities, including producing suitable clothing and  
14 providing mentors to aid in athletes' branding activities.

### 32 *Limitations and future research*

33 As with any study, limitations should be acknowledged and considered for future research.  
34 This study is based on an exploratory qualitative research design, limiting the number of  
35 participating athletes and experts. Thus, future studies could employ quantitative methods to  
36 provide further support for these findings with a larger sample of athletes and experts to  
37 generalise the results.

38 We focused on one geographical area (Turkey), but acknowledge that neither Muslim  
39 women nor the Muslim world can be regarded as homogenous (Hussain and Cunningham,  
40 2021; Wilson *et al.*, 2013), with diversity within Muslim countries despite practising one  
41 religion. This is particularly significant, as opinions about sports brands tend to vary according  
42 to cultural settings (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, research among other Muslim women  
43 athletes is recommended.

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3 Future studies could also study the issue of Muslim female role models. Considering  
4 that role models play an important role in identity construction and are vital for the successful  
5 development of young female professionals (Byrne *et al.*, 2019) and the difficulties identified  
6 by participants in the study to identify a role model, future studies could provide insights into  
7 the impact of these role models on brand development, thereby contributing to academia on  
8 managers and sports federations. Moreover, future research into sports brands and sports  
9 federations and their role in supporting the branding efforts of Muslim female athletes is  
10 recommended (Hussain and Cunningham, 2022).  
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## 24 **Conclusion**

25  
26 The dual role of Muslim women athletes in society and their family presents a choice between  
27 these aspects, as it impacts their branding and athletic success. This study has contributed to  
28 **understanding** these athletes' perceptions of the obstacles they experience, while relying on the  
29 experts' opinions of how these obstacles can be addressed to improve Muslim female brands.  
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## **Appendix 1: Interview guide**

### **1. Introduction**

- Introduction of the research and gathering information on each participant (e.g., name, age, education level) as well as sports-related information (e.g., sport, achievements).
- Can you tell us a little about how you became an athlete and how your career has developed?
- What are your future plans?

### **2. Understanding branding and branding activities**

- How do you understand the term “brand”?
- Are athletes brands? Which female athlete would you view as a brand? What do you think makes them a brand?
- Do you think female sports professionals face more challenges than male professionals? Why? Can you tell us about some of the challenges you faced?
- How do you compare male and female professional athletes in Turkey?
- Do you think good (successful) athletes could become popular brands? Why? How?
- Can you mention any Muslim female athlete whom you think is a brand? What are the qualities of the Muslim female athlete you mentioned that makes her a brand?
- Would you describe yourself as a brand? Have you tried to establish yourself as a brand? What would you have to do if you want to become a brand?
- Do you have a social media page? Is it a personal or a professional page? Why/Why not?
- How many followers do you have?
- Do you think social media is essential for branding?
- What advice would you give someone starting their athletic career? As athletes? As brands? And in building their brand?

### **3. Aspects related to being Muslim female athletes**

- How did society react during your career?
- Do you feel that Muslim females faced some constraints/difficulties if they want to do branding on media (social media or other media sources)? If yes, what? Please elaborate.
- In general, do you think there is a difference between Muslim female athletes and European/American female athletes?

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- Could Western female athletes be a role model for Turk female athletes? Why/why not? How?
- To become a top athlete/popular athlete, what would a female Turk/Muslim athlete be required to achieve?
- To become popular, what on-field and off-field attributes do female athletes require in Turkey?
- In general, how do you describe becoming a popular athlete in Turkey? (In the light of your experience.)

#### 4. *General/Conclusion*

- Do you think marriage can be a reason why women athletes quit sports?
- Was there anyone in your family doing sports at a professional level?
- Shouldn't a professional athlete have a professional social media account?
- Have you ever thought to hire someone as your brand manager or social media manager or marketing person? Why not?
- Suppose someone offered to be your media manager (for free or for a very small fee), would you accept this offer?

**Table I.** Participant details in stage one

Participant code	Age	Sport represented	Sport type	Professional experience in years	Participation level
A1 (R)	42	Taekwondo	Solo	33	International
A2	26	Wushu	Solo	20	International
A3	24	Bocce	Solo	6	International
A4	31	Taekwondo	Solo	18	International
A5	29	Wrestling	Solo	10	International
A6	27	Track and field	Solo	10	International
A7	24	Wushu	Solo	15	International
A8	26	Gymnastics	Solo	13	National
A9	22	Wrestling	Solo	4	National
A10	24	Weightlifting	Solo	5	National
A11	28	Wrestling	Solo	12	International
A12	28	Chess	Solo	8	International
A13	21	Football	Team	8	National
A14	24	Football	Team	10	International
A15	21	Rugby	Team	6	National
A16	27	Rugby	Team	10	National
A17	24	Volleyball	Team	8	National
A18	20	Handball	Team	4	International
A19 (R)	40	Football	Team	20	International

**Note:** R = Retired



**Table II.** Participant details in stage two

Focus group	Participant	Gender	Profession
<i>F1</i>	P1	F	Assistant professor of sociology
	P2	F	Sport journalist
	P3	F	Retired professional athlete
	P4	M	PhD scholar of sport sociology
	P5	M	Sport journalist
<i>F2</i>	P6	F	PhD scholar of sport sociology
	P7	M	Head of local female sports club
	P8	M	Associate professor of sociology
	P9	F	PhD scholar of sport sociology
	P10	F	Sport journalist
	P11	M	Assistant professor of sport management
<i>F3</i>	P12	M	Sport expert; advisor to local government
	P13	M	PhD scholar of sport sociology
	P14	M	Radio commentator
	P15	M	PhD scholar of sport management
	P16	M	President of a female sport federation
	P17	M	Sports marketing company member
	P18	F	National-level umpire

**Table III.** Representative quotes from athletes and experts

<i>Self-related obstacles</i>	
Branding knowledge	<p>“I wanted to be a brand, but I did not dare, could not. Moreover, I did not make many attempts because I could not find enough support from fans, fellow athletes, organisation, and sponsors” (A2).</p> <p>“If someone is not aware ... of branding, which is quite common among young female athletes, then it is [the] fault of [the] coaches, sports teachers, and federations” (F1, P4).</p> <p>“Lack of education ... can be tackled at different levels. For instance, in universities via sports faculty, in grounds via coaches, in competitions via federation” (F3, P16).</p>
Social media	<p>“I do not use social media too much. Unfortunately, in our society, people use social media in an irritating dimension. This is a situation I do not like” (A8).</p> <p>“Use of social media among athletes, especially females causes confusion. They try to avoid it because they think it is [a] source of negativity. The dynamic nature of social media terrifies them. Also, Muslim females are not well aware about what is appropriate to post” (F1, P4).</p> <p>“Most athletes acknowledged the importance of social media in the context of branding, yet they hesitated to use it properly. Managers and teachers should highlight the usage of social media as an individual and as a celebrity. They should encourage young athletes to set their official pages to promote their image brand” (F2, P10).</p>
Personal pressures	<p>“Travelling abroad, working with foreign coaches, living away from home with strangers in unknown culture caused lots of anxiety and depression. I know [a] few colleagues who could not cope with anxiety and either left the sport or never achieve[d] a brand status” (A19).</p> <p>“Most Muslim families live in a combine[d] family system and overprotect their children ... that is why, when female athletes travel without their family, alone by themselves, they feel homesick” (F3, P14).</p> <p>“Parents, teachers, coaches can play [a] role here to motivate young girls to keep them strong and committed to sport success” (F2, P10).</p> <p>“With better infrastructure and management, this situation can be improved” (F2, P11).</p>
A lack of (Muslim) role models	<p>“Ibtihaj Muhammed, a fencing athlete is one. I think there are not many Muslim female athletes that managed to become a brand.... I think Muslim female athletes are inadequate in creating a brand” (A15).</p> <p>“It is true that there is no ideal role model available for young Muslim female athletes. For example, one [role model] is Sania Mirza of India [tennis]. However, her appearance and lifestyle are the same as Western [athletes]. Therefore, she is not a solution for strict Muslim girls” (F3, P15).</p> <p>“This situation is a bit complicated, but I think I can improve with more females participating in sport and the presence of some role model” (F1, P1).</p>
<i>Social-related obstacles</i>	
Family	<p>“Since my father was a coach ... he always encouraged me to become a top athlete and a top brand. But there are many girls I know who faced family resistance during this process” (A10).</p> <p>“As a practising Muslim, you have lots of obligations. Modern-day sport is sometimes contradictory to some Muslim families. They like their girls to participate in sport to some extent, but as a professional athlete and a brand [it has] caused raising eyebrows in families” (F1, P1).</p> <p>“It is important for sports organisations to focus on top female athletes (via media) to change the thoughts among conservative families. It is required to convey that athlete is just like a banker, a teacher or a soldier. She does not have to leave her beliefs to become a top brand” (F3, P15).</p>
Impact of society	<p>“They [people] had [a] rhetoric that I would lead to negative success. Especially the comments of those who do not understand sports were deplorable. Of course, some people were proud of my achievements and supported me as well” (A14).</p> <p>“In backward and male-dominant societies, [a] female prefers to perform her duties at home mostly. Although people are changing but still female participation in sport</p>

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3		as a professional causes a negative vibe among society. Mostly it is in minds, but
4		yes it exists" (F3, P15).
5		"Although it is a time-consuming process, there are a few factors that can work as
6		catalysts to improve the situation. For example, prioritising females in government
7		jobs, highlighting the role of females in society and more female empowerment"
8		(F1, P4).
9	Media	"Media rarely cover women's sport. They only like football. In Europe and
10		America, female athletes grab lots of coverage on the field and off the field. The
11		media is male-oriented but here it plays [a] hypocritical role as well" (A18).
12		"It is the media that make impressions and portrays things in people's minds. In
13		societies like ours, the media should step forward and instead of making female
14		sports and female athletes a glamorous thing, portray them more professionally and
15		responsibly" (F1, P4).
16		"When media will change its focus point it will automatically change the society
17		and family norms and the social atmosphere will change too" (F1, P4).
18	<hr/> <i>Sport-related obstacles</i> <hr/>	
19	Taking part as a	"Since our society saw wrestling only as a male sport, there were a lot of people
20	woman	who said that I could not and should not do this sport at first. Some tried to
21		discourage me by saying that my physical properties would deteriorate" (A7).
22		"In Islamic societies, males have more liberty compared to females. For example,
23		no one questions their clothing, no one criticises ... their social media use etc.,
24		while females do not possess these privileges" (F1, P6).
25		"There is a need to change the viewpoint of spectators. Portraying sports as leisure
26		and athletes as showbiz models (especially females) will not serve the purpose at all.
27		It is the duty of governments, media and sports organisations that an athlete brand
28		should present as a national hero and role model instead of a fashion model walking
29		on the ramp" (F3, P16).
30	Taking part as a	"As a Muslim, we have to fast. Nevertheless, international tournaments have their
31	Muslim	own calendars. Therefore, we have to play during the month of Ramadan sometimes
32		and it caused a conflict in our minds that either to fast or leave it. These barriers
33		damaged one's effort to become a champion. So, without winning, achieving top
34		brand status is almost impossible" (A8).
35		"In Islamic societies, males have more liberty compared to females. For example,
36		no one questions their clothing, no one criticises ... their social media use etc.,
37		while females do not possess these privileges" (F1, P6).
38		"The situation should be changed. Education, positive media reporting, social media
39		and government steps (e.g., appreciation for female sports) could defuse the
40		situation" (P15, F3).
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**Table IV.** Strategies for overcoming the various branding challenges

Barrier	Possible strategies for overcoming
Self-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge and training provided by a range of actors to facilitate brand building (e.g., coaches, universities, and federations)</li> <li>• Providing support to develop psychological strength</li> <li>• Training in social media skills</li> <li>• Media promoting athletes as role models to others</li> </ul>
Social-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social change over time</li> <li>• Media promoting Muslim woman athletes as role models</li> </ul>
Sport-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federations actively support athletes in their brand building</li> <li>• Governments and federations can provide better facilities</li> <li>• Federations can also provide mentors to assist in the training and support of these athletes</li> </ul>

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**Figure 1 Data structure**