
Uber places bet on India in deal with cricket celebrity Kohli

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Uber Technologies Inc has named India's cricket captain -one of the world's most expensive sports celebrities- as brand ambassador, signaling that while it may be ceding ground in Southeast Asia, it's still trying to grow in the subcontinent.

Virat Kohli would be its first brand ambassador in India in a "one of its kind initiative across the Asia Pacific region", Uber said in an announcement on Friday afternoon.

Uber is going head-to-head against Bangalore-based rival Ola, whose parent ANI Technologies Pvt is also backed by SoftBank Group Corp. Uber is based in 31 cities in the region against Ola's 100-plus cities.

SoftBank, who has invested about \$9 billion in Uber, said it wanted the company to focus on the U.S. and European geographies. This advice has been partially contradicted by Chief Executive Officer Dara Khosrowshahi, who on his first Asia tour last month said that the ride-hailing company will continue to invest in the region.

However Grab, the dominant ride-hailing service in Southeast Asia and also backed by SoftBank, is close to finalizing a deal to acquire Uber's business in the region and may sign a deal this week or next, according to people familiar with the matter.

Uber and Ola have also begun talks about a deal, according to a report by Bloomberg in February. **A merger in India may face opposition from regulators** however, given a lack of viable rivals in ride-hailing.

Signing on Kohli is likely to yield a huge brand boost as the 29-year-old cricketer's appeal spans across age, language and cultural demography in a country where cricket stars are looked upon as gods. He is the country's most valuable celebrity with a brand value of \$144 million, according to a December report by global valuation advisory Duff & Phelps.

Within minutes, Kohli's tweet that he's looking forward to a "successful innings with Uber India" and that he's "stoked to take a back seat" was liked thousands of times. The cricketer has 23.5 million followers on Twitter.

The new marketing partnership would "underscore the company's commitment to

serve billions in the country in the years to come,” Uber said.

(Bloomberg)