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# Generational perspectives of sports figure authenticity: how age shapes fan perceptions of sports influencers in social media

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study aims to investigate potential generational differences in fans' perceptions of the authenticity of public sports figure influencers, utilizing a six-factor model of perceived authenticity. The research employed thematic analysis to explore how social media users who are sports fans construct perceptions of sports figure authenticity. This research recognizes the evolving nature of fan-athlete relationships in the context of growing digital influence, with implications for sports communication and athletes' brand management strategies.

**Design/Methodology:** The study employed eight focus groups comprising 42 participants from four generations: Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Participants were screened to ensure they used social media and were sports fans. These focus groups were used to deconstruct and analyze participants' perceptions of sports influencer authenticity across different age cohorts.

**Findings:** The research revealed distinct patterns in perceptions of sports influencer authenticity across generations, showing that Gen Z strongly emphasizes connectedness and accuracy, Millennials prioritize integrity, Gen X considers multiple factors, and Baby Boomers look for integrity and proficiency. An inverse relationship between the importance placed on accuracy and humility across generations was also observed.

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**Practical Implications:** The findings suggest the need for a nuanced, generationally aware approach to authenticity in sports communication and endorsements. This has significant implications for sports marketing strategies and athletes' brand management, particularly as public sports figures are increasingly considered social media influencers. Marketers and athletes may need to tailor their communication and branding strategies to resonate with different generational cohorts based on their varying perceptions of authenticity.

**Originality/Value:** This study advances the existing understanding of authenticity perceptions in sports figures across generations. By applying a six-factor model of authenticity and revealing generational differences, it provides valuable insights for both academic research and practical applications in sports communication and athlete brand management. The research highlights the importance of considering generational perspectives when developing strategies for authentic engagement between sports figures and their fans in the digital age.

**Keywords:** authenticity; generational differences; sports figures; social media; influencers; focus groups

Athletic sponsorships date back to ancient times, but their function as a multi-billion-dollar industry is more recent. In 2022, they grew by more than 20 % (Dixon 2022); the National Football League (NFL) saw a 15 % surge in value, to \$2.35 billion, in just the 2023–2024 season (SponsorUnited 2024). Individual athletes also can command substantial figures, such that in 2022, soccer stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi earned \$123.9 million and \$93.6 million, respectively, from endorsements (Gough 2024). In fact, many professional athletes make more in endorsements than in athletic contracts, often in connection with league salary caps. One example is LeBron James, who earned \$45.7 million playing for the LA Lakers in 2023 and took home \$80 million in endorsements from several different companies, including Nike, Beats by Dre, and PepsiCo (Zinkula 2024). Growing applications of name-image-likeness (NIL) rules have extended the benefits to college athletes too, allowing top NIL earners to secure massive contracts, like those for University of Southern California's Bronny James (\$5.8 million), Colorado's Shedeur Sanders (\$4.7 million), and Louisiana State University's Livvy Dunne (\$3.5 million) (On3 2024).

Social media has transformed fans' engagement with sports teams and athletes, fostering connections with real individuals rather than brands (Geyser 2024; Greenfly 2023; Nisar et al. 2018; Thorpe 2016). Digital platforms provide instant access to news, statistics, and behind-the-scenes content, strengthening the bond between fans and athletes beyond what traditional marketing could achieve (Hollebeek et al. 2014). These connections also enable athletes to demonstrate their substantial following to potential brand partners.

Notably, for both professional and college athletes, their marketing value largely stems from their social media followings rather than just their (admittedly impressive) athletic performance (Bredikhina et al. 2022; Stokowski et al. 2024). Sponsors seek athletes with the ability to connect their brands with millions of fans, which promises to increase their revenue through halo effects (Cui et al. 2019; McGhee 2012). An athlete's endorsement value thus depends greatly on their likeability, such that it can increase by nearly \$1 million for each 1-point rise in likeability or familiarity (Rascher and Eddy 2017). With many top athletes earning tens of millions annually from endorsements (Adeleye 2025; Knight and Birnbaum 2025), perceived authenticity is not merely academic; it is an economic imperative.

Additionally, generational misalignment in authenticity perceptions could cost brands millions in lost endorsement efficacy due to diminished trust and engagement among key consumer segments, which directly impacts brand loyalty and purchase intentions. When a brand or its athlete endorser fails to resonate authentically with a particular generation – for example, by overlooking Gen Z's preference for connectedness and humor or Millennials' emphasis on integrity – audiences may perceive the endorsement as inauthentic or irrelevant, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the campaign and undermining consumer-brand relationships (Feng 2024; Kim 2024; Nichols and Shapiro 2023). Research demonstrates that perceived authenticity significantly enhances brand love, trust, and willingness to pay a premium, while a lack of authenticity can erode these outcomes and lead to lower conversion rates and diminished long-term loyalty (Feng 2024; Guèvremont and Grohmann 2016; Rodrigues et al. 2023; Zafar et al. 2025). Moreover, authenticity-driven strategies are essential for building strong emotional connections and sustaining brand equity in a fragmented, digitally mediated marketplace where generational expectations differ markedly (Briana and Malindretos 2025; Feng 2024; Fernandes et al. 2024; Singer et al. 2023).

To retain such value and remain marketable, athletes also need to ensure that fans perceive them as authentic (Banet-Weiser 2012; Moore et al. 2018; Walsh 2018). For public sports figures, fan-perceived authenticity is essential to success; it also could mean millions in endorsement deals (Audrezet et al. 2020; Horowitz 2023; Kucharska et al. 2020). Athletes typically earn compensation in three ways: (1) team contracts, (2) competition prize money, and (3) endorsement deals. Whereas the first two depend on the athlete's physical and mental abilities to perform to an elevated level, lucrative endorsement deals often depend more on the size of the athlete's fan base, and also can yield more money than the other two options. Perceived authenticity is critical for creating a connection between fans and athletes, and it sets a foundation for social identification, which in turn is essential for building fans' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Carlson and Donavan 2017; Elbedweihy et al. 2016; Kucharska et al. 2020).

Because public figures' inner thoughts and genuine motivations are not directly observable, audiences must rely on available external cues and information to form inferences about what drives their actions and communication (Moulard et al. 2015). In digital markets, social media offers a platform for people to follow or observe actions and communications by public figures, on which basis they likely create perceptions of authenticity linked to various content, from personal stories to advertising.

Public sports figures, including athletes and coaches, can function as digital influencers. For the purposes of this study, we define 'public sports figures' as individuals in the sports domain with public visibility, including both athletes and coaches. The term 'sports influencer' is used more narrowly to describe those public sports figures, typically athletes, who actively engage audiences through social media platforms. They interact regularly with followers and promote brands on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram (Garrett 2022; Su et al. 2020). High-profile athletes like Ronaldo and Messi are widely recognized as influencers. Thus, the current research integrates findings from influencer marketing research that addresses perceived authenticity. These prior studies have identified several critical determinants, including topic relevance, communication skills (Shomoossi and Saeed 2007), sincerity (Becker et al. 2019; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Lee and Eastin 2021; Moulard et al. 2021), knowledge and expertise (Lee and Eastin 2021; Nunes et al. 2021; Shomoossi and Saeed 2007; Stern 1994), and relatability (Lee and Eastin 2021; Nunes et al. 2021). Regardless of how they achieve them, though, authentic connections between athletes and fans appeal to potential endorsers because authenticity can encourage increased sales of products endorsed by trusted influencers. Even if the athletes are not at the top of their literal game, they can attract lucrative endorsement deals based on their significant social media followings, which represent evidence of their popularity and marketability.

However, to understand a sports influencer's ability to connect with their audience, it is also important to consider the generational differences of their audiences. Different generations engaging with influencers can help foster intergenerational communication, as well as marketing efforts, and resolve conflicts (Kingstone 2021; Twenge 2023). Various studies of generational differences demonstrate how they manifest, in areas such as work values (Parry and Urwin 2011; Zabel et al. 2016), cultural perceptions (Obeda et al. 2018; Singer et al. 2023; Williams et al. 2010), and technology use (Baham et al. 2022; Oh and Reeves 2014; Skidmore et al. 2014). Academics and corporate marketers also leverage generational differences to influence consumer behaviors and craft targeted marketing messages (Brosdahl and Carpenter 2011; Li et al. 2013; Taylor 2021; Williams et al. 2010).

In an attempt to understand how fans construct perceptions of mediated sports figures' authenticity, this qualitative study investigates and compares multiple

factors that might influence the perceived authenticity of sports figures across different generations of consumers. Our analysis reveals distinct generational priorities: Gen Z associates authenticity with connectedness (e.g., humor and relatability) and accuracy, Millennials prioritize integrity, Gen X balances multiple factors, and Baby Boomers emphasize integrity and proficiency. Notably, humility – critical to older generations – shows an inverse relationship with accuracy, which Gen Z values most. These patterns underscore that authenticity is not unanimously perceived but generationally and formatively constructed.

## 1 Literature review

### 1.1 Authenticity

Authenticity results from some perceived verification of truth or reality, conceptualized as the “consistency between an entity’s values and its external expression” (Lehman et al. 2019, p. 2; Moulard et al. 2021). While authenticity is widely valued for establishing trust and credibility (Brinson and Lemon 2022; Kim et al. 2015; Piao et al. 2023), it is a complex, multidimensional construct that should not be treated as singular (Moulard et al. 2021). Lehman et al. (2019) identify three meanings of authenticity: (1) consistency between internal values and external expressions, (2) conformity to social category norms, and (3) connection via provenance or symbolism. In all cases, authenticity is regarded as binary, intangible, and positive (Lehman et al. 2019).

Prior research often conceptualizes perceived digital authenticity as a combination of sincerity, trustworthiness, expertise, and/or originality (e.g., Audrezet et al. 2020; Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Lee and Eastin 2021), typically from the creator’s perspective. These frameworks, however, tend to overlap in their definitions and may not fully capture the multidimensionality of authenticity as perceived by audiences, especially in the context of sports figures (Duffek et al. 2025). Traditional social media influencers primarily build their followings through content creation and direct engagement, curating their online personas and developing parasocial relationships. In contrast, sports figures – often athletes or coaches – derive influence not only from their digital presence but also from real-world achievements, public scrutiny, and adherence to the values of sport. Thus, the authenticity of sports figures is evaluated through a more complex lens, combining personal storytelling, professional conduct, and domain-specific expertise.

For example, Lee and Eastin’s (2021) five-factor model includes sincerity, truthfulness, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness, but does not explicitly differentiate between internal motivations, external expressions, and social norms. Other

models similarly emphasize overlapping constructs, such as sincerity and trustworthiness, without systematically accounting for the relationship between personal values, audience connection, and the expectations of high-performance domains (Duffek et al. 2025). Regardless of definition, perceptions of authenticity produce tangible outcomes for stakeholders (Lehman et al. 2019).

To address these limitations, Nunes et al. (2021) propose a comprehensive six-factor model: accuracy (reliability, truth-telling, transparency), integrity (intrinsic motivation, consistency), proficiency (expertise, skills, knowledge), legitimacy (adherence to norms and standards), originality (uniqueness without embellishment), and connectedness (emotional or physical closeness). This model captures both the qualities of the individual and their external outputs, offering a nuanced framework for analyzing authenticity in sports influencer contexts.

By explicitly separating these factors, the six-factor model enables a nuanced analysis of how audiences construct and perceive authenticity in the complex, mediated environment of sports influencers on social media. Importantly, this structure allows for the examination of generational differences, as each factor may be prioritized differently by distinct age cohorts. For instance, Gen Z may emphasize connectedness and transparency, while older generations may value integrity and proficiency, reflecting broader shifts in media consumption and values. Applying this model allows the current study to move beyond overlapping definitions and provide a contextually relevant understanding of authenticity in sports influencer digital communication.

## 1.2 Generational differences

Generations are cohorts defined by birth year and are shaped by the shared cultural, social, economic, and technological experiences of those born during those times (Kingstone 2021; Twenge 2023). These shared experiences create lasting frameworks through which each generation interprets authenticity in sports figures. There are currently four major consumer generations, including Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z.

Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) grew up during the post-war period of economic scarcity and the rise of TV. They generally emphasize tradition, conformity, loyalty, and have a strong work ethic (Twenge 2023). Their early media experiences were one-way and impersonal, leading them to value integrity and proficiency over personal connection in public figures (Brosius et al. 2021; Twenge 2023).

Gen X (born 1965–1979) came of age amid economic instability, dual-income households, and significant sociopolitical change. Their independent, pragmatic outlook was shaped by both analog and early digital technologies, and they tend to

seek authenticity through demonstrated expertise and consistency (Mingione et al. 2017; Singer and Jones 2025; Twenge 2023).

Millennials (born 1980–1994) experienced the digital revolution alongside events like the Great Recession, making adaptability and self-improvement central values. Their hybrid media habits and economic uncertainty have led them to prize both professionalism and relatability in authenticity (Burr 2023; Singer 2024; Twenge 2023).

Gen Z (born 1995–2012) is more digitally native than the other cohorts (although most did not begin interacting with social media until they became pre-teens), raised in an era of social media, global connectivity, and economic precarity (Cohen Zilka 2023; Twenge 2023). This cohort values connectedness, transparency, and originality, reflecting their expectation for interactive, immediate, and diverse digital experiences (Burr 2023; Singer et al. 2023).

The generational sociodemographic differences are useful in understanding the lived experience of people from a similar geographic location born in a similar time (Sarraf 2019). This leads generational differences to be an important factor to consider when analyzing a sports influencer's perceived authenticity, as the shifts in cultural and technological trends also shift how people construct and perceive the authenticity of others (Audrezet et al. 2020; Smith and Sanderson 2015). Those who grew up with social media (Millennials and Gen Z) will engage with social media influencers in a different manner than people who did not (Baby Boomers and Gen X) (Childers and Boatwright 2020; Kirschner 2024; Singer et al. 2023). On the same note, technological advances have had a drastic effect on how sports fans engage with their favorite athletes, helping shape what is considered authentic within each cohort (Billings and Hardin 2016; Hutchins and Rowe 2018).

### 1.3 Generationally perceived authenticity

Even if authenticity might be defined similarly by different generations, the members of different generations likely develop distinctive perceptions of it. As Mingione et al. (2017) reveal, the antecedents and consequences of perceived brand authenticity vary across the three generations of Baby Boomers, Generation (Gen) X, and Millennials. Similarly, Singer et al. (2023) find that members of Gen Z and Millennials view social media personalities differently. As digital natives, Gen Z defines influencer authenticity in terms of a “highly educated friend with whom they can seek advice and opinions” (p. 351). Millennials believe authenticity results from professional, transparent, ethical conduct. Gen X finds authenticity in balanced content that showcases expertise (Singer 2024). Baby Boomers, with their focus on paying dues, find authenticity in integrity: in content and content creators who have

demonstrated that they, too, have paid their dues and gained life experience and knowledge (Singer 2024).

Building on these studies of generational authenticity across two (Singer et al. 2023) or three (Mingione et al. 2017) cohorts, the current study seeks a deeper understanding of and challenge to the notion that perceived authenticity might represent a one-size-fits-all concept by considering its relevance across multiple generations.

## 2 Theoretical framework

This study utilizes Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor model of authenticity as a theoretical framework. When these factors are considered together, this multifaceted approach grants content creators, including public figures and companies, more nuanced insights into how to craft a comprehensive strategy for building genuine connections with audiences. For sports settings, these factors take on particular significance, marketing themselves to gain the largest audience because athletes and teams actively strive to cultivate authentic personas and relationships with their fans.

### 2.1 Adapting the six-factor model to sports influencer authenticity

Although the six-factor model of authenticity by Nunes et al. (2021) was originally developed for consumer contexts, its dimensions can be effectively adapted to analyze sports figures as influencers. In this context, accuracy refers to the athlete's perceived honesty and transparency, such as candidly sharing personal experiences or setbacks (Singer et al. 2023). Connectedness captures the emotional engagement and sense of closeness fans feel through interactive content and relatable storytelling (Närvänen et al. 2020; Singer and Jones 2025). Integrity is seen in the alignment between an athlete's stated values and their actions, including consistency in messaging and ethical conduct (Mingione et al. 2017). Legitimacy reflects adherence to the norms and traditions of sport, such as fair play and respect for the game (Brosius et al. 2021). Originality is expressed through a unique personal style or creative approach to content, which is especially valued in the crowded digital landscape (Burr 2023). Proficiency remains rooted in demonstrated skill and expertise, but in the influencer context also includes sharing insights and expertise with followers (Singer and Jones 2025).



By contextualizing each factor for sports influencers, this study extends the model beyond traditional consumption and captures the multidimensional nature of authenticity in digital sports communication. This approach is supported by recent research showing that fans evaluate influencer authenticity using similar, but context-specific, criteria (Singer et al. 2023), providing a robust framework for examining generational differences in perceptions of sports figure authenticity.

As noted previously, that model comprises accuracy (perceived honesty and transparency), connectedness (emotional closeness and engagement), integrity (consistency and intrinsic motivation), legitimacy (adherence to norms and standards), originality (uniqueness without embellishment), and proficiency (expertise and skill), which form a good basis for analyzing how different generations perceive the authenticity of public sports figures. The unique nature of sports, which blends personal achievement, team dynamics, and cultural significance, provides a rich context for examining how authenticity is perceived and valued. Thus, it also offers a meaningful setting for examining generational differences in the perceived authenticity of mediated influencers, though no prior research has addressed this notion. The current research aims to answer a central research question: ***How do Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z differ in their perceptions of the authenticity of public sports figures' social media presence?***

### 3 Methodology

The qualitative thematic analysis, based on Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor model of authenticity, took place across nine focus groups, eight online via Microsoft Teams and one in-person, conducted with members of the four largest consumer generations. The online format enabled participation across geographically diverse regions in the United States and one unanticipated U.S. participant residing in South America. The 42 participants (22 men, 20 women) included 9 Baby Boomers (6 men, 3 women), 10 Gen X representatives (5 men, 5 women), 10 Millennials (3 men, 7 women), and 13 members of Gen Z (8 men, 5 women). They ranged in age from 18 to 78 years, and all self-identified as sports fans (Table A1).

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men, 5 women), ranging in age from 18 to 78, with all self-identifying as sports fans (see Table A1 for demographic details).

Given the differences in group sizes among generations, the total number of comments and coded units necessarily reflects both the number of participants and the extent of discussion in each group. Therefore, percentages are used in the text to describe the distribution of themes within each generation, enabling more meaningful comparisons across cohorts of different sizes. In contrast, figures display the absolute number of coded comments by theme for each generation to provide full transparency regarding the data. Figure captions and Table A1 clarify whether data are presented as counts or percentages and contextualize these metrics given the varying cohort sizes.

### 3.1 Sample selection

Before beginning sample selection, the authors sought and received IRB approval, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of all participants. Recruitment utilized a mixed sampling approach: (1) SONA Systems and in-class announcements provided efficient access to Gen Z/Millennial students from two large Rocky Mountain region universities; (2) snowball sampling expanded recruitment to Millennial/ Gen X/ Baby Boomers through participant referrals. All participants were screened for sports fandom and social media use, ensuring alignment with study criteria. This tiered strategy balanced feasibility with demographic diversity by combining recruitment platforms across cohorts, a practice consistent with pragmatic sampling strategies in qualitative research (e.g., Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009).

SONA Systems is a research participation management platform widely used in academic settings to streamline participant recruitment, particularly for studies requiring human subjects. SONA participants received extra credit for participating courses, while all other participants did not receive compensation for their participation. The age range from 18 to 78 years includes the youngest adult members of Gen Z (18 years old) and the oldest Baby Boomers (78 years old) at the time the focus groups were conducted (Twenge 2023).

One participant, an American citizen residing in South America, was recruited via snowball sampling. This individual met all study inclusion criteria, including active social media use and engagement with sports figures online. Although the participant was not located in the United States at the time of the focus group, they were culturally aligned with the U.S. participant base. Their inclusion reflects the flexible nature of snowball recruitment and adds demographic diversity to the sample. However, this was not intended to support a formal cross-cultural or regional comparison.

People who indicated an interest in participating were asked to complete a brief survey, which began with a consent form, followed by questions about age (at least 18 years), sports fandom, generational cohort, availability, and an email address for sending the focus group link. All participants were screened to confirm active engagement with at least one sports figure's social media content. Participants were only selected if they were sports fans, reflecting the research focus on how people who consume sports-related content construct perceptions of the authenticity of public sports figures. In line with these criteria, and based on a preselection survey, 45 people were selected to participate, of which 42 participants took part in a focus group, and three invited members did not participate.

### 3.2 Focus groups

Conducting most of the focus groups online helped accommodate participants from various locations across the United States and South America. This format also allowed for flexibility in group size, which can affect data quality (Chakravarti and Crabbe 2019). All nine focus groups, ranging in size from 3 to 7 participants, took place in February 2024, and each group included members from multiple generations.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed using Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor model of authenticity as a guiding framework. Questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of sports figure authenticity in social media, with prompts addressing each of the six factors – accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency. For instance, participants were asked how they define authenticity in a sports figure's online presence, which qualities they find most important when judging authenticity, and whether they could recall specific examples of athletes who seemed authentic or inauthentic. Additional probing questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses and to discuss how their perceptions might differ from those of other generations. The content and structure of these questions were informed by prior literature on influencer authenticity and generational differences in sports fandom, ensuring both theoretical grounding and relevance to the research questions.

While focus group questions referenced both athletes and coaches as potential examples of public sports figures, participants overwhelmingly described athletes when providing specific examples of authentic or inauthentic sports influencers. This tendency reflects the dominant association between sports influencer culture and athletes' social media activity in contemporary fan discourse. Although the prompts were inclusive of various sports figure roles, discussion naturally centered on athletes' behaviors and online self-presentation, highlighting the cultural prominence of athletes as the primary public sports figures in the influencer context.

To ensure clarity and flow, a pilot focus group was conducted with five participants representing all four generations included in the main study. Feedback led to minor revisions in question wording and order, enhancing clarity and accessibility for participants across age groups.

In addition, each focus group session was facilitated by a trained moderator (the lead author), who guided all nine group discussions using the semi-structured interview protocol to maintain consistency across sessions. Each session began with an introduction and warm-up, followed by the main discussion organized around the six authenticity factors, with approximately 10–15 min allocated per topic. Sessions concluded with a summary and an opportunity for final comments. This structured yet flexible approach ensured comprehensive coverage of key themes while allowing for in-depth participant perspectives.

During focus groups, moderators explicitly framed discussions around athletes' influencer roles (e.g., 'How does [athlete]'s Instagram content shape your perception of them beyond their athletic performance?'). This ensured participants evaluated authenticity specifically in the context of social media influence.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed using Teams, and transcripts were carefully verified for accuracy. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify patterns and themes in the data, guided by Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor model of authenticity (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). This approach provided the flexibility and depth needed to explore complex topics, yielding nuanced insights while supporting transparency and replicability (Braun and Clarke 2019).

Two experienced researchers collaboratively coded the transcripts using MAXQDA 22 software. Coding followed a deductive framework based on the six authenticity factors, with definitions rigorously and consistently applied to text segments. The factors were defined as follows:

- Originality: Content uniqueness without embellishment.
- Accuracy: Perceived transparency and reliability.
- Integrity: Intrinsically motivated, consistent actions.
- Legitimacy: Conformity to standards and norms.
- Connectedness: Feelings of engagement or transportation.
- Proficiency: Displayed skills or expertise.

During analysis, inductive sub-themes were also identified to capture generational nuances, such as humility (under Integrity) and humor (under Connectedness).

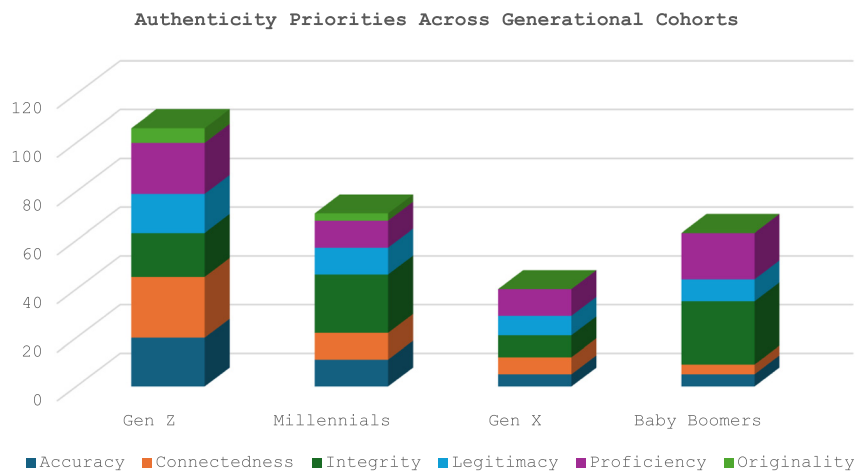
Coding was conducted independently by both researchers, with consensus-building sessions resulting in a coder agreement of 88 %. MAXQDA 22 facilitated stratified analysis by generation, allowing themes to reflect cohort-specific priorities, such as Gen Z's emphasis on parasocial engagement.

In this study, the number of comments for each authenticity dimension was determined through systematic thematic coding of the focus group transcripts. Each "comment" refers to a segment of participant dialogue that was coded under a specific authenticity factor, regardless of whether it was a direct mention (e.g., "integrity is important to me") or an illustrative example or narrative that clearly reflected that factor (e.g., describing a specific athlete's behavior that demonstrated integrity). Both explicit mentions and concrete examples were included, provided they were coded under the same thematic category. Each coded segment, whether a single sentence, a brief exchange, or a longer narrative, was counted as one comment for the relevant dimension. This approach is consistent with best practices in qualitative thematic analysis, where frequency counts are used to indicate the salience of themes across the dataset but do not replace the depth and nuance of qualitative interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2012; Kogen 2024).

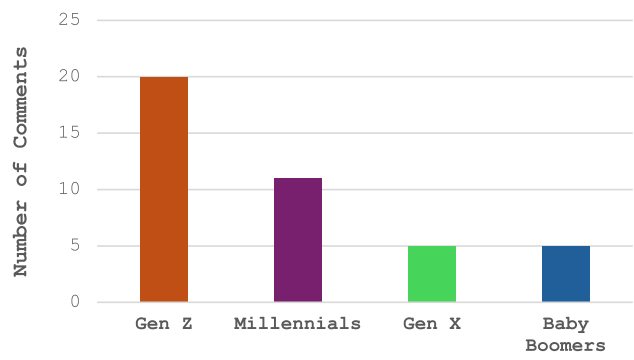
Additional codes captured nuanced concepts, including humility and the idea that authenticity "walks a fine line." Several participants described authenticity as "walking a fine line," meaning that sports figures must carefully balance being genuine and relatable with the risk of appearing inauthentic or overly manufactured. In this context, "walking a fine line" refers to the subtle distinction between positive qualities – such as confidence and openness – and negative perceptions, such as arrogance or insincerity. For example, when a sports figure shares personal stories to appear authentic, they may be praised for transparency, but if the content seems staged or excessive, audiences may perceive it as inauthentic. Thus, authenticity is not a fixed trait but requires ongoing negotiation, where small shifts in behavior or self-presentation can tip perceptions from authentic to inauthentic, underscoring the complexity of mediated authenticity in digital spaces.

## 4 Findings and discussion

Thematic analysis of nine focus groups revealed clear generational distinctions in how sports fans construct and interpret the authenticity of sports figures on social media, as mapped onto Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor authenticity model. These generational differences are illustrated with direct participant quotes and summarized in Figures 1–7, which display representative comments and frequency patterns for each authenticity factor.



**Figure 1:** Absolute comments related to the six factors of authenticity by each generation. Note: High comment counts for Gen Z reflect both their larger sample size and greater mean engagement (see Table 1). Percentages in Table 1 enable fair comparison of thematic emphasis within each generation.



**Figure 2:** Integrity comments, absolute number by generation.

To contextualize these thematic findings, Table 1 summarizes the generational composition of the focus groups, the total number of coded comments contributed by each generation, the mean comments per participant, and the percentage distribution of comments across the six authenticity dimensions. Because cohort sizes varied (ranging from 9 Baby Boomers to 13 Gen Z participants), and to ensure fair comparison, we provide both absolute comment counts (for transparency about response volume) and within-group percentages (see Table 1), which adjust for group size and reveal each factor’s relative importance within each generation.

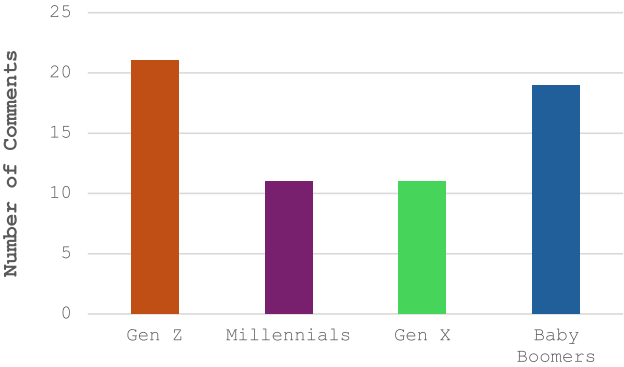


Figure 3: Proficiency comments, absolute number by generation.

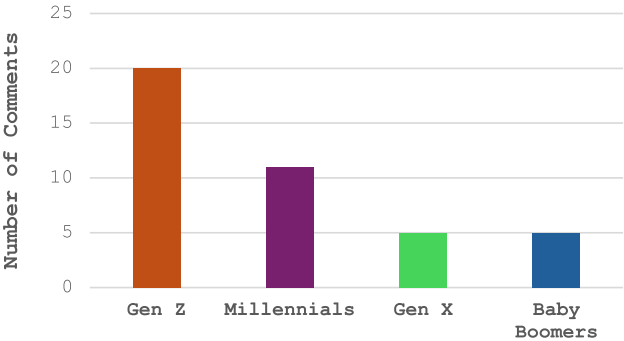


Figure 4: Accuracy comments, absolute number by generation.

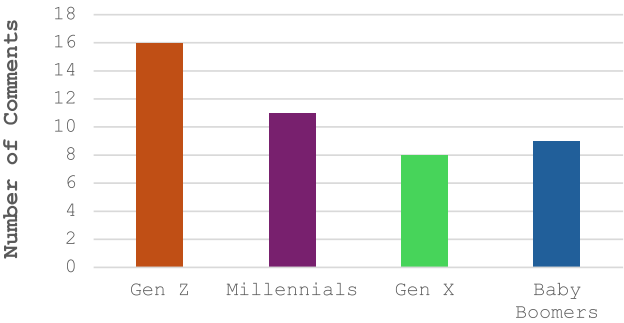


Figure 5: Legitimacy comments, absolute number by generation.

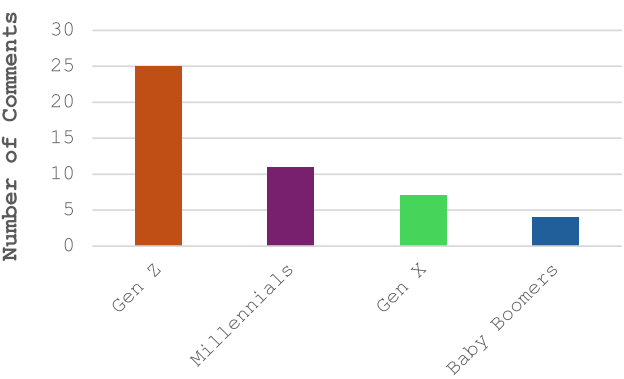


Figure 6: Connectedness comments, absolute number by generation.

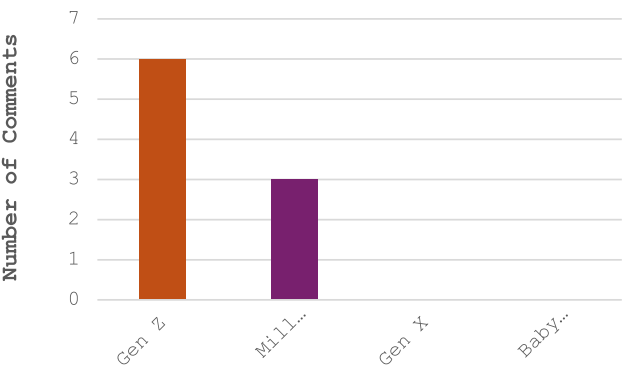


Figure 7: Originality comments, absolute number by generation.

Table 1 provides essential context for interpreting the generational patterns discussed below. For example, the higher absolute number of comments from Gen Z reflects both their larger group size and greater average engagement, while within-group percentages enable comparison of the relative salience of each authenticity factor across generations. Where relevant, both absolute and proportional figures are referenced to support interpretation. The following sections explore these patterns, drawing on participant quotes to illuminate the quantitative distributions.



Table 1: Generational distribution and thematic coding patterns.

Generation	N	Total comments	Mean comments/ participant	% accuracy	% integrity	% proficiency	% connectedness	% legitimacy	% originality
Gen Z	13	106	8.2	18.90 %	17.00 %	19.80 %	23.60 %	15.10 %	5.70 %
Millennials	10	71	7.1	15.50 %	33.80 %	15.50 %	15.50 %	15.50 %	4.20 %
Gen X	10	40	4	12.50 %	22.50 %	27.50 %	17.50 %	20.00 %	0.00 %
Baby Boomer	9	63	7	7.90 %	41.30 %	30.20 %	6.30 %	14.30 %	0.00 %

High comment counts for Gen Z reflect both their larger sample size and greater mean engagement (see table). Percentages in table enable fair comparison of thematic emphasis within each generation.

## 4.1 Gen Z: trusted and humorous friends

As shown in Table 1, Gen Z comprised the largest cohort ( $n = 13$ ) and produced the highest absolute and mean number of coded comments (106; 8.2 per participant). Connectedness accounted for 23.6 % of Gen Z's comments, the greatest emphasis among generations, illustrated by references to emotional resonance and reliability. As one participant described, "It seems as if it's like four friends talking about a game in a bar... it just makes you feel totally involved" (Gen Z: JM). Another noted, "If I can't vibe with you anymore, I don't want to follow you" (Gen Z: AD). Humor also stood out as a salient marker of authenticity for this group. One Gen Z participant noted they followed an athlete because "...they're personable, you know, cracking jokes, talking about things I actually knew about" (Gen Z: BW). Another similarly stated "One of my favorite athletes sings during races, which is something I definitely find appealing" (Gen Z: BS).

Accuracy emerged as a central theme, with participants valuing honesty and transparency. One Gen Z participant remarked, "[The athlete] genuinely seems to be a very good person – he donates to charity and just really tries to build community" (Gen Z: AD). Another explained, "It's valuable when athletes are just genuine to themselves in those spaces" (Gen Z: TM), but cautioned, "I don't like when sports figures make statements that seem forced, because then it doesn't feel honest or accurate."

Gen Z participants were also sensitive to inauthenticity. As one noted, "It's hard because if you try too hard to be real, it sometimes comes off as fake. There's a fine line between being open and being performative" (Gen Z: SR). Another similarly added, "You want athletes to be themselves, but if they overshare or seem too polished, it feels less real" (Gen Z: AD). These perspectives illustrate how Gen Z is keenly aware of the tension between genuine self-presentation and appearing insincere.

Proficiency further shaped Gen Z's sense of authenticity, as one participant shared "You can tell when someone's really good at what they do, and it just makes their personality shine even more" (Gen Z: TM). Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of authenticity factors for Gen Z, highlighting their emphasis on connectedness, accuracy, and proficiency.

## 4.2 Millennials: integrity-driven professionals

For Millennials ( $n = 10$ ), integrity stands out as the defining dimension of authenticity, accounting for 33.8 % of their coded comments, more than any other generation (Table 1), highlighting an emphasis on honesty, consistency, and moral principles in

evaluating sports figures' self-presentation. As one participant noted, authenticity could be sensed "by the way they [sports figures] walk" (Mill: SS), underscoring a belief that true character is evident in subtle, everyday behaviors. Another participant critiqued athletes who "bounce around from different products and different commercials" for lacking integrity for jumping to new teams because "they're getting offers for money" (Mill: SS).

While integrity dominated Millennials' discussion, the shares of comments attributed to proficiency (15.5 %), accuracy (15.5 %), connectedness (15.5 %), and legitimacy (15.5 %) were equal, suggesting a balanced or hybrid approach to authenticity (Table 1 and Figure 1). This even distribution reflects Millennials' experiences as digital adapters who value professionalism and are skeptical of overt commercialism yet still consider other core factors important. This pattern aligns with recent research indicating Millennials' preference for authenticity that blends professional standards with a broader set of ethical and relational considerations (e.g., Burr 2023; Singer et al. 2023).

### 4.3 Gen X: consummate expert

For Gen X ( $n = 10$ ), Table 1 shows a notably balanced distribution of responses across five of the six authenticity factors, with proficiency accounting for the largest share at 27.5 %. This suggests that Gen X places particular value on skills and craftsmanship, yet does not prioritize any single dimension to the exclusion of others. The proportions of comments devoted to integrity (22.5 %), legitimacy (20.0 %), connectedness (17.5 %), and accuracy (12.5 %) further reflect this generation's broad approach to authenticity. Gen X participants emphasize competence, ethical behavior, and a well-rounded sense of credibility and consistency.

As one participant described, true authenticity is rooted in professionalism and substance rather than self-promotion: "I think the way he presents himself, the way he's just very under the radar. He's just a basketball player. He's not there for the showmanship. He's not there for the accolades of being an NBA superstar" (Gen X: TS). This perspective captures Gen X's respect for craftsmanship and the value they place on athletes who succeed by focusing on doing their job well rather than seeking the spotlight.

### 4.4 Baby Boomers: humble craftsman

Finally, Baby Boomers overwhelmingly associated authenticity with integrity and proficiency, often intertwined with humility (Table 1 and Figure 1). According to

Table 1, Baby Boomers contributed 41.3 % of their comments to integrity and 30.2 % to proficiency, highlighting the generation's strong association with traditional notions of moral character (Seifert et al. 2023; Twenge 2023). These quantitative trends are reflected in the recurrent references to humility and consistent behavior found in participant narratives. Boomers were most likely to reference humility explicitly, as in the wish that athletes would “act like you have been there before” (BB: EC), reflecting a preference for modesty and traditional values associated with their generation (Twenge 2023). Baby Boomers also assign great importance to the athlete being intrinsically motivated and demonstrating consistent behavior over time, as indicated in comments about “consistency in terms of real life” (BB: NT). One Baby Boomer highlighted a contrast by claiming that a well-known quarterback has “changed over time, and I don’t think he’s authentic anymore” (BB: JL). Another informant combined humility, integrity, and proficiency in the statement, “I really like athletes who perform at an exceptional level but do that with humility and with character” (BB: DW).

## 4.5 Cross-generational patterns and theoretical synthesis

It is important to note that in Figures 1–7, Gen Z consistently displays the highest absolute number of comments across all dimensions of authenticity. This pattern is influenced not only by Gen Z’s thematic engagement, but also by their larger group size and higher mean level of participation, as detailed in Table 1. To avoid misinterpretation, we encourage readers to consider both the absolute comment counts shown in the figures, which reflect overall contribution volume, and the within-group percentages provided in Table 1, which more accurately represent the relative importance of each authenticity factor within each generation. This dual approach ensures that generational comparisons are based on both the richness of discussion and the proportional salience of each theme, thereby supporting an equitable interpretation of cross-cohort patterns.

Gen Z’s emphasis on originality, particularly creative content formats like *umor* and interactive storytelling, reflects their conscious engagement with athletes as influencers. This cohort demonstrated acute awareness of content creation strategies, often referencing specific posts (e.g., ‘I love how [athlete] turns training fails into funny Reels’). In contrast, some Baby Boomers focused primarily on athletic prowess, with one noting, “I follow them for game highlights, not their jokes” (BB: DW). This suggests generational differences in authenticity perceptions may be partially mediated by awareness of the influencer role itself.

Thematic analysis reveals distinct generational patterns in perceptions of sports figures across six determinants of authenticity (Figures 2–7). Integrity is universally

important, but its meaning shifts: for Gen Z, it is linked to transparency and relatability; for Millennials and Boomers, it is rooted in consistency and moral principle (Figure 2). Ethical considerations in sports thus appear to be a universal concern, though potentially more emphasized by older generations, which might reflect factors other than age, such as socio-economic factors or scandals during their formative years.

Proficiency is emphasized by both Gen Z and Boomers, indicating a shared appreciation for skill across the age spectrum (Figure 3). For Gen Z, proficiency enhances relatability and perceived genuineness, as one participant noted, “You can tell when someone’s really good at what they do, and it just makes their personality shine even more” (Gen Z: TM). Baby Boomers, conversely, link proficiency to humility and character, valuing athletes who “perform at an exceptional level but do that with humility” (BB: DW). This shared emphasis on competence transcends technological context: Gen Z’s digital-nativity foregrounds skill as a personality amplifier, while Boomers’ traditional media upbringing frames it as an extension of moral integrity. The bimodal distribution (Figure 3) underscores skill as a universal authenticity anchor, though its interpretive lens shifts from performative charisma (Gen Z) to craftsmanship ethics (Boomers).

Accuracy increases in importance from Boomers to Gen Z (Figure 4), suggesting that younger generations view sports figures as more truthful and open in their mediated personas (Figure 7). Inverse trends instead mark accuracy and humility, which might indicate changing societal values; younger generations seemingly assign less weight to traditional ideas of modesty and public self-presentation. It was a Baby Boomer who wished athletes would follow NFL Hall of Fame running back Barry Sanders’s words of wisdom and “act like you have been there before,” rather than demonstrating elaborate celebrations after scoring (BB: EC). Instead, only one Gen Z participant even mentioned the idea of humility. This difference implies trends in ideas about confidence and arrogance: Younger generations might view the outward expression of success or confidence as honest; older generations may regard it as evidence of unabashed arrogance.

Legitimacy, gained by adhering to shared norms, traditions, and standards, also appears to increase with younger generations, such that Gen Z cites it more often than the older generations (Figure 5). This trend could reflect the idea that digital natives are more aware of or attuned to established conventions or norms in current sports settings, or else that they are confident in making and asserting stronger judgments. Such confidence could arise because younger generations are more familiar with current standards and expectations in various sports arenas, due to their consistent use of social media, which grants them access to information about their favorite sports figures and confidence that they are well-informed judges of legitimacy. This finding is somewhat paradoxical, in that it suggests a more

conservative stance among younger generations, which seems counter to the idea of youth being more progressive or disruptive.

Connectedness also exhibits a clear, increasing trend from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, seemingly mirroring the increasing prevalence of digital communication and social media use by younger generations (Figure 6). These findings align with previous research on digital natives and their acceptance of technologically mediated interactions (e.g., Bourke 2019; Chen and Ha 2023; Duong et al. 2025; Jain 2024; Närvänen et al. 2020; Singer et al. 2023; Twenge et al. 2019).

Table 1 makes clear that originality was exclusively mentioned by Gen Z and Millennials, whereas Baby Boomers and Gen X gave this dimension no consideration (Figure 7), reinforcing the generational distinction in how innovation is linked to perceived authenticity. Gen Z and Millennials grew up in a rapidly evolving media environment that demands originality to garner attention, so it makes sense that they value and recognize original content, more so than the older two generations. Furthermore, current trends find public sports figures frequently crossing over into entertainment, fashion, and other types of business ventures, which they also publicize through social media and other commercialization channels. Such efforts might be perceived as more original and authentic by younger fans.

Interestingly, Gen Z consistently offers the highest scores, or nearly so, in most categories. Baby Boomers offer an interesting contrast, with their emphasis on integrity and proficiency but not accuracy or connectedness. Considering their references to humility too, this pattern might indicate that Baby Boomers value traditional notions of integrity; they care less about connecting with sports figures on a personal level, which is deeply important to members of Gen Z. As digital natives, Gen Z are more accustomed to interacting with social media influencers, with whom they have strong parasocial relationships (Närvänen et al. 2020). Accordingly, this generation appears to value and even expect personal branding and interactive relationships with sports figures in digital spaces.

Beyond the six factors considered in Nunes et al.'s (2021) model, the focus group participants mentioned additional characteristics that indicate authenticity in their view. One notable characteristic, mentioned by several participants, involved the ability to walk a "fine line" between being authentic and inauthentic, which reinforces the prediction that perceptions of authenticity are quite nuanced and complex. These comments were most often expressed by Gen Z and Millennial participants.

Although participants were prompted to consider both athletes and coaches as potential sports figures, in practice, they overwhelmingly referenced athletes when describing authentic and inauthentic sports influencers. This highlights the dominant association of the "sports influencer" role with athletes, rather than coaches, in

current social media culture, and was a consistent pattern across generational groups, shaping the nature of authenticity examples provided in each focus group.

## 4 Conclusions

This research advances the scholarly understanding of authenticity in sports influencer communication by demonstrating that generational context fundamentally shapes how fans perceive the authenticity of public sports figures on social media. By applying Nunes et al.'s (2021) six-factor model, our findings reveal that while integrity remains a core value across all generations, its meaning and expression are distinctly nuanced: Gen Z prioritizes connectedness and accuracy, Millennials emphasize integrity and professional consistency, Gen X values a balanced mix of proficiency and legitimacy, and Baby Boomers foreground integrity and humility.

These generational distinctions resonate with and extend prior research. For example, our findings corroborate Singer et al. (2023) and Närvänen et al. (2020), who show that Gen Z and Millennials, as digital natives, seek interactive, relatable, and transparent engagement from influencers, while older generations value more traditional markers of authenticity such as consistency and humility (Mingione et al. 2017; Singer and Jones 2025). The observed inverse relationship between humility and accuracy across generations further supports the argument by Moulard et al. (2015) that authenticity is a negotiated and context-dependent construct, particularly in digital environments where self-presentation is both more visible and more scrutinized.

Moreover, this research builds on the tradition of media effects scholarship (e.g., Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) by illustrating how technological and cultural shifts, specifically the rise of social media, have transformed the nature of fan–athlete relationships, reinforcing the importance of selectivity and interpersonal influence in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Our results also align with recent work in influencer marketing that highlights the tangible impact of perceived authenticity on brand loyalty, fan engagement, and endorsement value (Audrezet et al. 2020; Banet-Weiser 2012; Kucharska et al. 2020).

This research not only confirms the multi-dimensionality of authenticity (Nunes et al. 2021) but also demonstrates that its construction is deeply generational, shaped by both formative media environments and evolving social norms. These insights underscore the need for sports marketers and athletes to adopt generationally tailored strategies for authentic engagement.

While prior research has established that generational cohorts exhibit distinct preferences, such as Gen Z's focus on connectedness or Millennials' emphasis on integrity (e.g., Lee and Eastin 2021; Mingione et al. 2017; Närvänen et al. 2020; Singer

et al. 2023), this study advances the literature by revealing several sport-specific nuances in how authenticity is constructed and interpreted within the context of athlete influencers.

First, the findings show that athletic proficiency acts as an authenticity multiplier across generations, but with markedly different interpretations. For Gen Z, proficiency enhances relatability and serves as a personality amplifier: as one participant explained, “There’s this one girl who’s just been crushing it with climbing...and after each row would celebrate, you know, and still would be like, ‘yeah, I got it! Instead of just being like, easy peasy, you know, like it’s done with. That made me see her in a in a better light than if she was to just, like, climb up there and be done with it. It’s almost like, even though it’s super easy for her, she’s still kind of happy that she accomplished it and still kind of celebrating with the crowd instead of just being like ‘ohh it’s below me. I can do better’” (Gen Z: BW). In contrast, Baby Boomers frame proficiency as a form of moral proof, closely linked to humility and character, seen in comments like “I really like athletes who perform at an exceptional level but do that with humility and with character” (BB: TS) and “I think that humility, that character, the how they carry themselves is very important to me” (BB: DW). This dual role of proficiency, as both a skill marker and a moral anchor, is unique to the athlete influencer context and is not typically observed in studies of general social media influencers.

Second, this research identifies what might be termed the “fine line” paradox, most acutely observed among Gen Z participants. Here, authenticity is recognized as a negotiated performance, where athletes risk appearing inauthentic by being “too polished” or overly curated in their digital self-presentation. One participant shared, “Whenever I see the goofy kind of move...that makes me think that they’re kind of just a better, more genuine person, because it doesn’t feel like they’re hiding at all, just because I would expect that it (the goofy move) would be something that you would normally want to hide if you want to cater to appearances” (Gen Z: BW). This tension between athletic excellence and personal branding is a novel insight that extends beyond commercial influencer contexts, highlighting the complexity of authenticity for public sports figures whose reputations are built both on and off the field.

Finally, the findings challenge assumptions about generational attitudes toward tradition and legitimacy. Contrary to expectations that digital natives might dismiss established norms, Gen Z participants frequently emphasized the importance of sportsmanship and adherence to fair play as markers of authenticity. This generational reversal suggests that, in the context of sports, legitimacy is transformed from a perceived constraint into a valued authenticity anchor among younger fans.



Collectively, these insights demonstrate that sports figures' dual identity as both competitors and digital influencers generates authenticity dynamics that are absent in general influencer research. This study thus contributes a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of how generational cohorts construct authenticity in the unique domain of sports influencer communication.

## 5 Limitations and further research

These insights into generational differences raise several further questions and exhibit some limitations. As only one participant was located in South America, no region-based analysis or conclusions were drawn. Findings should be interpreted primarily as reflecting the U.S. participant population. As with most qualitative research, the findings are intended to provide nuanced, context-specific insights rather than broad generalizations. The value of this work lies in its ability to illuminate complex generational dynamics and generate hypotheses for future research, rather than in producing statistically generalizable results. While all participants engaged with athletes' social media, varying awareness of the influencer construct may have influenced responses. Gen Z's digital nativity likely made them more attuned to content-creation nuances (e.g., originality), whereas older generations occasionally defaulted to traditional athlete evaluations. Future studies should measure influencer-role awareness explicitly through pre-surveys. Future research should explore these patterns across broader populations and examine how evolving digital cultures continue to reshape what it means to be "authentic" in the eyes of diverse fan communities. Other studies also might explore a wider mix of online and in-person focus groups and compare findings across them. Examining authenticity perceptions as they relate to different sports roles (e.g., athletes, coaches, commentators) could yield additional and valuable insights. The inverse relationship between humility and accuracy perceptions warrants further investigation too, particularly in efforts to understand how these factors influence the perceived authenticity of mediated public figures across generations.

## Appendix

See Table A1.

**Table A1:** Focus group participant list with coded identifiers.

Focus group	Gender	Generation	Identifier	Location
1 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: BS	CO
1 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: CS	CO
1 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: BW	CO
2 (online)	F	Gen X	Gen X: MR	CO
2 (online)	F	Millennial	Mill: AP	CO
2 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: JM	CO
2 (online)	F	Millennial	Mill: TM	IL
2 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: KM	MD
2 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: TM	CO
2 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: DA	CO
3 (in person)	F	Millennial	Mill: JG	CO
4 (in person)	F	Millennial	Mill: JM	TX
4 (in person)	M	Millennial	Mill: RG	TX
4 (in person)	M	Gen X	Gen X: RS	TX
4 (in person)	M	Millennial	Mill: SW	TX
5 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: DW	CO
5 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: EC	CO
5 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: JH	CO
5 (online)	M	Gen X	Gen X: TS	CO
5 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: RP	TX
6 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: AD	CO
6 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: SR	CO
6 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: AC	CO
6 (online)	F	Gen Z	Gen Z: BH	CO
6 (online)	M	Millennial	Mill: LL	IL
6 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: RN	CO
6 (online)	F	Gen X	Gen X: AC	NY
6 (online)	F	Millennial	Mill: ML	South America
7 (online)	F	Baby Boomer	BB: JL	CO
7 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: TL	CO
7 (online)	F	Baby Boomer	BB: JC	CO
7 (online)	M	Baby Boomer	BB: JF	IL
7 (online)	F	Baby Boomer	BB: NT	CO
7 (online)	M	Millennial	Mill: AH	TX
7 (online)	F	Gen X	Gen X: MS	CO
8 (online)	M	Gen X	Gen X: MH	CO
8 (online)	F	Gen X	Gen X: CP	CO
8 (online)	M	Gen X	Gen X: RP	CO
8 (online)	F	Gen X	Gen X: TB	CO
8 (online)	M	Millennial	Mill: TT	CO
8 (online)	M	Gen Z	Gen Z: SP	CO
8 (online)	M	Gen X	Gen X: RB	CO

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