ATHLETE BRAND, INC.: THREE ESSAYS ON PERSONAL BRAND MANAGEMENT AND MONETIZATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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by
Nataliya Bredikhina
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Examing Committee Members:
Thilo Kunkel, Advisory Chair, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management
Bradley J. Baker, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management
Daniel C. Funk, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management
Elizabeth A. Taylor, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management
Heather Kennedy, External Member, University of Guelph
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores elite athletes’ strategic personal brand management on social media. Social media have become a primary platform for personal branding integrated into athletes’ lives and careers. Yet, the psychological and strategic processes underlying personal brand management have lacked scholarly inquiry as extant research tends to focus on consumer perspectives as opposed to decision-making, negotiations, and strategies from the point of view of branded individuals. This has hindered the understanding of how personal branding is managed as a unique type of self-enterprising activity. In this dissertation, I employ a multi-study approach to address three issues pertaining to athletes’ personal brand management on social media, namely: 1) experience of fit in pursuit of personal brand monetization, 2) negotiation of authenticity in self-presentation, and 3) joint effects of brand fit, athlete brand authenticity, and self-disclosure tactics in athlete corporate social responsibility (AxCSR) promotional content. Theoretically, the dissertation advances a view of how athletes, as public personas, manage their personal brands on the verge between their personal concerns and identities, commercial demands, and expectations stemming from sports industry stakeholders. Practically, it delivers insights to athletes, their managers, and sponsors on how to optimize athletes’ personal branding experiences and business outcomes.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a platform for personal and professional image-making, social media have been increasingly integrated into individuals’ everyday lives including ordinary employees, academics, CEOs, and (micro)celebrities such as athletes. Despite the proliferation of access to social media and the apparent ease of ‘getting started’, personal branding represents a sophisticated process where the branded individual, as an entrepreneur of their brand, is a branded entity and a manager, a content producer, and an audience (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This interplay of functions and roles raises questions about how personal branding is facilitated by the branded individuals, including how individuals make decisions, negotiate their self-presentation, and employ strategic appeals in this activity (Bendisch et al., 2013; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Scheidt et al., 2020). This dissertation addresses the issue of experiential and strategic aspects in personal brand management with a focus on collegiate, elite amateur, and professional athletes as a population of individuals who are highly visible, have access to monetization opportunities, yet also are subjects of high scrutiny due to sports communities’ norms (e.g., Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Geurin, 2017; Kunkel et al, 2021). Specifically, through three essays, this work explores issues related to the psychological experience of fit with the personal brand monetization activity, negotiation of authenticity, and usage of self-disclosure tactics as a strategy to enhance promotional outcomes.
Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

The need to untangle how athletes engage in personal brand management and selectively convey their life stories has become a prevalent issue in the industry. There are millions of professional and elite amateur athletes across the world, yet most cannot make a living off sport. For example, the annual salary of 60% of the U.S. national team members at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing was below $25,000, which was lower than the national salary/earnings average (Felbin, 2022). Given athletes’ high physical load and their busy practice and competition schedules, substantially supplementing this income through formal employment is often challenging (Felbin, 2022). Further, the NCAA’s legislation introduced in July 2021 has allowed for personal brand monetization at the collegiate level, amending regulations around the student-athletes’ amateurism model (NCAA, 2021). At the same time, while there are close to 500,000 student-athletes competing in NCAA member institutions, only approximately half of these individuals receive any amount of athletic financial aid (Marsh, 2022). This raises a question of how an athlete’s financial sustainability can be strengthened, with many athletes turning their attention to social media endorsements as a source of potential side earnings and in-kind benefits.

The technological progress and emergence of social media have given athletes an agency over their personal brand building beyond the traditional media channels yet also the pressure to do it the right way. An athlete brand consultant Jeremy Darlow (2017) eloquently described the challenge in his book *Athletes Are Brands Too:*
The screen that matters fits in your pocket and the director is you. [...] You control your storyline. You can say what you want, when you want, and where you want, and that message can reach millions instantly. The challenge lies in the how (p. 134).

Marketers point to the imperative role of storytelling for solidifying relationships with relevant stakeholders and achieving desired objectives such as profit maximization. Yet, many individuals are not able to effectively identify and communicate the relevant aspects of their identities (Cherry, 2021; Monarth, 2022). Understanding how personal branding can be effectively managed and how to convey attractive touchpoints through the personal brand is key to helping individuals flourish and achieve their personal and professional potential.

Organizations are dependent on the personal brand success of individuals associated with them (Aaker, 2012). For example, Bendisch et al. observe that CEOs, as brands, “embody the company’s direction, strategy, leadership, and management quality” (2013, p. 603). Further, the personal brand attractiveness and authenticity of star athletes increase loyalty toward the sports product, which is relevant to teams, leagues, and other sports organizations affiliated with athletes (Kucharska et al., 2020; Kunkel et al., 2020). Active presence and authentic voice maintained through user-generated content on social media are vehicles for transcending an attractive brand image (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Geurin, 2017). Given that social media is deeply entrenched in modern individuals’ lives with a global average of 2.5 hours spent on social platforms daily (BroadbandSearch, 2022), it represents a potent space for marketing activities, including self-promotions and personal brand monetization. Consumers want to see the
real unfiltered individuals behind the social media brand, as such a perception reduces perceived risk and increases confidence in consumption decisions (Bartsch et al., 2022). Relatedly, there is a need to investigate how athletes formulate their content strategy as they conceptualize, communicate, and assess their brand narrative (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Theoretically, scholars recognize the intricacies and complexities of managing a human brand considering that, unlike product/service brands, it is built around a living person (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Levesque & Pons, 2020). The line between the personal, professional, and private in personal brand building becomes increasingly vague and blurred (Mei et al., 2022), yet theoretical development in the domain of human brand management and the understanding of the boundaries of transferability of traditional branding concepts to the world of human brands remains sparse (Bendisch et al., 2013; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Levesque & Pons, 2020). Most prior research has focused either on consumer behavior, identification, engagement, and attachment to human brands (e.g., Bredikhina, Gupta, & Kunkel, 2022; Guèvremont, 2021; Saboo et al., 2016; Su et al., 2020; Walsh & Williams, 2017) or issues related to endorsement marketing (e.g., Carrillat & d’Astous, 2014; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Miller & Laczniak, 2011; Spry et al., 2011) with little attention to strategy and how content strategy is formulated (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022; Geurin, 2017; Mogaji et al., 2020). Relatedly, calls in extant scholarship (e.g., Gorbatov et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2020; Scheidt et al., 2020) reveal the need to understand the human in the human brand, that is the role of the entrepreneur, their agency, psychology, and tactics. This also entails accounting for how social and institutional contexts shape the way that individuals make
decisions in personal branding and the relevant tensions that emerge between the personal and brand components.

This dissertation advances the sport management and personal branding scholarship toward a more holistic view of personal branding as an activity integrated with life and career and entailing a self-negotiation experience. Overall, such a view enhances an understanding of how a personal brand is built with attention to psychological processes and interactions with the environment (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Scheidt et al., 2020). At the same time, a focus on athlete branding allows for exploring personal branding in the context of an occupation with high identity demands (cf. Arai et al., 2013), which accentuates external influences and internal negotiations. This is of theoretical and practical interest to sport management scholars and practitioners since athlete brands are integrated within a highly interconnected and visible sport brand architecture (Kunkel et al., 2013).

Viewing the athlete as the entrepreneur behind the brand addresses how athletes identify and exploit personal brand monetization opportunities, shift between the real and branded selves, and how their approaches shape brand outcomes. In this way, the dissertation addresses the identified gap concerning the lack of experiential, psychological, and strategic perspectives on personal brand building as well as how an individual’s humanness is leveraged to amplify the brand impact (cf. Audrezet et al., 2020; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Geurin, 2017). Further, from the managerial perspective, this research helps uncover the nuances of athletes’ experiences and self-presentation practices as they engage in personal brand monetization on social media,
including identifying effective practices. This is of interest to organizations such as institutions of higher education, teams, leagues, and commercial brands who support athlete brand building through targeted education programs, strategically managed relationships, and resources.

**Literature Overview**

*Theoretical Perspectives on Personal Branding*

The notion of personal branding can be traced back to the sociology literature of the mid-twentieth century. Scholars attribute the introduction of the personal branding perspective to sociologist Erving Goffman, who, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), discussed how individuals strategically and selectively engage in impression management (Khedher, 2014; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). Numerous disciplines have contributed to the literature on personal branding, including psychology, management, sociology, sport, tourism, media and communication, and others (Blaer et al., 2020; Geurin, 2017; Gorbatov et al., 2019; Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Whitmer, 2019). Various definitions of personal branding have been proposed, yet the one commonly emphasized principle is the idea of creating a strategic, attractive, and differentiated narrative around a person to outcompete the market (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Thus, Lair et al. (2005) state about personal branding that “here, success is not determined by individuals’ internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled – in other words, branded” (p. 308), emphasizing the core role of an attractive narrative as the essence of personal branding.
Scholars have categorized human brands based on the source of the recognition and the magnitude of development (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Whereas everyone has a personal brand that has the potential to be expanded through strategic management, human brands are individuals who are well-known and are “the subject of marketing communication efforts” (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Thus, personal brands can range based on the nature of their operations and influence from ordinary individuals’ impression management targeting family and close personal and professional circles, to microcelebrities within niche communities, to celebrity person-brands where the name is shared by a living person and an inanimate business venture as the extension of their brand (Osorio et al., 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Walsh & Williams, 2017).

Generally, there are two camps of thought on personal branding – scholars siding with the product-centric perspective and those advocating for a person-centric view. The product-centric view emphasizes the application of universal marketing principles to people, suggesting the need to re-package and offer self in ways that satisfy the customers (Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005). This view prioritizes the brand over the human component and explores how it can be leveraged to derive profits or be monetized (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). For example, Shepherd (2005) defines personal branding as an activity “based on the obvious logic of applying to people the same marketing and branding principles originally developed for products and corporations” (p. 589). In a similar vein, Parmentier et al. (2013) suggest: “the premise of much of what has been written is that some product branding concepts are sufficient for understanding
how people can position themselves for any career pursuit” (p. 373). Examples of employing a product-centric approach often include research on endorsement marketing where human brands are positioned as “vehicles” or “instruments” who, through activation of consumer brand schemas and transfer of meaning, contribute recognizability and enrich the brand image of partner brands (e.g., McCracken, 1989; Su et al., 2020; van der Veen, 2008). Yet the critique of the product-centric view is that it provides a static perspective that does not fully account for the human features and complexity of managing a brand that is also a person and the implications that this humanness can have on endorsements. Like any self-presentation, personal branding is a sophisticated process that is not always rational and includes spontaneous aspects, subconscious tendencies, and instances when the individual acts off-script (Bolino et al., 2016). Personal brands are embedded within social structures (Fink et al., 2012), whereas personal life and reputational failures are also a part of personal brand management (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2020).

As an alternative to the product-centric angle, scholars have developed a person-centric view, which resonates with the sociological theories on impression management and self-presentation (Gorbatov et al., 2018). It views personal brands as embedded and evolving within the social structures and is underlined by self-discovery and self-reflexivity to remain the true self while identifying and selectively emphasizing desirable aspects (Levesque & Pons, 2020). It also affords the branded individual agency, placing them in the role of an entrepreneur where the personal brand is the enterprise (Gorbatov et al., 2018). At the same time, since a human brand is both a person and a business
entity, this poses challenges for its management. Whereas traditional brands are fixed and stable, human brands are fluid and uncertain (Bendisch et al., 2013). For example, scholars have brought attention to the negative potential of transgressed human brands to hinder evaluations of affiliated brand entities (e.g., Lee & Kwak, 2017; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2020). Relatedly, to address the issue of instability and dynamism of human brands, Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) juxtapose these brands to a combination of the inextricably linked mortal “body natural” and immortal “body politic” of medieval royalties whose political identity was transferred from one king (queen) to the other after the death of the person. Through their inquiry into the tensions between “body natural” and “body politic,” which together amalgamate into “body corporate,” the authors identify four aspects of humanness that can upset the relationship between the person and the brand, including mortality, hubris, unpredictability, and social embeddedness (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Yet, what remains largely unaddressed, is how these tensions, external factors, and instability should be accounted for when building a personal brand. Additionally, the authors recognize intimacy and authenticity as naturally inherent qualities, which, if communicated effectively, can give human brands an edge compared to traditional branded entities (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). This further justifies the need for research on effective strategies on how to position a personal brand as authentic and relatable and the business implications of such positioning.

The juxtaposition of product-centric and person-centric approaches to personal branding creates tensions. On one hand, it renders the body of literature on personal branding fragmented and reliant on different theoretical models and definitions (Gorbatov
et al., 2018). On the other hand, it creates a disagreement regarding the pertinent research questions. When viewing human brands through the lens of marketing theories, the focus shifts from the brand itself to the incremental value the individual’s name and recognition can add to other entities in their brand network, that is the nuances of endorsement marketing where the human brand is the vehicle for promotions (e.g., Lee & Koo, 2015; Spry et al., 2011). In contrast, the person-centric approach suggests scholars need to understand the uniqueness and defining characteristics of personal branding as a marketing activity and career behavior (Bendisch et al., 2013; Gorbatov et al., 2021).

In this dissertation, I apply a person-centric view of personal branding, recognizing athletes’ agency and intentionality in the personal branding process and, resultanty, their reflexive thinking behind the construction of a distinct self-presentation (Gorbatov et al., 2021). The person-centric view allows researchers to recognize both the business aspects and promotional functionality of personal brands, their societal and cultural meanings, as well as lifestyle and career dimensions. While societal and cultural dimensions are undoubtedly relevant for traditional brands, human brand deserves separate attention as it represents a different genre where the act of conceptualizing brand identity is not as explicit as the expectation to authentically reflect the person behind the brand (cf. Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). The relevance of developing such a person-centric view is visible in creative and entertainment industries such as sports, where individuals, their stories, and identities are the driving force behind interest in and attachment to the product (Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Kucharska et al., 2020), bringing focus to the experience of the entrepreneur behind the brand and the storytelling
strategies that they employ. I contribute to the person-centric perspective by investigating how the individual operates behind the brand in terms of both the choices that they make as they engage in this activity, pulling upon resources provided by their brand ecosystem as well as how they present themselves in the digital environment. Further, I extend the understanding of what makes the human brand unique by disentangling how consumer-based perceptions of athletes' brand authenticity as well as human interaction techniques such as self-disclosures can be exploited to derive business value.

**Athlete’s Personal Brand**

The human brand category in sports includes several types of brands such as athletes, coaches, managers, owners, wives and girlfriends (WAGS), media personalities, and others (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Vaczi, 2016). These human brands play a pivotal role in how consumers connect with the sports product and organizations and must be carefully managed to assist the branded individuals in achieving professional and commercial success. Given their business implications, visibility, and prominence in sports and marketing spheres, athletes' brands have been gaining consistent attention in sport management scholarship over the last decade. In their seminal paper, Carlson and Donavan (2013) suggest that many professional, collegiate, and amateur athletes can be classified as human brands due to their recognizability, being subjects of concerted marketing efforts, and driving business value. Further, Arai et al. (2013) have brought focus to the business, societal, and cultural connotations that come with an athlete brand by uncovering brand associations that constitute a consumer-based athlete brand image. Drawing on these associations, the uniqueness of athletes compared to other human
brands is underscored by expectations of being in a superior physical and mental condition, exhibiting high moral principles, and adhering to sports community norms, all of which are repeatedly tested in the context of uncertainty of winning versus losing, which defines the sport (cf. Funk, 2017). Relatedly, scholars have studied athlete brands as a distinct category (e.g., Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Doyle et al., 2022; Kunkel et al., 2020), since consumers develop unique brand associations toward athletes encompassing their athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle attributes (Arai et al., 2013). Additionally, the task of growing sports spectatorship and fandom also necessitates attention to athlete brands, considering that perceptions of athletes are integrated with perceptions of sports organizations’ brands such as teams (Kunkel et al., 2013).

Athletes are a part of the broader sports brand environment, which is a summation of brand entities mutually influencing each other (Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). As subbrands of their teams and leagues, athletes are a part of the larger league, club, or institutional brand portfolio, where consumers’ brand associations are informed by unique brand characteristics as well as ties with affiliated brand entities (Kunkel et al., 2014; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Whereas an athlete’s embeddedness in the social and organizational structures governed by social hierarchies, gender politics, and resource allocation used to largely determine their visibility and brand value, the advancement of technology and social media have challenged that dynamic, presenting athletes with a greater agency over how their brand is constructed and monetized (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022; Geurin, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). While affording athletes
(especially minority, underrepresented, and niche sports athletes) greater control over brand building, this also has raised questions about how they should engage and present themselves on social media.

In particular, while scholars have explored how the brand relationships between athletes and other brands are signaled and brand associations are formed, a framework outlining the negotiation processes that athletes go through as they try to build a brand, construct their self-presentation, and leverage available organizational resources has been lacking (Dumont & Ots, 2020). With the scholarly emphasis on the brand perspective, the experiences and strategies of athletes, as the entrepreneurs behind the brand, often remain unexamined (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022; Ratten, 2015). Especially for athletes who face high external demands, be it due to rigid sport community norms, minority status, or identity, it is relevant to theoretically consider how the encountered barriers impact their experience with personal brand monetization, whether they feel like they can “fit in” with the environmental demands and what factors define that ability (Mogaji et al., 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Athletes face unique challenges related to managing a personal brand that stem from social expectations related to the athlete's professional identity (Taniyev & Gordon, 2022), role model expectations (Arai et al., 2013), as well as industry conventions and brand relationships that are a part of the sport brand ecosystem (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Society views athletes as role models (cf. Arai et al., 2013). Relatedly, athletes are expected to be involved in ethical behaviors and philanthropic activities that allow for maintaining role model status (Kunkel et al., 2022). In addition, an athlete brand is co-created through interactions with relevant stakeholders
such as sponsors, media, and consumers, and thus it is dependent on resources and exposure provided by other brands within the sport brand ecosystem (Dumont & Ots, 2020).

Considering the potentially conflicting personal desires, moral standards, social expectations, and market demands, scholars have raised the issues of environmental influences and authenticity in athlete branding, and how it is experienced and negotiated by athletes (Clavio et al., 2013; Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). For instance, this includes the question of why some athletes decide to pursue the personal brand monetization route, whereas others choose to leave this endeavour believing it stands in conflict with their other commitments and expectations (Mogaji et al., 2020). This also includes concerns related to stereotyping and whether affording female athletes the ability to market themselves has created risks for the feminist movement as the adjustments to an athlete’s self-presentation to make a brand profitable may contradict the effort of creating a positive social impact (Streeter, 2022). Further, more research is needed to understand the business outcomes of self-presentation strategies that athletes employ on social media (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). The athlete branding literature has fallen behind the research on other types of human brands such as influencers in untangling the effective persuasion tactics that can be employed for promotions on social media (cf. Audrezet et al., 2020; Lee & Johnson, 2022; Leite & Baptista, 2022). Much research has focused on tensions arising on the athlete-endorser/sponsor interface, including reputation management, performance, and advertisement design (Fink et al., 2012; Kunkel et al., 2020; Lee & Kwak, 2017) with
less attention to how specific narrative elements employed by athletes as a part of their self-presentation on social media derive sponsorship outcomes.

Addressing the identified gaps, this dissertation study aims to advance the understanding of the how behind athletes’ commercial personal branding, including the factors that shape how athletes navigate the personal branding process, authenticity concerns, and self-presentation strategy. Specifically, I will contribute by addressing the following three interlinked yet distinct research objectives:

1. To investigate how athletes experience and establish a sense of fit with the personal brand monetization activity and leverage available social capital and institutional resources.

2. To uncover self-negotiation in the construction of self-presentation, particularly concerning the experiences and impressions of authenticity.

3. To understand the effects of integration of personal life narrative as a branding element through self-disclosures.

**Philosophical Foundations of the Dissertation**

In this dissertation, I adhere to pragmatism as a philosophical framework, which suggests that one should “choose the combination or mixture of methods and procedures that work best for answering your research questions” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). Pragmatism aligns well with the idea of using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for the collection of essays in this dissertation as fundamentally, pragmatism supports the strategic choice of philosophical tools and research methods that allow to best address the outlined research questions (Biesta, 2010). Specifically, Essays I
and II investigate the perspective of athletes on building a personal brand and negotiations of fit and authenticity, which is accomplished through adhering to the view that reality is socially constructed (Charmaz, 2016). Relatedly, as a researcher, I recognize my active role in the generation and interpretations of the findings in these studies. Furthermore, Essay III seeks validity and statistical generalizability of the findings and applies hypothesis testing, aligning with the postpositivist view (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this way, whereas quantitative and qualitative methodologies normally require paradigm thinking, pragmatism allows overcoming tensions in integrating different methodologies as a part of my dissertation study.

Overview of the Studies

This dissertation represents a collection of three essays that collectively bring focus to the athlete as the entrepreneur behind the brand and integrate a consumer-based perspective on athlete brands with a person-centric view on the personal branding activity by addressing the experiential, psychological, and business implications of building a brand. Specifically, Essay I features a grounded theory approach and focuses on the viewpoint of NCAA student-athletes to map out the underpinnings of their experience of fit that they assess as they engage in personal brand monetization activity. As a logical extension of Essay I, Essay II advances the understanding of how individuals construct their self-presentation once they engage in personal brand monetization. Namely, using grounded theory and operating in the context of niche professional and elite amateur athlete branding, I explore athletes’ authenticity negotiation in self-presentation on social media and how athletes balance their internal experiential authenticity with the external
environmental demands. Considering the importance of authenticity in building a sustainable and profitable social media brand, Essay III expands the inquiry by incorporating the consumer perspective. In this way, it shifts the level of examination from athletes’ experiences to consumer perceptions of athlete branding, yet still centers on how the humanness and authenticity of an athlete’s human brand can be leveraged to achieve a competitive edge in promotional activities. It draws on social penetration theory and features an online experiment design to investigate how incorporating self-disclosure as a story-telling element into a sponsored post impacts consumers’ attitudinal outcomes toward the athlete and the advertised brand. Further, as a part of the inquiry, Essay III introduces a consumer-based athlete brand authenticity scale.
CHAPTER 2

‘YOU’RE THE BRAND NOW’: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCE OF FIT IN NCAA STUDENT-ATHLETES’ NIL MONETIZATION VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

Advancement of digital technologies and social media has given rise to an influencer occupation – a subset of microcelebrities who generate income through creating appealing content that documents their lives and promotes sponsored products (Abidin, 2016). Athlete influencers occupy a prominent position among these human brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Athlete influencers are those athletes who have adopted the role of content creators with a brand that is “contextualized with myriad interactions with audiences, organizations, events, media, and other influencers” (Cornwell, 2020, p. 476). Athlete influencers range from celebrity brands such as Cristiano Ronaldo or Connor McGregor earning millions of dollars per social media post, to emerging and niche sports athletes. This category has recently expanded to include the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes after revisions of the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies allowing for personal brand monetization.

Athlete influencers are part of a multidimensional network of brands where numerous parties have an interest at stake in these individuals’ branding successes. For example, social media is an important source of athletes’ income, increasing earning

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1 Research for this project was conducted with the financial support of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Any opinions, findings and conclusions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NCAA.
potential, career sustainability, and quality of life (Brison & Geurin, 2021). Further, sponsor brands also depend on successful athlete influencers, including their ability to collaborate, productivity, and creativity as the interest in influencer marketing has been rising (Santora, 2023). Ultimately, how athletes engage on social media is of concern for sports organizations, whose brand image and success are co-dependant on athletes’ self-presentation, well-being, and performance (Barry et al., 2022; Hayes et al., 2020).

Overall, these points emphasize the critical importance of understanding the factors that shape an athlete influencer’s ability to effectively fulfill faced expectations while balancing other professional and personal concerns.

Successful engagement in a professional role requires a level of congruence between the person and the external environment, that is person-environment (PE) fit, which occurs when their characteristics match (Edwards et al., 1998). PE fit has been linked to numerous individual-level and organizational outcomes such as job performance quality, role satisfaction, and overall well-being (e.g., Edwards & Billsberry, 2010; Guan et al., 2021; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). In contrast, a sense of a misfit can bring negative outcomes, which in the case of athlete influencers may entail perceived pressures, unfulfilled expectations, conflicting demands, and worsened well-being (Hayes et al., 2020; Mogaji et al., 2020). Understanding the underpinnings of the fit experience in personal brand monetization from the athlete influencer perspective can inform personal branding and organizational practices that influence their experience. However, prior research on athlete brand management is yet to integrate a person-environment fit perspective, whereas the generalizability of findings from organizational
settings to self-enterprising activities has been questioned because of the unique characteristics of the latter (Riedo et al., 2019). Advancing knowledge on athlete influencer activity as a part of a modern athlete’s job requires a context-specific understanding of how they experience and manage fit.

The current research investigates such a perspective by focusing on the case of NCAA student-athlete influencers and their name, image, and likeness (NIL) monetization. Specifically, the study reconstructs the experience of fit by investigating 1) why student-athletes pursue NIL monetization, 2) perceptions of the experience of fit, and 3) adjustments in the case of a misfit. Designed as a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a total of 50 NCAA student-athletes from all three divisions. Theoretically, it uncovers the meaning of fit in personal brand monetization on social media. Practically, it contributes to the understanding of the factors promoting a favorable personal brand monetization experience as well as how stakeholders such as university athletic departments can structure their programming to support athlete influencers.

Theoretical Background

The Experience of Person-Environment (PE) Fit

By bringing the PE fit perspective to athlete influencers, I recognize their identity as an entrepreneur (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022; Ratten, 2015), which supplements existing research on athletes as brands (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Doyle et al., 2022). PE fit theory stems from an interactive perspective in psychology and managerial literature, defining fit as a “congruence, match, similarity, or
correspondence between the person and the environment” (Edwards & Shipp, 2007, p. 211). It postulates that attitudinal, behavioral, and well-being outcomes (positive or negative) do not arise from the person or the environment separately but rather from their level of congruence (Edwards et al., 1998). Specifically, personal attributes include needs, goals, abilities, or personality, whereas environmental attributes include demands, resources, and conditions (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Meta-analytic studies support that achieving PE fit leads to positive individual-level and organizational outcomes (e.g., Oh et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2008).

Scholars make several distinctions between various types of PE fit. One distinction is between complementary and supplementary fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Supplementary fit focuses on how well the person and the environment match each other, that is whether there is a congruence based on values, interests, and vision. Complementary fit focuses on how well the person and the environment complement each other, that is how well the needs of one party are offset by attributes of the other party (Edwards, 1991). Furthermore, scholars draw a line between subjective and objective fit, where objective fit refers to a match between the objective attributes of the person and the environment, whereas subjective fit refers to a fit as perceived by the individual (Edwards et al., 1998). In this research, I focus on subjective PE fit because subjective fit has been identified as a primary proxy of individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (Edwards et al., 1998).

Extant work-related PE fit literature mainly focuses on fit in organizational environments, typically in the Western context, where individuals, as employees, strive to
fit with various aspects under the umbrella of an organization (Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019; Follmer et al., 2018; Tepper et al., 2018). Scholars suggested considering fit from a multidimensional perspective, posing that the experience of fit is simultaneously nested in multiple dimensions of the environment (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Research has investigated various levels of fit (e.g., person-vocation, person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-person fit), demonstrating that they are interdependent and nested (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). However, prior works also indicated that the models of fit can look different and vary between work environments, which prompted grounded theory inquiries to investigate interpretations of fit in contexts that are not typically represented theoretically, such as non-Western cultures (Chuang et al., 2015) or volunteering (Englert et al., 2020). These inquiries suggested that new forms of fit and conceptual connotations can emerge in other cultures and non-traditional work settings, pointing to the importance of contextualizing fit experience.

One of the contexts that are currently omitted from the scholarly discussion on fit is self-enterprising work environments that are becoming increasingly reflective of the current state of the gig economy (Guan et al., 2021). In the case of a self-enterprise, an individual engages in self-organizing rather than entering an already-existing organizational framework (Riedo et al., 2019), which has the potential to change fit dynamics. Specifically, unlike the experience of joining an organization or a team to perform a specific job, self-enterprises typically expose the individual to a multitude of tasks, responsibilities, and roles as well as the flexibility to shape their venture according to their vision (Riedo et al., 2019). This emphasizes the role of emotional and social
capital and access to networks (Ratten, 2015) in establishing congruence with self-enterprising activity and potentially de-emphasizes the role of group fit or person-organization fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004). The introduction of the notion of fit to research on entrepreneurship has only occurred at the level of personality fit, which generally aligns with the person-vocation fit perspective (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Scholars have yet to investigate individuals’ perceptions of fit in different self-enterprising domains.

**Athlete Influencer and the Experience of Fit**

Social media entrepreneurship is a “process of opportunity identification, evaluation and exploitation, carried out by stakeholders within social media networks” (Gustafsson & Khan, 2017, p. 28). At the core of influencer activity is a mastery of personal branding, which is a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based on a unique combination of individual characteristics, narrative, and imagery (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Like all human brands, athletes’ personal brands can be situated on a continuum ranging from early-stage brands that essentially imply impression management to close social and professional circles to highly commercialized (micro)celebrity brands seeking income from sponsorships and monetization activities (Osorio et al., 2020). Yet, it is the commercial personal branding that is often associated with tensions related to authenticity, reliance on resources, and having to integrate monetization within lifestyle (Dumont & Ots, 2020; Hayes et al., 2020; Mogaji et al., 2020), which makes investigations of fit with the environment particularly relevant. Whereas the commercial success of athletes can be boosted through
entrepreneurial ventures (Ratten, 2015), social media provides a flexible platform for monetization activities. Thus, an athlete influencer is a “contentpreneur,” who builds a brand around their own identity and monetizes it through strategic self-presentation and curated content (Johnson, Short, et al., 2022).

Following self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuals’ well-being rests upon the ability to find fitting environments that can enable them to satisfy these needs. Accounting for motives that drive individuals’ involvement in personal brand monetization activity is crucial since based on these motives, individuals can potentially prioritize different facets of the PE fit experience (Chuang et al., 2015; Englert et al., 2020). Research on personal branding and monetization across industries, including athletes, CEOs, marketers, and influencers suggested there are certain common motives for engagement in personal branding (e.g., self-expression), yet that the motives can also be domain-specific (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2013; Geurin, 2017; Jacobson, 2020; Venciute et al., 2023).

For example, research on athletes’ experiences with personal brand monetization via social media suggested that the motives that drive their engagement include self-expression and commercial motives, yet also the desire to interact with their fanbase and prosocial considerations (Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). These actions expand athletes’ brand reach and enact a prosocial impact on consumers (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022). With a focus on the context of CEOs and business leaders, research indicated that individuals may be motivated to build visibility and image of their companies as brand ambassadors (Venciute et al., 2023) or create an online portfolio for
future audiences (Jacobson, 2020). Furthermore, research showed social media influencers may also exhibit multiple motivations, ranging from seeking eudemonic benefits from content creation to leadership in a topical domain and commercial motives (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Overall, these insights from prior literature collectively suggest the importance of accounting for context when assessing motives. Understanding the motives helps gain insight into individual needs that will be integrated into the assessment of fit with an activity that an individual engages in (Edwards et al., 1998). Hence, the first step in understanding athletes’ experience of fit in personal brand monetization on social media is distilling the motivations behind athletes’ engagement in this activity. Relatedly, the first research question aims to understand the motives that athletes have as they engage in an influencer role:

Research Question I: Why do athletes engage in personal brand monetization on social media?

Personal branding activity is inevitably tied to identity management (Johnson, Short, et al., 2022), suggesting that personal brand monetization is a complex psychosocial activity and athlete influencers are likely to assess multiple dimensions of fit as they engage in it. Given the understanding of fit varies across different organizational contexts (Chuang et al., 2015; Englert et al., 2020), whereas the applicability of employee-centric understanding of fit to self-enterprising activities has been questioned (Riedo et al., 2019), it is important to re-examine the notion of fit from the perspective of an athlete influencer.
The ability to achieve fit is predicated upon personal and environmental attributes (Edwards, 1991; Chuang et al., 2015). As athletes engage in personal brand monetization, they are embedded within multiple socioecological layers (Bronfedbrenner, 1977), including close social circles, brand networks and architectures (including sports stakeholders, media, and commercial brands), and communities, all of which exert influences on their personal branding and monetization process. For example, Kunkel and Biscaia (2020) position athletes as sub-brands within their teams and leagues, indicating these stakeholders provide a framework for athletes’ operations as brands. Furthermore, athletes’ ties with their peers and their ability to employ external networks such as event brands can help increase their brand value (Bredikhina, Gupta, & Kunkel, 2022). Yet, while research shows these networks impact the athlete branding process by providing resources and conventions (e.g., Dumont & Ots, 2020), scholars have not assessed how, on the psychological level, influences exerted by these stakeholders are balanced with athletes’ individual level considerations, goal achievement, and desire to stay involved. Although research on social media influencers and professional talents identifies the role of organizations and commercial parties in impacting individuals’ experiences with personal branding, this research does not delve into how these influences and demands are balanced with individuals’ attributes and resources (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2015; Jacobson, 2020). Hence, the second research question focuses on how athletes balance individual-level and environmental characteristics in search of PE fit:

Research Question II: How do athletes balance individual-level and external concerns in search of PE fit in personal brand monetization on social media?
While achieving a sense of fit is a desirable circumstance, in line with extant scholarship (e.g., Follmer et al., 2018), it will not always be achieved. This makes it relevant to examine both the consequences of PE (mis)fit in personal brand monetization activity and how athlete influencers adjust their thoughts and behaviors in this process. Therefore, the third research question is:

Research Question III: How do athletes resolve the consequences of a sense of PE (mis)fit in personal brand monetization on social media?

Method
Research Design

Following the exploratory purpose of the research, I pursued a qualitative design, specifically a constructivist grounded theory approach. Grounded theory entails the discovery of theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 2010), whereas the constructivist approach specifically relies on the premise that knowledge reflects participants’ constructed reality and the researcher’s interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). Employing grounded theory methodology rather than relying on a pre-existing framework allowed for exercising flexibility and fresh perspective during data collection and generating new concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). The interpretive paradigm aligns well with studying individuals’ personal brand monetization experience as it emphasizes the individual-level perception of reality and brings into perspective both the experiential and imaginative aspects of building a brand (Packard, 2017). It also aligns with intending to supply a process view to the understanding of fit experience, while integrating and refining relevant concepts from both empirical data and existing literature (Charmaz, 2006).
Relatedly, grounded theory methodology has been instrumental in helping identify novel forms of fit idiosyncratic to non-traditional work environments (Chuang et al., 2015; Englert et al., 2020).

Following recommendations for achieving rigor in qualitative research, the design featured iterations of data collection in the format of an analytical funnel shifting from more general and abstract questions early in the investigation, to more defined and specific questions and themes later in the process until theoretical saturation was reached (Atkinson, 2007). The waves of data collection were succeeded by cycles of analysis and verification of observed patterns against the literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Although relevant athlete branding, entrepreneurship and PE fit literature was reviewed a-priori to help situate the gap, I tried to approach the data collection setting theoretical assumptions aside to allow for inductive identification of new patterns (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Gioia et al., 2013).

**Context: NCAA Student-Athletes’ NIL Monetization**

As I seek to address the outlined gap, my focus is on NCAA student-athletes’ brand monetization. The introduction of a novel NIL policy in the summer of 2021 has created a circumstance where thousands of student-athletes were afforded the potential to monetize their brand and entered the market at the same time, making it convenient to gauge differences in their experiences. Given the novelty and industry impact of the NIL market (Dosh, 2022b), it is relevant to examine how student-athletes perceive a PE fit in personal brand monetization balancing their individual needs, aspirations, and abilities, as well as the environmental conditions within which they build their brand, including their
positioning within the sport brand architecture, influence of media stakeholders, as well as social norms and trends. While there are distinct contextual traits in NIL monetization such as regulations that govern student-athletes or the demands of student-athlete lifestyle, I believe that the identified logic and fit experience dynamics can be analytically generalizable (i.e., generated concepts will be conceptually applicable; Smith, 2017) to other populations of influencers and athlete influencers to the extent that (micro)celebrities and influencers generally have to operate within organizational and regulatory frameworks and balance personal branding and lifestyle commitments (Scheidt et al., 2020).

NCAA student-athletes provide a well-fitting context for this study. Furthermore, social media has emerged as a dominant space for student-athletes’ personal brand monetization with 61% of NIL deals involving social media activations (Dosh, 2022a). Second, the recency of such experiences makes them easier to recall, allowing for data richness (Heyler et al., 2016). Third, student-athletes are a part of organizations (i.e., athletic departments, universities) that generally have similar structures and functions, yet also observable variations in size, resources, belief system, and market size. This allowed for an understanding of how these variations shape individuals’ experiences with personal branding. Fourth, the feasibility of sampling several student-athletes per institution allows for disentangling the differences in experiences based on individual factors as well as embeddedness in social structures. The managerial importance of disentangling student-athlete experience with personal brand monetization is evident considering that NCAA member institutions’ mission is optimizing student-athlete
experience, whereas athletic departments’ programming is a part of talent recruitment and retention (Smith, 2022).

Participants

Participants for this study were 50 student-athletes enrolled in NCAA member institutions. The sample size was determined based on when the study reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2016). Criteria for selection included being over 18 years of age and being an American citizen or permanent resident since most international student-athletes are not allowed to pursue NIL monetization due to visa regulations (Dosh, 2022b). Participants were recruited in one of four ways: through direct messaging on social media to student-athletes whose accounts were public and set to “business” mode (24), by contacting their coaches and asking to forward invitations to the team (20), through a marketing agency (4), and snowball sampling (2). Different recruitment methods allowed to reach potentially different categories of student-athletes (e.g., those who have business-related objectives on social media as indicated by a social media account set to “business” as well as those who may not be active on social media yet learn about the call for participants from their coach), which allowed for a more robust sampling approach.

I adhered to the principles of theoretical sampling. In this case, I was not looking for a representative sample of college athletes, but rather individuals of diverse identities and experiences who are at different levels of personal brand commercialization (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). For example, as most personal brand commercialization occurs at the Division I level (Hunzinger, 2022) and these institutions offer a greater variety of NIL programming compared to Divisions II and III, this motivated sampling
more participants from Division I as in most cases interactions with participants from smaller Division I and Division II and III institutions offered theoretically comparable insights concerning negotiating the experience of fit in NIL monetization. Thus, I recruited 42 participants from Division I (12 from Power 5 conference institutions), three from Division II, and five from Division III. To gauge the effects of institutional factors, I sampled individuals from fourteen different sports, including both revenue- and non-revenue generating, as well as of both genders (58% women). Participants exhibited a range of engagement in NIL activity and personal brand commercialization, ranging from those who are not interested and never got involved (7), to those considering (13), to individuals with NIL monetization experience (30). Further, for those engaged in the pursuit of NIL monetization, Instagram was the most common platform for personal branding, whereas Instagram followers ranged from 692 to 201,929. This provided an opportunity to gauge the experiences of a diverse pool of student-athletes, including nano-, micro-, and macro-influencers. Details about participants are presented in Table 2.1.

Data Collection

Considering that personal branding is a complex phenomenon that is embedded into the broader societal realm (Gorbatov et al., 2018), it was important to calibrate data collection modes in a way that allowed for both in-depth insights as well as integrating social dynamics. I combined individual interviews and focus groups to generate complementary insights on the issue, achieving in-depth insights as well as a built-in comparative element (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Morgan, 1996). Both interviews and
<table>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,316</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Cross country</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,619</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 31</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>I</td>
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<td>1,122</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SA 32</td>
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<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td>1,560</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Track &amp; field</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Track &amp; field</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>1,664</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA 35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
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<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,125</td>
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</tr>
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<td>SA 36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SA 37</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA 38</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>Track &amp; field</td>
<td>I</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA 42</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>Track &amp; field</td>
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<td>1,089</td>
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<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td>SA 44</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>Lacrosse</td>
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<td>1,145</td>
<td></td>
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<td>SA 45</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2,428</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>I</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 47</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>790</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 49</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>II</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,627</td>
<td>TikTok 15,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA 50</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>142,184</td>
<td>TikTok 128,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** I = interview; P5 = Power Five; F = focus group. Student-athletes 1-11 were interviewed in May-August 2022, whereas student-athletes 12-50 were interviewed in February-May 2023.
focus groups were administered virtually via Zoom software. The data were collected in iterations consistent with recommendations for robust grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Gioia et al., 2013). Three waves of interviews took place first and a wave of focus groups was arranged afterward, to confirm the findings via method triangulation (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

A total of 27 participants took part in individual interviews. Furthermore, 23 individuals partook in one of five focus groups, which ranged in size from three to six people. The focus groups included athletes from different schools and/or sports, which introduced a comparison element in the conversations. While I collectively draw on the interview and focus group data within the discussion of findings, I recognize the unique aspects of each dataset stemming from the mode of data collection. Specifically, by design, the individual interviews offered a more intimate conversation setting, prompting discussion on more personal topics, including personal aspirations, mental health, or vulnerabilities. In contrast, focus groups allowed for generating diverse points of view (Guest et al., 2017) and naturally gravitated toward focusing on social aspects of NIL, such as policy impact, school support, and networking with other athletes. In this way, naturally supplementing each other, this combination of modes of data collection allowed for enhancing data richness (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). The protocols for interviews and focus groups are presented in Appendices A and B.

Analysis

The analytical strategy and the coding process adhered to the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). Iterations of data collection were succeeded by coding and literature
review to allow for flexibility and analytical control in the data generation process (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The interviews/focus groups were recorded and reviewed at the stage of data analysis to increase the reliability of observations (Golafshani, 2003), after which they were transcribed verbatim. I conducted manual qualitative coding using ATLAS.ti software for storing and organizing the codes. I engaged in memo writing throughout the data collection and analysis as a part of abstracting and theorizing process (Charmaz, 2006). Initially, the texts were read multiple times and then coded in-vivo. Through evaluating similarities and differences between the codes, I formed first-order categories. Throughout the analysis, these categories were refined and further grouped into higher-level second-order themes, which were a product of inductive abstractions based on the data and abductive reasoning informed by prior literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Finally, second-order themes were organized through a similar process of comparison and abstracting to form theoretical dimensions. This process was illustrated in a data structure and culminated with a grounded model depicting the experience of fit in student-athletes' personal brand monetization on social media (Gioia et al., 2013).

**Transparency and Trustworthiness**

With transparency, trustworthiness, and reliability being valid concerns in research, I integrate several measures to ensure the rigor of my work. To triangulate participant responses through additional data sources (Golafshani, 2003), I reviewed participants’ publicly available social media, providing insights into athletes’ careers and experiences (Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022), as well as archival materials on NIL resources from the participants’ university websites. In my analysis, I paid particular
attention to the ‘negative’ (or atypical) cases emerging from the data aiming to reach a saturated understanding of what defines a ‘norm’ (Morse, 2015). Further, I engaged in memo writing (Morse, 2015). Finally, I visually documented the codes and themes through a data structure and a process model as well as integrated exemplary quotations to help the reader observe the logic behind the presented findings (Gioia et al., 2013).

Findings

The findings suggested three theoretical dimensions capture the experience of fit for student-athletes monetizing their personal brand on social media: (1) motivations, (2) assessing fit, and (3) consequences of (mis)fit. As a part of the model, I establish six second-order themes, depicting the facets of the fit experience. I integrate exemplary quotations supporting conceptual categories throughout the findings.

Motivations for Personal Brand Monetization

The findings showed that student-athletes formulate a variety of objectives guiding them in the process of personal brand monetization on social media, addressing Research Question I. With personal branding and entrepreneurship being complex psychosocial processes (Geurin, 2017; Ratten, 2015), most participants exhibited a combination of emotional, networking, and financial motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000), where different objectives could be situated at different levels of priority. These motivations point to the needs that the participants sought to fill through the personal brand monetization process.
### Table 2.2

**Data Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Codes</th>
<th>Second-Order Themes</th>
<th>Theoretical Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Monetizing personal brand for the “coolness” of experience</em></td>
<td>Emotional Motivations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fulfilling personal potential</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Extending personal identity beyond sport</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Feeling like an “in-group”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Creating professional networks beyond sport</em></td>
<td>Networking Motivations</td>
<td>Motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Feeling like a leader within a community</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Connecting over things one is passionate about</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deepening social connections</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Social media monetization allows for additional income</em></td>
<td>Financial Motivations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Co-promotions with brands raise the personal brand value</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Securing in-kind benefits</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Restoring fairness within the NCAA business model</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Being okay with publicity and “putting your life out there.”</em></td>
<td>Influencer Identity Fit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Feeling like the role fits one’s personality</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Perceiving social media as a part of life</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Handling the stresses associated with publicity</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Having space for social media in one’s schedule</em></td>
<td>Lifestyle Compatibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Personal branding is aligned with career aspirations</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Potential to integrate NIL activity with academic assignments</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Having relevant knowledge</em></td>
<td>Sufficient Expertise and Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Being “social media savvy”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Family can offer the necessary expertise</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Athletic department and peers can share helpful knowledge</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Perceiving demand for the personal brand within the market</em></td>
<td>Market Niche Fit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Being able to identify a niche where one could “fit in”</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Available sponsorship formats and options feel meaningful</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brand stands for what I stand for</em></td>
<td>Value Congruence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My interests align with the brand’s interests</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Collaboration allows me to express what I stand for</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Filtering out sponsorships based on alignment with personal values</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Having a shared vision for partnership with the sponsor brand</em></td>
<td>Appropriate Terms and Compensation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Compensation is sufficient relative to requirements</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sponsor treats their endorsers fairly</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sponsor is an advocate for student-athletes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Re-evaluating goals for influencer activities</em></td>
<td>Dispositional Adjustments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Revising expectations for outcomes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Distancing self from outcomes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Changing focal niche</em></td>
<td>Strategic Adjustments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Re-prioritizing NIL activity within the lifestyle</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Adjusting self-positioning in the market</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transferring between schools</em></td>
<td>Environmental Adjustments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hiring sponsors</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hiring professional help</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Broadening peer networks</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sense of frustration from misfit</em></td>
<td>Entrepreneurial Exit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Achieving fit does not seem possible</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>NIL monetization is no more a means to achieve goals</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</table>
**Emotional Motives.** Emotional objectives transpire when personal brand monetization is carried out in search of positive emotional experiences. Explanations of what motivated participants to monetize their personal brand included seeking a platform for self-actualization and enjoying the “coolness” of the NIL experience. On one hand, participants positioned NIL monetization as a creative and entrepreneurial outlet allowing them to be themselves and expose new, alternative versions of self beyond sport. For example, a gymnast discussed how even before NIL, she had envisioned herself in a role of an entrepreneur, whereas NIL has provided a platform to fulfill that dream:

> Before NIL even came about, I had always had this itch to be an entrepreneur. I always thought it was unfair that student-athletes would ruin their eligibility if they made money online like anybody else. I ran a food blog in the past and just always thought that I could see myself being an influencer doing something like that just for fun on the side. (Student-athlete #18, W, DI)

In this quote, she explicitly positions satisfying her entrepreneurial “itch” as one of the objectives of her NIL activity. On the other hand, participants also discussed how building a monetizable personal brand allowed them to overcome the feelings of being in the box of the student-athlete identity, commonly assigned to student-athletes on university campuses.

Furthermore, several participants discussed the “coolness” factor associated with the NIL experience. For some, the “coolness” of experience was being among the first student-athletes to monetize their brand in the historic moment when the NCAA model is changing. Thus, a football player discussed being driven to “experience the fullness of what is going on” (Student-athlete #20, M, DI). Multiple participants linked the “coolness” with being associated with a high-profile brand or becoming an in-group with
high-profile athletes endorsed by the same brand, which gave a sense of pride and exclusivity: “Through Barstool, I was able to get posted and be among these high-profile athletes. I believe Gabe Stevenson is an Olympic gold medalist and is a member of Barstool Athletics” (Student-athlete #6, M, DI). Similarly, a golfer observed: “The money and the stuff were nice. But the way other people looked [at me], the way friends talked to me, I think that was really cool” (Student-athlete #2, W, DI), highlighting how, while monetary value is important, she engaged in NIL monetization ultimately because of how that made her feel.

**Networking Motives.** Participants identified networking objectives as a stimulus for engaging in NIL monetization on social media, identifying a variety of means by which building a commercial brand can deepen social connections. While prior research has highlighted how athletes engage in personal branding to connect with others and promote themselves (Geurin, 2017), the current findings suggest that for student-athletes, the development of the personal brand and NIL is also a chance to create professional networks beyond sport. Thus, several participants described NIL monetization as an opportunity for professional networking with companies and individuals. For example, a volleyball player stated: “You can meet so many people and network with so many companies. I think that it is really setting me up great for success after I graduate” (Student-athlete #16, W, DI), showing how she intentionally built her NIL network as an asset for the future.

Additionally, participants positioned NIL as the opportunity to emerge as a leader within the online community and a NIL expert. For example, a rower described the
enjoyment that she received from connecting with others over brands that she genuinely supported: “Being able to share my life with my followers and build those relationships while still [promoting] the products I like and use. Getting to have those conversations with my followers is great” (Student-athlete #17, W, DI). This quote shows how personal brand monetization can be stimulated by wanting to connect with others over something that the individual is passionate about.

Financial Motives. The foundational component of NIL legislation is allowing student-athletes to benefit financially from their athletic identity (Kunkel et al., 2021). Relatedly, financial considerations were a key factor in stimulating the search for opportunities to monetize NIL on social media. Participants discussed how NIL deals allowed them to generate extra income through direct compensation as well as in-kind benefits. Notably, in certain cases, participants’ financial motives were linked to psychological needs as they sought to restore a sense of fairness concerning the current college sports pay model: “When people pay to come to the game, they're paying to see the players, but we never get that money. If I can get some money, like a return on investment, this will be a great way to go” (Student-athlete #24, M, DII). This uncovers how the pursuit of NIL monetization, although targeting financial benefits, may originate from a desire to overcome a sense of unfair treatment within the NCAA business model.

Participants discussed how NIL became a pathway to additional income, which particularly for student-athletes with a macro-influencer status, reached tens of thousands of dollars annually. Furthermore, NIL monetization could give access to costly products or services in exchange for promotions such as restaurant dining, nutrition supplements,
or massages. Even when sponsorship did not generate immediate sizable financial or in-kind value, participants expressed it could create a business benefit serving as a steppingstone toward greater earnings in the future.

**Assessing Fit**

The desire to fulfill a set of personal needs through NIL monetization activity, captured in the prior theoretical dimension, introduces the relevancy of assessing external demands of the activity as well as relevant personal attributes and assets to evaluate whether achievement of fit is feasible (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Considering that fit essentially represents an interaction between how an individual perceives self and the environment, I follow prior research on PE fit in grouping the discussion on attributes and demands under the umbrella of fit experience themes as their critical constituents (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Englert et al., 2020), addressing Research Question II. I identified six themes that depict the dimensions of the experience at three different levels: role fit, market fit, and brand-level fit. Specifically, participants discussed how they assessed their fit with the role of an influencer with attention to influencer identity fit and lifestyle compatibility. Furthermore, participants believed they could successfully perform in the NIL market when they achieved sufficient expertise and resources and established a niche fit. Finally, the fit was also assessed when evaluating a match with a specific company that they considered working with, taking the forms of value congruence and perceptions of appropriate terms and compensation. These facets along with attributes, supports, and requirements, that are assessed as a part of establishing fit are discussed in the following sections.
Role Fit.

Influencer Identity Fit. Participants’ responses suggested that the initial stage of assessing the experience of fit is reflecting on how personal identity aligns with the influencer profession. In this process, student-athletes operate with their knowledge of self, their attitudes toward social media, as well as perceived views of self by others, juxtaposing these ideas with their knowledge about the requirements of the influencer role. For example, participants laid out the need to have a “personality”-level fit: on multiple occasions, it was stated that “it takes a special kind of person” to effectively monetize NIL on social media. For instance, a softball player observed: “[It takes] being a specific type of athlete who is okay with putting their life out there and being able to glorify their situation and their lives for a fanbase” (Student-athlete #21, W, DI). The quote explicitly positions fit as a personality-level match, emphasizing the willingness and ability to integrate orchestrated (“glorifying”) aspects of self-presentation.

Furthermore, fit also refers to welcoming social media as a part of constructing the social self. Relatedly, alignment with an influencer role includes being willing to face and mitigate risks and stresses that come with such exposure. Thus, a basketball player highlighted:

It depends on the type of person you are and how comfortable you are with stepping out of your comfort zone. If you care too much about posting some random business on your Instagram because you think it is going to hurt your following or persona, then you will not do it. It revolves around your personality and what you want to do with your platform. (Student-athlete #12, M, DI)

This comment further positions specific character traits such as openness or ability to distance self from the judgement of others as prerequisites for experiencing fit with the
role. This can also be tied to the needs that push individuals to pursue personal brand monetization on social media: specifically, the fit occurs in the instances when an individual embraces social media and the publicity that comes with it.

In contrast, a sense of a misfit is captured through feeling an incompatibility between who one is and the influencer role. In an alternative example, a soccer player indicated he chose to not get involved in NIL monetization on social media simply because publicity and high activity on social media just did not fit with who he was: “I guess partly it is personality-based. I am not the most active on social media and to post would be almost like a life change. It is not an avenue that I am naturally active in” (Student-athlete #8, M, DI). Thus, a quote exemplifies a perceived lack of a “natural” fit between the athlete’s personality and role characteristics.

**Lifestyle Compatibility.** Successfully engaging in an influencer role requires embracing new responsibilities in addition to an already busy student-athlete life filled with conflicting demands (Caulfield et al., 2022). Yet, social media entrepreneurship presumes an ‘always-on’ mentality where flexibility comes with precarious immaterial labor blending work and leisure (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Relatedly, participants discussed experiencing fit as an ability to sustainably balance the requirements associated with engagement in social media and other lifestyle needs related to their academic, athletic, and personal commitments.

An alignment of personal aspirations and circumstances with some aspects of the influencer activity such as viewing content creation as a hobby or integrating NIL pursuit with academic and professional development allowed for a smoother integration of the
NIL activity with the lifestyle. For example, a gymnast discussed how she built her master’s capstone project around digital NIL monetization, which allowed for using the time allotted to academics to advance her self-enterprise: “My capstone project was on NIL, which turned into a business that I have launched now. It has been a long time coming, something I worked on for my whole master's degree. It ties into my motivations toward NIL” (Student-athlete #18, F, DI). Alternatively, another participant, who was a lacrosse player from an academically reputable liberal arts college, discussed how because NIL activity was unrelated to his other commitments, it was hard to integrate it:

   It would not be feasible to put that into my schedule packed with sports practices and school commitments. I do not have the time and would have to give something up or do something to the best of my ability […] I am interested in the medical field, and I do not see how that route is involved with NIL sponsorship.” (Student-athlete #9, M, DIII)

Overall, this suggests that the addition of NIL monetization is most fitting for lifestyle when it aligns with other already-present activities that are meaningful on a personal level, whether it be hobbies, education, or other lifestyle domains.

**Market Fit.**

**Sufficient Expertise and Resources.** While the current NIL market remains novel and uncertain, succeeding as a student-athlete influencer requires a certain level of expertise, including legal, marketing, and content-creation aspects. To balance this need for expertise, student-athletes evaluate relevant personal skills and knowledge as well as their ability to rely on their networks to obtain that knowledge. For example, a basketball player linked “being social media savvy” and “knowing his way around social media” to why he felt prepared when NIL rules came into existence (Student-athlete #23, M, DIII).
Furthermore, the current theme once again raises the importance of an alignment of NIL with a student-athlete’s field of study for achieving a sense of fit as participants who were business or communication majors typically perceived they were a fit for the role because of the knowledge they gained in class, for example: “I am really glad I did advertising [as a major] because I have been able to use all of the practical knowledge, from how to build a social media presence to creating ads for businesses with NIL deals” (Student-athlete #18, F, DI).

Brand and social networks with other stakeholders such as family members, the athletic department, and peers emerged as another pathway for reconciling environmental demands. Several participants identified their families as a source of expert support. For example, a volleyball player conveyed she consulted her mother on how to brand herself: “She [my mother] is a real estate agent, so she is used to marketing houses. As humble as I am, I do not market myself as well as she does” (Student-athlete #3, W, DI). This resonated with the experience of yet another volleyball player who described her mom as a personal “agent” who helped her coordinate activities within a competitive marketplace, which demonstrates how student-athletes draw on personal networks to respond to the demands of the NIL marketplace. Furthermore, a sense of fit was associated with the ability to acquire expertise through educational programming on NIL offered by the athletic department. Participants found valuable educational sessions on NIL as well as the ability to get introduced to the online NIL marketplaces such as Opendorse, INFCR, MOGL, Postgame and others. Yet, on a practical note, participants recognized the limitations of many of such programs, which often tended to focus on regulatory
frameworks rather than branding-related questions, leaving a gap in student-athletes’ brand training. Furthermore, perceptions of inequities emerged concerning the distribution of NIL-related resources across institutions and sports, raising issues of status and gender. For example, a softball player captured the challenges associated with the current format of education:

I do think that they just need to offer better classes and bring in businesspeople that can talk to the athletes about how to get these partnerships or who to partner with. I think that was the problem: I didn't know which companies were good to partner with or who would be willing to partner with someone like me. If they focused on giving more business-savvy classes on how to build a brand and things like that, that would have been way more helpful than telling us what we can and cannot do. (Student-athlete #21, W, DI)

Albeit being a critique, this quote further reinforces the role of universities as gatekeepers in access to education within the NIL market and indicates athletes’ reliance on organizational resources. Finally, a sense of fit was also associated with access to a supportive peer network providing the benefits of information exchange and feedback. This was particularly important given the lack of emphasis on practical expertise from the universities in their educational programming, yet usually concentrated at institutions with an already more developed NIL infrastructure.

**Market Niche Fit.** Participants discussed status-related demands associated with being an endorser for a sponsor brand. As sponsors seek to extend their brand reach and strengthen their brand image, such requirements favor those student-athletes who present a higher brand value in the eyes of a sponsor (e.g., top division, prominent athletic performance, large following). As sponsorship arrangements for NCAA student-athletes vary from lucrative contracts with established brands to in-kind sponsorships with
emerging companies, this makes it relevant to assess a perceived sense of fit with the sponsorship niche available to a student-athlete. This also raises the question of how student-athletes perceive a demand for their services and choose a niche where they ‘fit in.’

For example, it was common to hear from participants coming from non-revenue-generating sports that they perceived their niche-level status compared to their counterparts in revenue-generating sports. Thus, a swimmer remarked: “I have heard some people from basketball and football get NIL deals already with their freshman contract. With swimming, it is not like that. We are not a very marketable sport” (Student-athlete #49, M, DII). This perception extends to student-athletes in Division II and III institutions, shaping how they approach the sponsorship search process. For example, a Division III basketball player discussed his logic when deciding on where he fits in within the sponsorship market and how that understanding evolved:

My first experience with NIL started in the summer of 2022. I was new to it. I thought it was just for the big DI athletes. But I started to realize that it would not hurt to try. I had nothing to lose. I reached out to some small local companies. Smaller companies still need advertisement, and a lot of the big-name guys might not look at smaller companies. I felt that was my opportunity to get a deal out. (Student-athlete #24, M, DII)

This quote captures several stages of evaluating personal fit with the market, transitioning from believing it is “just for the big DI athletes” to deciding to try and then establishing a personal fit with a specific niche: “smaller companies.” Further, the quote uncovers that although the participant realizes he may not be a candidate for sponsorships with big-name brands, he finds it beneficial to engage with smaller companies.
At the same time, identifying a fit with a niche is more than just finding demand in the market as these student-athletes are also concerned with whether the format of sponsorships that they are fit for is meaningful on a personal level, which is especially relevant for athletes with emerging brands. In this way, establishing a fit with a niche is not necessarily about value congruence, which would be more relevant to assess at the brand level, but rather about an individual perceiving that engagement with a niche that is accessible to them provides them with a value on a personal level and is not just a result of striving for image making. For instance, a Division III lacrosse player uncovered the importance of fit with the sponsorship tier niche by discussing how in his case, he observed a mismatch between his aspirations to work with well-known brands and available opportunities:

I would be interested in pursuing sponsorship, but the companies that I like do not do it, and the companies that are within reach are not the companies I am particularly interested in. There is a mismatch between the companies that are doing it and the companies that I would be interested in. I do not know how much effort I would have to put in to go and secure [sponsorship]. The uncertainty led me to not really pursue it vigorously. (Student-athlete #7, M, DIII)

Importantly, in this case, the participant does not allude to compensation or the brand identity of the companies available to him, but rather an overall perception that he is too niche as a brand to contend for collaborations with brands that he admires. This excerpt uncovers a sense of a misfit between personal aspirations and available options that eventually derailed the participant from continuing to engage in NIL monetization as he elaborated that securing sponsorship only for the sake of being a “sponsored athlete” did not feel “authentic.”
Brand-Level Fit.

Value Congruence. When social media sponsorship is secured, student-athletes find it critical to have their tastes, preferences, and vision for partnership shared by the brands that they collaborate with. I label this form of fit as brand-level value congruence. Importantly, searching for this form of fit resonates with motivations for engagement in personal branding on social media such as the ability to express personal identity and values as well as connect with others over things one is passionate about. For example, discussing how he chose his sponsors, a basketball player situated a sense of values-based fit with a brand as central to deciding on whether to collaborate:

The biggest thing I think about is my values, how it [sponsorship] is going to represent me, and how I can represent the company at the same time. If it is not a fit, it is not a fit, and unfortunately, it's not going to work out. If it is a good representation of what I care about and what they care about, I am all for it. (Student-athlete #12, M, DI)

In a similar vein, a tennis player who was an advocate for mental health described what she is looking for in her collaborations with brands: “I am focused on mental health and the ‘people first’ [approach]. Those are the type of companies I work with and respect” (Student-athlete #25, W, DI). Supplementary in nature, this dimension of fit resonates with the notion of person-organization fit in traditional work settings (cf. Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006), where individuals are mindful of value-based congruence with the organizations. One of the participants captured this idea in her interview:

If you are applying for an actual job, you do not want to go for a job that is just for money. You want something that will interest you. On the [marketplace] platform you can filter opportunities by your interests. One of my interests is traveling, and I am into mental health. If I go through my opportunities, I will see which ones match my interest. (Student-athlete #14, W, DI)
The quote explicitly positions the intention to filter out potential sponsorships based on interest-based congruence.

*Appropriate Terms and Compensation.* As student-athletes engage in NIL monetization, the activities require fulfillment of specific responsibilities to carry out a promotional function. Whereas the requirements vary based on sponsorship, common expectations include maintaining an active presence on social networks and the creation of pieces of content featuring the product. Participants described experiencing a sense of fit when both parties have an aligned vision relative to the terms of the partnership, which necessarily includes the understanding of the value provided. For example, being a macro-influencer with over 200,000 followers on Instagram, a rower observed: “Many companies do not realize how much they need to pay. A lot of them underestimate how much a social media influencer is worth” (Student-athlete #17, W, DI), which results in a feeling of mismatch of vision or being taken advantage of. Further, in addition to compensation, participants mentioned the importance of considering the terms, suggesting unfair terms can also lead to feelings of being taken advantage of. For instance, a football player stated: “We are representing ourselves, so you have to pay attention to the deals you are signing. There are eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds old that got taken advantage of and signed their NIL away” (Student-athlete #27, M, DI).

Importantly, getting offers that do not match student-athlete influencers’ vision or expectations is not just about the financial aspect: it gives a sense that they and their time are not valued by the company. For instance, a volleyball player observed: “Finding
brands that value you and your time. As student-athletes, we do not have a lot of time. The lowest paying NIL deals, they do not want to advocate for student-athletes” (Student-athlete #16, W, DI). The quote uncovers how in the eyes of a student-athlete, a brand’s compensation rates signal its commitment and value system. Thus, when a rate is perceived as unfair, that causes a sense of a misfit within the company.

**Consequences of (Mis)Fit Experience**

As repeatedly indicated in participants’ quotes, creating a personal brand monetization strategy is a cyclical process where individuals seek an effective way to position their brand. Relatedly, evaluations of fit are iterative as individuals continuously re-evaluate their expectations, “test” the market, and seek further adjustments to expectations, resources, or strategies to optimize their fit experience. While experiencing fit is an ideal scenario, findings suggest it is not always achieved. A mismatch between desired and actual experiences entices individuals to adjust their expectations or strategies to achieve fit in the future. I identify three strategies that individuals employ to resolve a misfit: *dispositional adjustments, tactical adjustments*, and *environmental adjustments*. Furthermore, I discuss circumstances when individuals choose to exit the market. Collectively, these themes address *Research Question III*.

**Dispositional Adjustments.** The experience of engaging in personal brand monetization activity informs what can be achieved and what needs are feasible to satisfy. Based on this information, student-athletes can adjust their motivations to achieve a sense of fit in the future. The overall expectations can be heightened or lowered. For example, dispositional adjustments can imply athletes learn how competitive the NIL market is and
change a perspective on their progress. For example, a cross-country runner discussed how her experience in the market made her revisit her expectations:

There were companies that I wanted a lot, and I think if I had reached out earlier, I would have got them. By the time I was looking seriously, they already had so many athletes they are working with like: "Hey, we love this, but we already have 100 people." It was not me, it was my timing. I took a little too long to start getting serious about it. I accept that I waited too long. I already have a couple [of deals], so that's fine. (Student-athlete #15, W, DI)

In this case, a participant unveils how upon realizing how competitive the NIL market is, she learns to distance herself from the factors that she cannot control (e.g., competitive marketplace) and accepts smaller successes, which allows her to re-establish a sense of balance.

Furthermore, dispositional adjustments are about revising the meaning of sponsorship on a personal level. For instance, a softball player discussed how the inability to secure a sponsorship has pushed her to change her mindset and not define her personal success and value based on that: “It gave me the opportunity to realize my worth beyond just how much money I am making or how many different companies are sponsoring me” (Student-athlete #21, W, DI). This quote illustrates a change in needs that the participant believes can be satisfied through her personal brand monetization on social media (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Tactical Adjustments.** Adjustments can be tactical by changing the patterns in how a student-athlete pulls upon available resources to satisfy market demands, whether it is changing the niche that they seek to address, how they position their brand, or how they integrate NIL activities in their daily life. For example, a cross-country runner
discussed how learning more about the NIL market as well as his personal needs made him revise the niche that he was targeting:

First, I started out with [reaching out to] a lot of running companies and then I moved over to clothes. I already have free running gear. I do not really need it as much. I catered towards what I wanted more cause at that point I had enough running gear. (Student-athlete #6, M, DI)

The quote demonstrates how as he re-prioritizes his needs, he also revises his sponsor search strategy to fit those needs. Further, addressing how experience and expertise allow one to revise self-presentation strategies, a volleyball player discussed how she updated her self-presentation over time: “I think it's a lot of trial and error. I've put out a lot of content, and sometimes I realize my followers did not really like that as much as they like my volleyball content” (Student-athlete #16, W, DI). Yet another respondent discussed how she has changed up the pace of her involvement in NIL activities to better fit with her lifestyle, including integrating a break from social media:

I had to post so much, I was like, "I cannot keep doing this. It was getting a little overwhelming for me. I had to take a break from posting. Such a good break, but little by little, I am doing more. It [NIL] completely changed how I had been as an athlete. (Student-athlete #14, W, DI)

This resonates with the responses of other participants who observed that their involvement with NIL was not the same throughout the year, but rather fluctuated based on their academic and athletic workload. Overall, these examples demonstrate how the way that student-athletes engage available resources to achieve personal objectives from NIL monetization is adjusted over time to fit their lifestyle.

**Environmental Adjustments.** Given that stakeholder support is essential for student-athletes in acquiring sufficient expertise and resources for personal brand
monetization, when an individual believes that they could be more competitive with access to better resources, they may seek adjustments to their environment. For instance, several athletes identified the trend of athletes transferring to a different institution in search of a better NIL platform. While none of the participants personally switched schools because of NIL-related considerations, several reflected on the stories of their peers, for example: “I had a friend who was in Miami and transferred to a different school. He was trying to figure out, where he can make the most money from his final year of college” (Student-athlete #1, M, DI). In a similar vein, another participant discussed: “Kids are not necessarily going to the best-fit school for them, whether it is academics or basketball, they are going to the best-fit school that will get them paid the most” (Student-athlete #12, M, DI), positioning the trend of transfers as potentially problematic.

Another example of adjustments to resources is employing professional media help or agents when an individual believes that this help can fulfill the personal brand potential. For example, a gymnast reflected on how bringing an agent on board allowed her to strengthen her personal brand:

I saw my platform grow, and I upgraded the quality of content. I started hiring videographers and just getting better at making videos and things for NIL deals. As I became a better content creator, I started getting paid way more. My first couple of NIL deals were $100 each. Now, I started getting paid $2,500 per single video. I started realizing it is a lot of work to be facilitating all these deals, reaching out, and emailing. It was time to look for an agent, and I did. I found a great agent. He has helped read contracts. It is also nice to be like, "I'm cc'ing my agent on this deal," and it just makes you feel more legit. I think just having an agent is a little bit of magic, brands are willing to pay you more. (Student-athlete #18, W, DI)
The quote captures a cyclical process where higher compensation makes the participant re-think her expectations and personal branding approach, adjusting her environment by bringing in additional resources and an agent, which subsequently gives her a new competitive edge.

**Exit from the NIL Market.** At times, however, reformulating expectations meant realizing exit from the NIL market may be more worthwhile than continuing to pursue NIL monetization. For example, a few participants who tried engaging in monetizing their NIL on social media shared a sense of frustration, realizing the extent of a misfit between the requirements imposed by the environment and the lack of personal resources or support that they could lean on. This pattern is exemplified by a quote from a softball player who conveyed how despite being initially interested in the opportunity, her hopes were soon shuttered by feeling there is not place in the market for a student-athlete of her profile:

> It was frustrating and did not seem fair. I was so excited. I was like, "I am going to build my brand. I am going to partner with people." I had all these big dreams and goals. Just in the first six months, everything was shut down because there was no market for me to build a brand. I was derailed from doing anything that had to do with NIL because I felt the companies did not care. (Student-athlete #21, W, DI)

In this quote, she highlights how being unable to experience a fit with the market has changed her intention to get involved.

**Model of PE Fit Experience in NIL Monetization**

Bringing the second-order themes and theoretical dimensions together, I propose a model capturing how student-athletes approach and perceive the experience of fit in
personal brand monetization on social media via influencer activity. Thus, Figure 2.1 represents a visualization of the grounded model (Gioia et al., 2013) culminating in the discussion of the findings. In line with prior research on fit experience, I present the model as a process with input, throughput, and output stages (Chuang et al., 2015), where inputs are individual motivations driving engagement in NIL, throughputs are the balancing acts between individual-level and external considerations in seeking to fulfill motivations, and outputs are tactical adjustments made based on the fit experience.

**Figure 2.1**

*Model of Experience of Fit in NCAA Student-Athletes’ NIL Monetization on Social Media*

On the left side of the model, in the arrow-shaped figures are motivations underlining engagement in the influencer activity, including seeking to fulfill emotional, social, and financial needs. For different individuals, some motives can be more pronounced than others. For example, for a student-athlete seeking fulfillment of emotional needs through an influencer activity, achieving influencer identity fit or value-based congruence with the sponsor brand in personal brand monetization may be more
important, whereas the salience of other types of fit (e.g., based on resources contributed by their institution or compensation) may be less pronounced. Thus, recognizing these motivations is instrumental in disentangling the experience of fit since it is contingent on the fulfillment of these needs (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2000). The ellipsis signifies the experience of fit representing a balance of personal attributes or resources and external requirements fulfilling individual needs, and includes six different facets, which collectively cover identity-related, market, and specific partnership-related aspects of fit (cf. Chuang et al., 2015).

The model culminates by stipulating the consequences of a PE (mis)fit experience. Specifically, the process is assumed to be cyclical in that when individuals achieve satisfactory levels of fit, this is likely to fuel further motivations to continue with personal brand monetization through social media, as signified by the arrow linking the outcomes of the fit experience back to motivations. On the other hand, when the fit is not achieved but appears feasible in the future, this may stimulate attitudinal adjustments (signified by a line at the bottom of the figure pointing back to motivations) as well as strategic and environmental adjustments (signified by a line pointing back to the ellipsis of the experience of fit). Dispositional adjustments imply changes on the emotional level without updating behavioral patterns to achieve fit. Alternatively, environmental and tactical adjustments imply adjustments to resources or how an athlete pulls upon these resources, changing their strategy for achieving fit. Furthermore, when fit does not seem achievable or efforts to re-establish fit did not lead to desirable outcomes, this may provoke entrepreneurial exit, which is signified by the line on the right side of the figure.
Theoretical Contributions

Through reconstructing the experience of fit in personal brand monetization on social media, the study advances the theoretical understanding of the process of strategic athlete brand management (e.g., Bredikhina, Sveinson, & Kunkel, 2022; Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020) and research on PE fit in self-enterprising activities (e.g., Riedo et al., 2019). Specifically, the research contributes in four ways. First, by considering motivations for personal brand monetization as a part of the model of fit, it re-visits what stimulates the commercial personal branding activity (cf. Geurin, 2017), offering new insights pertinent to the NIL context. This perspective is particularly relevant given the grounded model shows there are multiple dimensions to fit experience in personal brand monetization, yet motivations are likely to determine which fit dimensions are most salient for a given individual. Relatedly, in addition to the previously identified interactive, sponsorship, and self-promotion-related objectives in athletes’ social media branding (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020), I show student-athletes engage on social media because of experiential, status-related, professional, and emotional considerations, which further informs the types of fit that are sought out. Overall, identifying these motivations helps further situate commercial personal branding as a part of an athlete’s identity construction process that is driven by a specific set of needs.

Second, the study identifies what dimensions fit are relevant when considering personal brand monetization on social media, deepening the understanding of how/why individuals decide to engage in the personal brand monetization process and what individual or external factors shape that experience (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Scheidt et al.,
In this way, it extends prior research that recognized personal brand monetization as a part of a modern athlete’s profession (e.g., Ratten, 2015), yet sparsely addressed the entrepreneurial aspects of building a brand on the empirical level. The study uncovers which facets of the fit experience are idiosyncratic to the context of athlete brand monetization and which facets resonate with those identified in prior research on workers and volunteers (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Englert et al., 2020; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Specifically, facets related to identity fit, lifestyle fit, and value-based congruence with an organization appear to be comparable with the understanding of fit in other work environments (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006), although the current research provides valuable insights into nuances related to the personal branding context. For example, it identifies personality-level characteristics as the driving set of considerations in establishing fit, uncovering the role of identity in fit experience with entrepreneurship on social media. Furthermore, it also positions the ability to embrace social media as a part of identity construction and an integral part of an influencer experience. An alignment of an athlete influencer activity with other aspects of an individual’s life such as hobbies or professional development is established as a pathway to achieving lifestyle fit, elaborating on how influencers manage the precarious always-on labor of social media entrepreneurship (cf. Duffy & Hund, 2015).

At the same time, this work introduces a novel perspective on niche fit, which is not pronounced in prior research, given the unique format of influencer activity as a self- enterprise. Specifically, given the freelance nature of influencer activities as well as status-related requirements of the profession, it positions a student-athlete influencer as
an entrepreneur “selling” their brand value to partner brands. Yet, an integral part of this process is achieving a balance between what an athlete has to offer and finding a sponsorship tier that would offer a demand for their services yet simultaneously be perceived as meaningful and authentic on a personal level. Although identified in the student-athlete branding context, such a finding is likely generalizable to other influencers and (micro)celebrities who decide to engage in personal branding on social media (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Additionally, this finding is likely generalizable to other self-enterprising contexts (e.g., Riedo et al., 2019), defining fit experience in entrepreneurship as a balance between the value that one believes one can provide and the overall demand that one can achieve.

Additionally, while prior research has identified organizational support concerns as a part of the evaluation of fit experience (e.g., Englert et al., 2020), the findings reveal an intricate dynamic peculiar to the process of personal brand monetization. Specifically, while student-athletes are hired by external sponsor brands for endorsements, they rely on their immediate organizational environments such as athletic departments for education and support services. This creates an intricate relational triangle where it is not just the “employer” (i.e., partner sponsor brand) but also the parent brand (i.e., athletic department) that they may part with in case they feel unsupported in their NIL monetization pursuit. This is demonstrated in the theme of discussing environmental adjustments in the cases of misfit experiences. While a theoretical understanding of decision-making in this context warrants future research, the findings extend prior research addressing the impact of sports organizations as external stakeholders on athlete
brand monetization experiences (e.g., Dumont & Ots, 2020; Geurin, 2017) by providing a perspective on the joint influences of sponsors and parent organizations on perceptions of fit. This finding could be generalizable to other categories of professional talents (e.g., tech geeks, fitness influencers) who are trying to build a monetizable personal brand while still being a part of an organization and seeking to leverage organizational brand networks for personal branding benefits. In contrast, while the group-level fit has been identified as an important facet of fit in traditional work environments (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006), this dimension of fit was not as pronounced in the grounded model of fit experience in personal brand monetization derived in this study, which aligns with its self-enterprising nature as well as parasocial style of interaction on social media (Doyle et al., 2022).

Third, the study deepens the understanding of hierarchies and inequities present within the student-athlete branding market (Kunkel et al., 2021) concerning access to brand networks and resources. This is important, given inequities in the athlete branding context are often discussed with regard to social stereotypes (e.g., Mogaji et al., 2020) or compensation (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2021), yet not how resources are allocated to support personal brand monetization activity. Specifically, the reliance on other stakeholders for support in the personal branding process suggests that while monetizing a personal brand may be a lucrative opportunity, it may not be accessible to all student-athletes. Student-athletes in institutions with greater resources and networks, particularly those in revenue-generating sports, as well as those whose family members can contribute their time,
networks, and relevant expertise, are in a more advantageous position, which raises the issues of gender, class, race, and other inequities.

Finally, the work advances prior literature on individuals’ adaptations to person-environment misfit (Follmer et al., 2018) by outlining the strategies that student-athletes engage in when unable to reach a sense of fit. Specifically, it uncovers attitudinal, resource-based, and strategic adjustments to mitigate exit from the market, supplementing prior research that focused on athlete branding strategies from an external, consumer-based point of view (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2020). Perspective on how student-athletes seek to adjust themselves or their environment in response to perceptions of dissatisfactory levels of fit uncover both the psychology of the personal branding process and reliance on the athletic department framework.

**Practical Implications**

Practically, the study contributes useful insights to student-athletes and the stakeholders working with them on the best ways to support these individuals’ personal brand monetization endeavors. First, for student-athletes, it breaks down the factors that influence one’s ability to “fit in” with the influencer role requirements, allowing them to assess whether personal brand monetization on social media is for them as well as what areas to address to improve a sense of fit. Further, it positions striving toward fit as a cyclical process. Thus, student-athletes who are interested in pursuing NIL monetization need to realize that achieving fit may not be an immediate occurrence but rather a process unfolding over time, as indicated by the cyclical nature of the model as well as the
themes signifying adjustments to resolve a sense of misfit. Thus, the findings can help inform student-athletes’ expectations regarding this activity.

Second, the NCAA and athletic departments’ mission is to facilitate an optimal developmental experience for student-athletes, including academics, athletics, and professional development (NCAA, n.d.), which raises the importance of these insights for athletic departments. Similarly, the usage of NIL-related resources to achieve a competitive edge in recruitment has become increasingly integrated into the college landscape (Dosh, 2022a). Thus, for staff at the university athletic departments, the study turns attention to their integral role in preparing and training student-athletes to engage in personal brand monetization as these stakeholders are perceived as a primary provider of expertise and resources. Importantly, in their responses, participants identified some shortcomings of existing NIL programming. Specifically, participants, including those from bigger Division I institutions, commonly perceived that the emphasis is placed on legal aspects of NIL, and programs tend to overlook strategic, self-presentation, and content-related aspects of building a brand. Relatedly, programs are advised to integrate more opportunities to learn about the marketing aspects of NIL. While doing so, programs should integrate sessions allowing for peer networking and exchange. Peer networks emerged as another integral source of expertise and information helping respond to the requirements of the influencer role. Yet, from participant responses, it was evident that programs currently do not integrate peer learning sessions, offering the potential to integrate such approaches in the future.
Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this work represent opportunities for future research. The first limitation is associated with the nature of recruitment and data collection strategy. While the current work focused on gauging the process of establishing fit by asking participants to evaluate their current and past experiences, it does not capture how perceptions of fit change over time. Yet, prior research suggests people can revise their memories of fit to achieve consistency on a cognitive level (Vleugels et al., 2023). Hence, future research should focus on temporal dimensions of fit in personal brand monetization activity. Studies could employ smaller samples of participants yet conduct studies with higher levels of participant involvement such as tracking how perceptions of fit with the personal branding activity change over the years from the point when an individual first begins to engage in this process. Further, the insights derived may be impacted by selection bias as student-athletes self-selected to participate in interviews and focus groups. Future research could explore other ways to gauge student-athletes’ experiences such as collaborating with the athletic departments to conduct ethnography and observation to verify these insights.

Second, while seeking to uncover the overall dimensions of fit in personal brand monetization on social media, the work did not consider in detail how, that is with attention to what environmental cues, individuals learn about (mis)fit. Given high levels of competition within the NIL market, a relevant direction for research could be focusing on how fit is established between a student-athlete influencer and a sponsor, which would
allow tracking how student-athletes learn about and interpret their fit with sponsor companies, and how this perception evolves.

Third, considering that the current study resonates with prior research in establishing organizational support in helping individuals achieve fit (e.g., Ballout, 2007), the potential remains to create a deeper exploratory account of specific aspects of NIL programming offered by university athletic departments that best evoke a sense of expertise, confidence and fit with the personal branding activity. Specifically, while the study identifies the role of organizational support, it does not delve into what kinds of support are more versus less effective, which should be explored in future research due to its managerial importance. Given the developing nature of the NIL market and programming, scholars should explore intervention studies to help advance managerial practice for athletic administrators. Finally, the study focused on the context of NCAA student-athletes’ pursuit of NIL, and as such, it would be interesting to examine how the process of establishing fit in this context may differ from other athlete and influencer contexts.

**Conclusion**

Existing theories on person-environment fit, which is integral for positive individual and organizational outcomes, stem from research on employees in traditional organizational settings. Despite social media influencer activity becoming increasingly integrated into the modern economy, research has yet to explore how influencers establish fit in this process. The current research focuses on the issue of NCAA student-athletes’ NIL monetization on social media and uncovers motivations stimulating
engagement in this activity. Fulfillment of these motivations is preconditioned upon achieving fit in personal brand monetization. The work identifies six domains of fit peculiar to this context, nested within three categories, namely influencer identity fit and lifestyle compatibility as a part of role fit, sufficient expertise and resources and market niche fit as a part of market fit, and value congruence and appropriate compensation as a part of the brand-level fit. The work situates these domains in relation to the previously established domains of fit in traditional work environments as well as discusses the consequences of (mis)fit. Further, the study provides a grounded model depicting the process of fit experience, which links the domains of fit to motivations and consequences of personal brand monetization. Thus, the research advances the theoretical understanding of psychological aspects of personal brand monetization as well as offers recommendations for managing support programs for student-athletes interested in monetizing their personal brand.
CHAPTER 3

‘I JUST TRY TO BE MYSELF’: DISENTANGLING AUTHENTICITY NEGOTIATION IN ELITE ATHLETES’ PERSONAL BRANDING

What do people want to see? If I were in their shoes, what would I want to see? What do I want to show? What do I want to look back on and see on my social media? I have found this internal dialogue a little bit complicated (Olympic bronze medalist in softball2)

It is hard to explain, but I am just myself. (Paralympian wheelchair tennis player)

Introduction

Establishing an aura of authenticity – i.e., genuineness, honesty, and truthfulness – is a critical component of a successful personal brand (Moulard et al., 2015). Career coaches and brand consultants commonly advise public personas such as athletes to “just be yourself” or “be authentic” (Horowitz, 2021). Modern consumers increasingly search for authenticity in their daily life, and therefore human brands need to capitalize on that search by projecting authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Yet, extant research has focused primarily on consumer perceptions of authenticity (e.g., Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kucharska et al., 2020), whereas little remains known on how branded individuals, including politicians, entertainers, and elite athletes negotiate their self-presentation to build an authentic personal brand.

Given the major role of managing authenticity for athlete brand success, scholars have stressed the importance of further exploring authenticity negotiation and production,

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2 To preserve anonymity of participants, their names and nationalities were de-identified. With their permission, details such as gender, sport, level at which they compete, and an approximate social media audience size as a proxy for level of personal brand development were included.
including the feasibility of presenting an authentic self in personal branding (Geurin, 2017), factors shaping individuals’ self-presentation (Doyle et al., 2020), and calibration of inner motives and commercial objectives (Hayes et al., 2020). This highlights a gap in the knowledge on authenticity negotiation processes from the creator's perspective. Developing this perspective is critical because since authenticity is an essential element of effective personal brand positioning, scholars need to understand how athletes construct that authenticity. Additionally, personal branding has become engrained in athletes’ lives and careers (cf. Carlson & Donavan, 2013), and we must know how this affects their experiences of authenticity. To address these questions, it is necessary to disentangle how the authenticity of human experience and constructed brand authenticity coexist in athletes’ personal branding process.

Managing authenticity in personal branding requires navigating internal and external binds (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Being fully authentic can often be a challenge. An ‘authentic’ yet imprudent instance of self-expression such as a careless comment during a press conference or an incautious social media post can hurt one’s public reputation (Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). Likewise, suspected inauthenticity can also damage an athlete’s brand, leading to controversy and consumer distrust (Lopez & Rice, 2006). An example of how performative brand content poses risks for athlete brands is Manchester United players posting a uniformly-sounding “apology” on social media as a strategy for image repair after losing, which has led to condemnation and ridicule by fans and the media (Dunn, 2021). These opposing pressures highlight the tensions arising from individual concerns and external expectations that athletes must navigate when
striving for authenticity (Erickson, 1995). To help address these challenges, there is a need for a systematic model of how athletes navigate authenticity demands and communicate their authenticity to audiences.

The current research addresses the identified gap by exploring authenticity negotiation in elite athletes’ personal branding, namely: 1) factors contributing to athletes’ authenticity search, 2) perceptions of authenticity, 3) authenticity constraints, and 4) resolution tactics. I employ a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) and draw on semi-structured interviews with an international sample of 30 elite athletes competing in niche sports, including Olympians, Paralympians, and members of national sports teams. Findings reveal the complexity of being a ‘true self” for a public persona, where authenticity is a multi-faceted, subjectively experienced self-presentational attribute established through an interplay of self-expression and constructed appearances of realness. Based on the findings, I introduce a conceptual model of authenticity negotiation in athletes’ personal branding. The model offers guidance to athletes and practitioners on managing athlete brands and collaborations with stakeholders.

**Theoretical Background**

**Theoretical Perspectives on Authenticity**

The notion of authenticity has long excited the minds of philosophers, thinkers, and scholars. The term “authenticity” originates from Ancient Greek where *autos* meant “self” and *hentes* meant “doer” (Spiggle et al., 2012). It was believed that an individual who is *authenticos*, meaning acting on their own authority, will achieve happiness or
eudemonia (Trilling, 1972). Thus, authenticity is the quality of being authentic – that is a “true self”, real, and genuine. Over the years, research on authenticity has span into an interdisciplinary body of literature that can be generally divided into two overarching perspectives: how authenticity is experienced and how it is perceived by others (Lehman et al., 2019). These two perspectives align with Goffman’s (1959) distinction between the “frontstage” and “backstage” regions of self-presentation. According to Goffman, social interaction can be juxtaposed to a theatre performance where an individual is an actor, and their social environment is the audience. The individual operates between a backstage, where they can be their true self while evaluating and strategizing their performance, and a frontstage, where they put up a “decorum”, stage a desirable appearance and adhere to social norms to avoid sanctions (Goffman, 1959, p. 108). Thus, authenticity can be evaluated from two perspectives: internally, by the ‘actor’ and externally by the ‘audience’.

The first dominant view – authenticity as a human experience (i.e., the ‘backstage’ perspective) – emerges from research on individuals’ emotional experiences. Experiential authenticity is manifested through an alignment of feelings and actions, self-awareness, and resistance to external influences (Wood et al., 2008). It increases individuals’ self-esteem, facilitates a sense of competence and autonomy, and creates a feeling of being in touch with the inner self (Ryan & Deci, 2004; Wood et al., 2008).

People search for experiences of authenticity to restore the sense of self in their lives such as through reconnecting with family, nature, spirituality, and religion (N. Wang, 1999). In the context of marketing, the search for authenticity frames consumer choices (Moulard
et al., 2021). Likewise, the search for authenticity extends to the personal branding process where branded individuals, such as journalists, athletes or social media influencers desire to retain authenticity in their personal branding experiences (Clavio et al., 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Geurin, 2017).

An extension of the first view is the perspective on authenticity as an impression constructed through self-presentation (Lehman et al., 2019). In this case, authenticity is assessed not by the ‘actor’ but rather by the ‘audience’ who witnesses the actor’s performance. The focus is on the external interpretations of the authenticity of self-presentation and, analogously, perceptions of the authenticity of brand entities such as human brands and organizations (Lehman et al., 2019). The externally perceived authenticity has been conceptualized as a projection of internal consistency and purity yet also conformity to the norms of a category that one belongs to (Moulard et al., 2021; Wang, 1999). Externally perceived authenticity is essential for building trust and healthy social relationships (Lopez & Rice, 2006). In branding, consumer perceptions of authenticity derive a multitude of benefits such as better evaluations, perception of higher quality, loyalty and word of mouth (e.g., Beverland, 2005; Illicic & Webster, 2016).

Although existing evidence suggests it is important to feel and appear authentic (Ryan & Ryan, 2019), those standpoints are not the same as authenticity can take on different meanings (Lehman et al., 2019). According to identity theory, individuals manage multiple identities based on situational norms and demands, yet tensions arise when an identity does not correspond to the norms of a social environment (Stryker, 1968). Additionally, how branded individuals perceive their own brand may be
incongruent with the audience’s perceptions (cf. Linsner et al., 2020). The challenge of balancing the backstage intrapersonal experience with the frontstage impression management reveals potential tensions. For example, just being true to self, behaving spontaneously and expressing how one really feels can be punished when the external environment’s expectations for self-presentation are breached (Erickson, 1995). At the same time, being inauthentic through overly filtering and adjusting self-presentation can be draining on the emotional level due to misalignment between inner feelings and actions (Grandey, 2003), and can hurt interpersonal trust if inauthenticity is discovered (Lopez & Rice, 2006). This makes negotiations of authenticity arising beneath self-presentation a complex matter.

**Authenticity in Athletes’ Personal Branding**

The relevance of self-negotiation becomes particularly evident and significant in the personal branding of public personas such as elite athletes. On one hand, personal branding is a part of an individual’s identity construction and self-expression and it poses the expectation from the audience to show the ‘real self’ and true personality (Linsner et al., 2020). On the other hand, athletes’ desire to commercialize a personal brand essentially requires attracting liking, recognition, and engagement from the audience, which affects the freedom of self-presentation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hayes et al., 2020). For example, Clavio et al. (2013) interviewed seven IndyCar series drivers on their usage of Twitter and observed that the athletes had a strong inner drive to communicate personal authenticity rather than convey a fake image. Further, Geurin (2017) explored the experiences of new media usage of six female elite athletes
demonstrating their strategic and selective sharing of content about their personal life to portray authenticity. However, in both studies, authenticity exploration was not the central purpose and the authors identified inquiry into authenticity as a future research direction.

The process of personal branding makes it very visible how an effective self-presentation combines searches for both an authentic experience of self-expression and a way to communicate an attractive, socially acceptable version of self to others. Likewise, in the context of social media influencers’ (SMIs’) marketing, it was shown that individuals may experience an authenticity bind as they feel like they must avoid being too real or too fake (Duffy & Hund, 2019) or engage in practices allowing to retain a sense of self such as posting no-make up selfies (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). Yet, knowledge of how individuals manage their authenticity in personal branding has remained fragmented. The conceptual bridge between the experiential and strategized facets of authenticity has been missing as extant scholarship has typically focused on a single meaning in isolation (Lehman et al., 2019), which leaves unaddressed how individuals dynamically navigate the different meanings of authenticity in their self-presentation.

As I set out to address this gap and describe the experience that athletes go through as they negotiate authenticity in personal branding, I have four objectives in mind. First, considering that there are different meanings of authenticity, including the contradictory demands of raw self-expression and conformity (Lehman et al., 2019), it is important to understand what triggers the search for authenticity in the first place as it
will allow to better comprehend the pursued meaning(s) of authenticity. Second, it is important to disentangle the meaning(s) of authenticity experienced and interpreted by the branded individuals to address the conceptual void due to the predominant scholarly focus on the consumer perspective (cf. Moulard et al., 2021). Finally, since the “issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt” (Peterson, 2005, p. 1083), it is important to understand the spectrum of constraints and tensions that are experienced by individuals as they pursue authenticity and how they use to resolve them. Hence, I formulate four research questions:

- Research Question 1: What factors contribute to athletes’ motivation to be authentic in personal branding?
- Research Question 2: How do athletes perceive being authentic in personal branding?
- Research Question 3: What authenticity constraints do athletes face in personal branding?
- Research Question 4: How do athletes manage their authenticity in personal branding?

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

I employed a qualitative research design featuring a grounded theory approach with a focus on the development of a process model. A view of authenticity as socially constructed required constructivist methods (Peterson, 2005). This motivated the choice of a constructivist grounded theory methodology which is based on a “discovery of
theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 2010, p. 1). Thus, I step away from existing frameworks such as MacCannell’s staged authenticity in tourist settings (1973) or Peircean semiotics, which are concerned with symbolic attributes typically evaluated by observers and do not account for the complexity of individual’s experiences that may evoke staged and unfiltered elements (cf. Wang, 1999). Shifting away from choosing an existing framework a priori allowed me to approach data collection and analysis with a fresh eye (Gioia et al., 2013). Considering the unique institutional context that athletes are a part of, drawing on existing frameworks from other disciplines also risks overlooking the unique aspects of athlete brand management stemming from their professional identity such as the role model expectations, symbolism, compliance with master brands’ regulatory frameworks, and visibility (cf. Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2010). Grounded theory provided a rigorous analytical framework embedded within the line-by-line coding process, comparatively distilling and explicating conceptual categories, and interrogating the multiple meanings of authenticity (Charmaz, 2006). In this work, I adhere to a ‘modern’ approach to a grounded theory where I integrate both inductive and deductive elements as I interactively shift between data collection and analysis (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2010). Further, as a researcher, I recognize my active role in generating findings (Charmaz, 2006).

**Context: Athlete Personal Branding on Social Media**

I study athletes’ personal branding specifically in the social media context, due to three main considerations. First, social media as a personal branding platform makes negotiation dynamics more evident given the need to deliberately capture and
conceptualize the moment that individual wishes to convey. Second, social media is highly artifactual. This includes observable artefacts of self-presentation as well as feedback such as the number of followers, likes, and comments. This makes the act of social performance and received feedback more salient for the branded individual. Third, as commonly cited in athlete branding scholarship, social media has become one of the primary platforms for personal branding and monetization that gives athletes the agency and incentive to create and publish content, which makes self-negotiations explicit and relevant (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin, 2017).

**Participants**

Elite athletes competing in niche sports were the context for this study. While sports media often focus on top celebrity athletes, many athletes across the world compete at lower professional levels (e.g., minor leagues) or in non-mainstream sports (e.g., triathlon, karate, curling), labeled as “niche” for targeting narrower segments of sport consumers (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). The processes and challenges associated with negotiating self-presentation while building a personal brand are likely to be particularly accentuated for niche sports athletes compared to their celebrity counterparts because, at the niche sports level, athletes often manage their brand themselves rather than hiring professional marketing staff (Geurin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). With smaller earnings, niche sports athletes are also likely to be quite sensitive to social media income and therefore, feel personally invested in their self-promotions (Hayes et al., 2020). Furthermore, authenticity has been identified as a distinguishing feature and hence a primary concern for nano- and micro-influencers, which aligns with
the status of niche athletes (Audrezet et al., 2020). This makes niche sports athletes an informative and data-rich context as they represent knowledgeable agents.

The sample featured 30 elite athletes from 18 niche sports competing for 12 nations. The sample size was dictated by the timing of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2016). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, specifically, either through contacts with a marketing agency that connects athletes with potential sponsors \((n = 8)\) or directly \((n = 22)\), by identifying and inviting athletes who publicly list an email address for public inquiries (Geurin, 2017). Recruitment criteria included: 1) being an active elite-level athlete (i.e., taking part in top national or international athletic events); 2) having an active public account on social media where the athlete brands themselves; 3) activating sponsorships on social media; and 4) native or professional fluency in English.

Initially, a convenience sample of six athletes was recruited through a marketing agency. Further, I adhered to the principles of theoretical sampling. For example, to investigate self-negotiation processes, I determined that it was necessary to contact not only those athletes who work with a marketing agency but also athletes who brand themselves on their own. Similarly, when clarifying the barriers to authenticity, it was necessary to recruit athletes from both individual and team sports as well as athletes members of minority groups. To ensure theoretical saturation, it was necessary to recruit athletes of different levels of popularity and brand commercialization, which dictated additional dynamically updated recruitment criteria throughout the data collection process.
## Table 3.1

**Study Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Social media following</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Olympian</td>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Handball</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>12,000-13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Discus throw</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Sitting volleyball</td>
<td>Paralympian</td>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Sled hockey</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>American football</td>
<td>Pro League</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>14,000-15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>Olympian</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Curling</td>
<td>Olympian</td>
<td>1,000-2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>MMA</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>1,000-2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>9,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 12</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>15,000-16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Triathlon</td>
<td>INTL</td>
<td>8,000-9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>1,000-2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>INTL</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>11,000-12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Pro League</td>
<td>5,000-6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
<td>Guinness Record</td>
<td>1,000-2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Wheelchair tennis</td>
<td>Paralympian</td>
<td>12,000-13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Pro League</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Karate</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>11,000-12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Wheelchair tennis</td>
<td>Paralympian</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Footvolley</td>
<td>INTL</td>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Bodybuilding</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>17,000-18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>OCR</td>
<td>INTL</td>
<td>28,000-29,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Olympian</td>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>6,000-7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Triathlon</td>
<td>INTL</td>
<td>26,000-27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>4,000-5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete 30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Handball</td>
<td>National Team</td>
<td>7,000-8,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nationalities:**

USA (14), UK (4), Canada (3), Brazil, France, Greece, Guatemala, India, Japan, Russia, Slovakia, the Philippines

**Note:** Athletic level abbreviations: INTL = athletes competed in elite-level international events; NL = athletes competed in elite-level national events; Pro League = athletes competed in professional league. OCR = obstacle course racing. Social media abbreviations: FB = Facebook, TW = Twitter, YT = YouTube. Followership numbers are approximated to help preserve informants’ anonymity.
The sample included four World Champions, one World Cup winner, a Paralympic gold medalist, and those competing at high-level domestic and international competitions in their respective disciplines. One athlete did not compete formally but held a Guinness Record in a strength exercise and branded his athletic persona to followers and sponsors. Participants employed a variety of social media platforms for branding, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, yet most mentioned that Instagram was their primary platform. Forty per cent of the sample had a “verified” checkmark on at least one of their social media accounts. Information about participants is provided in Table 3.1.

Data Collection

Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews administered by the first author who took notes and engaged in reflexive memo-writing after the interviews, which allowed to capture impressions of participants’ verbal portrait, emotion, and behavior (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012)). Most interviews occurred via video conference software, Zoom or Skype, with video enabled (n = 24); four interviews were held with the audio-only setting; and two interviews were over the phone. To get familiar with participants’ stories before the interviews, the first author reviewed the available online archival data, including the athletes’ social media content and websites, team/league webpages, and media stories. This helped contextualize the interviewees’ responses. The interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes with an average interview time of 37 minutes. The difference in length is likely attributed to the additional questions included later in the process as the interview protocol became
more refined as well as natural differences between participants in how much detail they answered the questions. With participants’ permission, the interviews were video/audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 256 pages of single-spaced text (149,417 words).

The iterations of data collection comprised six to eight interviews. The interview process began with preliminary open-ended questions (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012) focusing on athletes’ overall experience with personal branding, including motivations, approaches, challenges, and benefits of personal branding on social media, without explicit prompts about the notion of authenticity. Participants’ responses helped verify that authenticity was a concern for athletes (Clavio et al., 2013; Geurin, 2017). Further, I refined my protocol, aligning the questions with the four research questions, focusing on motivations for authenticity search and perceptions of authenticity (cf. Goffman, 1959; Lehman et al., 2019), perceived constraints to being authentic, tensions, as well as ways to address these tensions. I updated the interview guide as the understanding of theoretical categories advanced (Gioia et al., 2013).

Reflexive memo writing helped inform the updates to the interview protocol. For example, during the interviews, I took casual notes, which informed post-interview interpretative memos on preliminary observations, participants’ emotions as they answered questions or the ease with which they answered, and potential modifications for future interviews. Thus, in their interviews, Athletes 1 and 2 repeatedly mentioned how feedback from the audience shaped their personal branding such as the feelings they wanted to elicit from the audience or the pressures they felt. This inspired attention to
how athletes process the audience’s feedback and the addition of new questions to the interview protocol before the formal analysis process. The data collection was completed when theoretical saturation was reached. The protocol is presented in Appendix C.

**Analysis**

Interviews and analysis proceeded iteratively. ATLAS.ti software was used to organize and code the textual data. Data analysis followed the principles of the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The analysis began by reviewing the recordings and reading the texts multiple times to become familiar with the data, before proceeding to open coding. Through similarities and differences between open codes, I created categories of first-order codes, after which I proceeded to abstract at a higher level. Consulting the prior literature, I verified observations against constructs from extant research and combined the codes into categories, producing second-order themes. As a result of each successive iteration of data collection and analysis, I refined the list of first-order codes and second-order themes through a similar process of close reading, consultation of literature, and reflective memo writing. Considering its iterative nature, my process was guided by a combination of both inductive and deductive principles (Charmaz, 2006). Engaging in higher-level theorizing, I classified the themes into theoretical dimensions and created a process model, which shows interrelationships between the emerging constructs explaining the phenomenon of interest (Gioia et al., 2013). The understanding of these relationships emerged throughout the iterative process of data collection, analysis, coding, and schematizing as a part of abstracting to build grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016). Figure 3.1 shows the data structure (Gioia et al., 2013).
whereas Figure 3.2 presents the model of authenticity negotiation.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings revealed four theoretical dimensions of the process of authenticity negotiation in elite athletes’ personal branding: (a) motives for authenticity search, (b) perceptions of authenticity, (c) authenticity constraints, and (d) authenticity management tactics (Figure 4.1). The discussion of findings is organized in correspondence to Figure 3.2, which presents a grounded model synthesizing the relationships between second-order themes and dimensions. Throughout the discussion of findings, I draw on participants’ quotes from interviews. Additional quotations are presented in Appendix D.

**Research Question I: Motives for Authenticity Search**

*Research Question I* sought to understand what factors underlie athletes’ motivation to pursue authenticity in personal branding. Participants conveyed that the pursuit of authenticity was both intrinsically stimulated, revealing a psychological need for authenticity, and extrinsically stimulated by social and industry expectations.

**Intrinsic Factors.** Athletes’ search for authenticity in personal branding is in part motivated by intrinsic factors. For instance, an Olympian tennis player mentioned: “I think that I am very unique, and I think that it [social media] is my way to show who I am” (Athlete #8, M), which revealed how social media was the space for the athlete to reveal his unique self. Additionally, a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter stated: “I want to make it as close to my personality and who I am [as I can], so when you look at my Instagram, you know who I am, you know my personality” (Athlete #10, M). This shows athletes’ quest for self-expression and building authentic relationships with followers.
### Figure 3.1

**Data Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Order Codes</th>
<th>2nd Order Themes</th>
<th>Aggregate Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Fans value when athlete is open about their feelings</em></td>
<td>Extrinsic motives</td>
<td><strong>Motivations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Athletes who post results only do not do well</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Social media is a part of the athlete profession</em></td>
<td>Intrinsic motives</td>
<td><strong>Authenticity Perceptions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fans want to see the athlete behind the scenes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wanting to be relatable to inspire others</em></td>
<td>Revealing the true self</td>
<td><strong>Authenticity Constraints</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wanting to be more than an athlete</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Seeking an outlet to express self</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Self-discovery through content creation</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Feeling enabled to show self beyond real life</em></td>
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<td><em>Need to be professional</em></td>
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<td><em>Feeling like one is under surveillance of fans and peers</em></td>
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<td><em>Looking for monetization through social media</em></td>
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<td><em>Sponsors care more about social media than performance</em></td>
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<td><em>Looking at how many followers others have</em></td>
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<td><em>Setting goals in terms of audience size</em></td>
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<td><em>Sponsorship feels like a burden</em></td>
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<td><em>Struggling to find time to create sponsored posts</em></td>
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<td><em>&quot;Deading&quot; promotional posts</em></td>
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<td><em>Fears of being stalked of solicited</em></td>
<td>Perceived risks</td>
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<td><em>Oversharing leads to unwanted questions from fans</em></td>
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<td><em>Spontaneously sharing moments when one is happy</em></td>
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<td><em>Including content even if it does not fit with curated image</em></td>
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<td><em>Not worrying about feedback</em></td>
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<td><em>Defying stereotypes about athlete profession</em></td>
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<td><em>Feeling good about admitting weaknesses</em></td>
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<td><em>Feeling an authentic connection via positive feedback</em></td>
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<td><em>Avoiding controversies</em></td>
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<td><em>Avoiding content that is unlikely to create engagement</em></td>
<td>Strategic framing</td>
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<td><em>Avoiding posts that can reveal personal details or location</em></td>
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<td><em>Framing the post around broader narrative</em></td>
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<td><em>Exhibiting a &quot;you win or you learn&quot; attitude</em></td>
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<td><em>Choosing the right time to post</em></td>
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<td><em>Choosing the right hashtags and linguistics</em></td>
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<td><em>Studying engagement and calibrating posts</em></td>
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<td><em>Preplanning sponsorships and testing sponsored products</em></td>
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<td><em>Creating posts as if it happened in real life</em></td>
<td>Staged content</td>
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<td><em>Creating filler content</em></td>
<td>Outsourcing self-presentation</td>
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Figure 3.2

*Model of Authenticity Negotiation in Athletes’ Personal Branding*
The desire to be authentic is also motivated by athletes’ aspirations to positively impact others. Commonly, participants expressed that their potential as individuals extends beyond athletic performance and implies positively shaping the world, signaling the pursuit of self-actualization (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Participants discussed how through personal branding, they wanted to be “a motivator,” “an inspiration,” and “make people dream,” whereas accomplishing these objectives gave them a sense of pride. However, maximizing personal impact on the audience requires athletes to be “vulnerable,” “human,” and “imperfect” because that makes them relatable. For instance, a National Women’s Soccer League player explained:

I am trying to be real, authentic, and consistent because it allows fans, friends, and people to see that we [athletes] are relatable. This is important because we are all human. I am not perfect, and no one is perfect. We all have the same difficulties. This can inspire other people too. Being able to bring joy to other people brings joy to me too. (Athlete #12, F)

This quote demonstrates how the athlete understood the importance of taking herself off the elite athlete's pedestal to create a positive impact on others by being relatable.

**Extrinsic Factors.** Participants expressed that extrinsic factors also contributed to their motivation to be authentic on social media. For example, athletes see engaging through social networks as a part of their job, yet this necessitates offering a certain level of self-disclosure to fans and revealing the behind-the-scenes life (cf. Doyle et al., 2020). For example, a Major League Soccer player observed: “Once I became pro, it has become a huge thing. Fans want to see you and what you are doing not just on the field but off the field too” (Athlete #17, M). This sentiment was echoed by other athletes who, based on feedback from fans, inferred that fans wanted to see athletes’ realness and authenticity.
Relatedly, athletes also perceive sponsors assess the quality of potential endorsers based on their ability to communicate ‘authentic’ personalities. For instance, a triathlete believed that his authenticity is what made him an attractive endorser:

I make mistakes all the time and probably sound a little bit like crap in the videos, but it doesn’t matter […] I think in the end, that is what is attractive as well. If a sponsor is looking for an athlete, they are going to look for someone different and not like everyone. (Athlete #15, M)

This quote demonstrates a perception that authenticity, realness, and vulnerability are socially desired as they are a foundation for building trusted relationships (Lopez & Rice, 2006).

**Research Question II: Perceptions of Authenticity**

Since participants expressed the importance of being authentic in their personal branding, it was crucial to clarify what authenticity meant from their perspective, which was the focus of Research Question II. Participants’ overarching interpretation suggested a view of authenticity as a self-presentational attribute, which was established through the feelings of *revealing the true self* and *maintaining consistency between the online and the offline self*.

** Revealing the True Self.** Authenticity in personal branding is an intrapersonal experience of unleashing, liberating, or unearthing the true self through the technological interface that facilitates creativity and the expression of personal values and beliefs. For instance, a tennis player shared his perception of ‘being a true self’: “I do not ever want to give them [followers] the wrong impression and it is how I perceive myself. I just want to be fun, eccentric, wild, crazy, whatever you call it” (Athlete #8, M). In this quote, he
positioned authenticity as an aspirational experience of unleashing his “fun,” “crazy,” and “wild” self, which was consistent with his vision of himself. Other participants discussed ‘being true self’ as constructing the self online in ways that were inaccessible in everyday life. Thus, an American football player, competing in a traditionally hypermasculine sport, expressed that he longed to be “more than an athlete”, and social media allowed him to position himself as a “gentle giant” helping others like children with autism and “doing what is right.”

Thus, social media is not merely a communication or monetization tool but rather a part of athletes’ personal journey sparking self-expression and self-making. Revealing the true self requires active self-reflection and self-verification. For instance, a softball player conveyed that personal branding entailed self-discovery: “A lot of it has just been self-discovery and figuring out my values. When I am about to do a post, does this align with what is important to me?” (Athlete #26, F). In this quote, she observed that wanting to show who she was on social media in turn, triggered the process of figuring out what her true self was, suggesting that authenticity requires internal self-verification (cf. Lehman et al., 2019). Several participants echoed the feeling that personal branding was a deep intrapersonal experience of self-expression and self-making, referring to their accounts as a “diary” that documented their lives and careers.

**Consistency Between the Online and the Offline Self.** The findings showed that authenticity also encompasses a sense of consistency between the online self and the real-world persona. For instance, a handball player stated: “I want them to see me how I am. What I project on my social media should reflect my personality, who I am and how
people know me to be.” (Athlete #30, M). Like in this quote, justifying the authenticity of their online self-presentation through its consistency with real life was common for participants, which highlights the interpersonal dimension of authenticity on social media (cf. N. Wang, 1999). Alternatively, “faking it” on social media generates a feeling of self-alienation, which is manifested through a sense of split between the online and the offline self. Thus, a softball player described: “It is like two separate people. You can feel when you are a different person on social media than you are in your day-to-day life” (Athlete #26, F). Being authentic means showing the real everyday self, as opposed to “showing off,” “trying too hard,” or doing something “over the top.” Additionally, it implies that the level of honesty and transparency in expressions should not be altered on social media. For instance, a curler stated: “I'm just trying to be authentic in whatever is going on. I will not be talking about something that has no meaning to me and I would not support anything I did not believe in,” which highlights the importance of retaining consistency between internal beliefs and what is communicated.

Importantly, maintaining consistency between the online and the offline self requires integrating not only the positive aspects but also disclosing struggles and challenges, which is demonstrated in participants’ quotes. A Paralympian wheelchair tennis player expressed:

I never try to be over-emotional or fake or post something super happy when I'm down. When I lost tournaments, I posted how I felt. When I won tournaments, I posted how I felt. I kept everyone with me during the whole preparation for the Parapan American Games, for the Paralympics. No matter if the day was bad or good, I was always sharing it and sharing a little bit of my story (Athlete #19, F). Here she highlights how showing imperfection is an integral component of consistency
and authenticity. Further, athletes’ understanding of authenticity is accentuated by their observations of the lack of genuineness in the modern digital culture where SMIs and general consumers alike often use filters and project only an embellished version of self (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Participants emphasized that authenticity is retaining honesty, transparency, and realism in self-presentation and showing the real-life self as is.

**Research Question III: Authenticity Constraints**

Since a disaccord between one’s personal feelings and the demands of the external environment can create constraints to authenticity (Erickson, 1995), Research Question III sought to establish what authenticity constraints athletes perceived in their personal branding process. Findings showed the connection between feeling authentic and projecting authenticity is not straightforward. Athletes’ ability to authentically express themselves on social media is inhibited by *institutional norms, commercial incentives* and *protocols*, and *platform risks*.

**Institutional Norms.** Participants discussed explicit and implicit norms imposed by stakeholders that affected their ability to authentically express themselves and enticed them to present “the best version of yourself.” Societal expectations dictate that athletes behave as role models (Arai et al., 2013; Linsner et al., 2020). Relatedly, sports organizations, as parent brands (Kunkel et al., 2013), impose regulations on athletes to avoid content that could be perceived as controversial (e.g., posts about nights out or political talk) or reveal competitive advantage (e.g., practice content). A member of a national sled hockey team explained: “Especially with me being on the [national] team, we are not allowed to have [in the post] alcohol, drugs, or anything like that. So any kind
of picture you are taking of me, I have to approve it” (Athlete #5, F), highlighting how her agency in self-presentation is bounded. Participants linked violating the guidelines to the risks of losing a contract or sponsors.

Explicit regulations are complemented by implicit norms. For instance, a footvolleyer expressed that he felt like with his sports federation being a professional entity, “there was not a set standard or expectations” but athletes had to “correlate that [professionalism] with their image” (Athlete #23, M). Further, a national karate team member noted how conservative sports norms affected her freedom of self-presentation:

With a sport like mine, I need to be very careful and conscious of what I do, because there are a lot of referees and coaches, and the administration itself, having constant eyes on me. Social media stars really have the freedom to do whatever they want. They could do a prank, an embarrassing prank, whereas I cannot do that. Now, I’m labeled as immature and wild, and all of this stuff.” (Athlete #21, F)

The athlete observed a notable contrast between her personal branding experience and those of SMIs (cf. Duffy & Hund, 2019), which points to the constraining effects that institutional norms and sports brand alliances have on athletes’ authentic self-expression.

**Commercial Incentives.** Followership and engagement metrics have direct career and business implications for athletes, presenting a powerful external incentive that shapes athletes’ self-presentation. Participants observed that sponsors paid close attention to athletes’ social media metrics or sometimes even “discovered” athletes through social media. For example, the sled hockey player explained: “When I look for sponsors – clothing or athletic gear – they are asking how many followers I have, how often am I on it [social media]” (Athlete #5, F). A strong social media brand also leads to greater
professional prospects (cf. Doyle et al., 2020). Relatedly, the ability to reach more potential followers and be liked becomes a goal and a source of internal tensions for athletes. A member of a national team in beach handball explained:

You kind of have to play the social media game. A limitation of social media is that some people feel less inclined to put out authentic content. They try to put out content that matches the numbers or is going to win that social media game. (Athlete #2, M)

This behavior influences the extent to which athletes express themselves authentically in their content and creates tensions. On several occasions, participants described trying to create posts frequently or express in the posts specific emotions (e.g., positivity) not because this is how they felt in the moment, but “to stay relevant” and spur interactions. Thus, a sprinter described experiencing the pains of social comparison: “Of course, you are comparing yourself. You are like: ‘oh, she has 5,000 and I have 1,000.’ But then I started to realize that a lot of people buy [followers], and I am not paying money for a number.” (Athlete #1, F). In this quote, the participant alluded to both the social comparison that personal branding imposed as well as the inauthentic and unethical self-branding practices she had observed others engage in to grow the audience. Thus, the desire to obtain extrinsic rewards affects athletes emotionally and buffers their authenticity, creating a temptation to calibrate self-presentation.

**Commercial Protocols.** Once sponsorships are secured, many sponsors impose a set of protocols on athletes. Participants’ sponsors dictated the frequency and timing of promotional posts, formatting, hashtags, and mentions. Participants acknowledged that sponsors wanted promotions to appear organic, though this desired “realness” often
created tensions. Several athletes remarked that they “dreaded” creating promotional posts and that integrating advertisements into the posts hurt their engagement. Relatedly, a triathlete expressed that although she understood the necessity to disclose partnership, she found it challenging: “I do find it really awkward that you have to do the hashtag ‘ad.’ It is quite hard sometimes to slip it in and know where and when to slip it in” (Athlete #13, F). Several participants described having to create promotional posts in moments when they were not eager to be on social media, which felt like a “burden,” and others recalled promoting a product they did not actually like, which made them feel “guilty.” A bodybuilder recalled a memory of realizing she did not like the promoted product:

> They had strict rules in relation to posting. So it was really hard to post something and want people to buy it when I did not even like it myself. […] It made me feel a little guilty because I did not want people to be spending money and coming to me saying “Hey, I do not like this.” That would ruin trust in the long term. (Athlete #24, F)

The athlete eventually removed herself from such a partnership. Yet, cases like these from athlete stories are vivid examples of authenticity constraints imposed by sponsorship.

**Platform Risks.** Participants were aware of the limitations of social media and privacy risks. Whereas (micro)celebrities have historically lived under public surveillance, social media exacerbates the pressures on athletes due to its publicness, immediacy, and direct access. For instance, a soccer player observed that whereas social media is a great platform for voicing out opinions, one must be careful and cognizant of the “sensitivities” of others. She conveyed: “Whatever you do, whoever you follow,
whatever comment you make, you are representing yourself and your beliefs, and it is important to think about how you approach that” (Athlete #12, F). Participants discussed how expressing oneself freely could come at the expense of certain followers. Additionally, they conveyed that the feeling of public surveillance promoted by social media can be burdensome (Geurin, 2017). Athletes described their fear of being stalked, getting solicitations from bookmakers, and receiving unwanted questions about their private lives when they were going through a personal crisis. They wanted to protect their privacy, which is illustrated below in the quote by an American football player:

You do not want everyone to be indulged completely in your life and everything that you do. You want to have some type of privacy. Some type of peace of mind. You have to find a happy medium between being consistent and having your private life private, and not posting every waking moment that you live. (Athlete #6, M)

The quote highlights how at times exposing personal life and feelings feels like a breach of the inner sense of authenticity as it violates the desire to retain privacy and a “peace of mind.”

**Research Question IV: Authenticity Management Tactics**

“How can I combine the two: to think about what I am posting, but then also have the authenticity in there, so it shows a piece of me?” (Athlete #26, F) – This dilemma, outlined by a softball player, accurately summarized many of the participants’ experiences as they sought to balance retaining authenticity and addressing the external constraints. *Research Question IV* focused on athletes’ approaches to resolving tensions. Participants expressed that the right way to “be themselves” had to be learned through observation and trial and error. I identified patterns in how they resolved the authenticity
dilemma, which centered around three categories of tactics: self-authentication, authenticity refinement, and authenticity orchestration.

**Self-Authentication Tactics.** Whereas professional identity requires consistent conforming and adjustment of self-presentation (Stryker, 1968), the findings showed that periodically, athletes pursue the raw expression of their inner selves with little regard for, or even at the expense of, impression management. This tendency is congruent with the notion of authentication acts, which individuals engage in to reaffirm their sense of self, identity, and uniqueness (Arnould & Price, 2000). In their personal branding on social media, athletes pursue self-authentication by sharing intense, happy moments in their lives and disclosing vulnerabilities.

**Sharing Peak Experiences.** One scenario when athletes feel compelled to include self-expressive content with little regard for managing their audience’s impression is moments when they feel particularly happy, fulfilled, and excited in real life that they want to share with others. For example, when asked if she ever uploaded content spontaneously, a bodybuilder responded: “Yes, the more personal things. Such as going on a vacation, relationships in my life, or dogs. If I am just really happy and in the moment and want to share that, then I will.” (Athlete #24, F)

Athletes described sharing happy and fun moments unrelated to sport, including hobbies, time with pets and family, travel, or engaging in art such as playing a musical instrument or composing poems. Participants tended to incorporate such content with limited regard for the generated engagement. For instance, a cross-country runner shared:
I try to not hurt my brand by doing posts that I know will not be successful. But sometimes I will post something that is just completely reflective of me and not care about how well it will do. So, I did a post a couple of months ago on the National Cat Lady Day of just me and my fat cat, and it did not do very well, but I did not care. That is a part of who I am. I am not just a runner, but I am also a cat lady, so I want it to be a part of my image. (Athlete #27, F)

Thus, the participant highlights how, at times, she deliberately integrated content that made her fulfilled because it was a part of her even though it did not necessarily yield high engagement.

**Disclosing Vulnerabilities.** Another attempt to self-authenticate manifested in athletes’ disclosure of their challenges and vulnerabilities to the audience. The inclusion of these elements allowed athletes to act autonomously on their internal moral values and fulfill their need for self-actualization (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2004). For instance, one of the interviewees discussed how the most authentic moment for her was a post where she talked about the challenges she faced as an LGBT athlete. Further, at least four participants had undergone the experience of battling stigmatized disorders in their lives. They found it important to share this with others who might be struggling with similar challenges. For instance, an obstacle course racer explained:

> I have struggled with an eating disorder for most of my life... I try to be really honest about my journey, and a lot of people say “I’m in the same spot, thank you for sharing this. It really helps me.” Especially for posts on eating disorders and the recovery process, I try to choose pictures of myself that I do not like because I know that I am filtering them through my still sort of disordered lens. (Athlete #25, F)

In this quote, the athlete highlighted how despite a natural desire to “filter” images of herself that she deemed unattractive, she tried to include such pictures due to her intrinsic desire to help others battling a similar disorder. This highlights that the pursuit of *feeling*
authentic may be not only spontaneous and unprompted as demonstrated by the prior theme (i.e., in the moments of happiness) but also deliberate as showing the unembellished self takes an effort.

**Authenticity Refinement Tactics.** Much of the athletes’ self-presentation was framed by external constraints requiring that they regulate their authenticity to deflect the potential repercussions of not conforming to societal and/or commercial demands or overexposing their inner selves (Erickson, 1995). Relatedly, many athletes pursue the twin tactics of filtering and strategically framing their content. These tactics allow them to stay true to themselves, communicating real-life events, thoughts, and feelings as opposed to staging content, yet do so in a refined manner, constructing a self-branding performance that their followers will appreciate and engage with.

**Self-Filtering.** To address the risks and authenticity constraints, “put the best foot forward” and optimize their engagement, athletes advance their ideas for potential posts through a set of mental filters, assessing them vis-à-vis a pre-conceptualized desired image they want to project. This allows one to strategize self-presentation in a way that feels genuine to the branded individual yet adheres to the elite athlete's identity standards (Stryker, 1968). Thus, a cross-country runner discussed how she “filtered” out anything that may be perceived as controversial:

> I try to avoid including opinions that may offend people and keep it very surface-level. Especially if you are representing another brand, steering away from offending anybody is really important. You definitely have to filter. If you have fans, if you are anybody, people are going to talk about you, so avoiding any situations where you can add to that is a good thing and just using a filter on what you say basically. (Athlete #27, F)
Ensuring that content is not controversial or “assertive” was the most common type of “filter” mentioned by athletes. Participants also discussed other types of mental thresholds they employed. For example, athletes worry about the visual quality of pictures and videos they post and avoid content that the audience did not engage with in the past. Many male but also some female athletes “filter” their content based on its relatedness to the sport, feeling more secure keeping their personal life behind the scenes. Additionally, “filtering” out content means ensuring that the content posted would not be “too narrow.” Athletes recognize that their audiences comprise many different segments and a diverse assortment of fans and attempt to “filter” content out to ensure their feed would resonate with diverse audience segments.

**Strategic Framing.** After conceptualizing a social media post, athletes need to ensure that the post helps reach their personal branding goals. For that, athletes strategically frame and calibrate the content to entice engagement, which shows strategic adjustments to authentic self-presentation under commercial demands (cf. Goffman, 1959). For instance, the footvolleyer believed that when his content was related to sports, it generated higher engagement. In the quote below he described how he had weaved a sports narrative into a post about his father:

> Sometimes, you want to show that you are on vacation, with a girlfriend, or with family – that you not only [play sports] every day of your life. Last Sunday was Father’s Day. So, I did a post about Father’s Day. But it was about me playing football with my dad. So there is always something that connects a post to sport in a certain way. (Athlete #23, M)

This highlights how the athlete tries to balance his identity as a son and an elite athlete through content that corresponds to his inner impulses while being effective.
Metrics such as “likes” or “comments” and analytics features such as built-in “insights” dashboards on Instagram allow athletes to study the demographics of their audiences as well as their tastes and patterns of engagement. Participants observed posting patterns and engagement of their peers as well as public personas and influencers to learn the best practices and “emulate.” Observation led to recognizing the role of algorithms in engagement, including the time of the post and the hashtag used. Athletes experimented with different elements within their content trying to calibrate it for success: length of captions, style of writing, and type of picture, which illustrates how feedback loops alter athletes’ authentic self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). A quote below shows how a triathlete framed her content to yield engagement: “It is a bit of a game. There are things you can do that will get more engagement, certain hashtags, certain times of the day. […] You learn how to get your followers engaged” (Athlete #13, F).

**Authenticity Orchestration Tactics.** Combining and/or alternating authenticity refinement tactics with instances of self-authentication allowed athletes to create a strategy aiming both outward (satisfaction of stakeholder expectations) as well as inward (satisfaction of inner needs). Yet, sometimes, producing content within the flow of everyday life was not enough to satisfy the high external demands on personal branding. In response, athletes employed authenticity orchestration tactics, staging content specifically for social media but as if it happened in real life.

**Staged Content.** Participants discussed instances when the content posted was staged specifically for social media. Thus, a triathlete recalled how some of his peers “staged” content in times of injuries to make it appear as if they were training as usual to
deflect unnecessary pressure. A softball player discussed how her team’s rules prevented her from posting content about training. Nevertheless, she wanted to integrate athletic content into her brand image, so she incorporated staged training posts: “If I cannot post my real training, I will just post fake training” (Athlete #26, F). Athletes also discussed how they “stayed relevant” and engaged with the audience when had no new content to share by using “filler” content: a pre-planned “backup” stock of content, including inspiring quotes, compiled ahead of time, and pictures from the past, which athletes sometimes included without even mentioning these were “throwbacks.”

Integrating sponsored posts also required engineering authenticity. Sponsorships imply that athletes make sponsor brands a part of their story. Several athletes discussed how they adhered to the rule of always trying the product before promoting it. This highlights that although authenticity is usually thought of as spontaneous (Wang, 1999), in personal branding, athletes often engage in careful planning to partner with sponsors that will reflect authenticity. Once sponsorship is secured, athletes can begin integrating sponsored posts into their narrative. The participants’ approaches generally focused on making the posts seem as if they were created within the flow of everyday life, which shows a performative nature of authenticity in sponsored posts (Duffy & Hund, 2019). They engaged in careful preparations to highlight the sponsor in the best light and styled the visual and textual components of their posts. In the example below, a triathlete discussed the nuances of creating an effective visual and caption for a sponsored post:

You do not want the picture to be staged. A picture of you holding the product in your hand is super staged. You actually using the product in your day-to-day, that's more authentic. And then for the caption, rather than saying: “guys, look,
This is my Coca-Cola bottle. It's the best thing ever. You should buy it, and here is a discount code”, people will listen if you tell a story about yourself and how you use the product. (Athlete #28, M)

This attention to nuances of producing an “authentic post” shows how achieving an impression of authenticity in sponsored posts is work, which athletes need to engage in (cf. Peterson, 2005).

**Outsourcing Self-Presentation.** Although my sampling purposefully targeted athletes who manage personal branding themselves, the data revealed that even at the niche level, athletes can outsource their self-presentation. Since maximizing the commercial value of an athlete’s brand through organic practices is challenging and requires time and expertise, some participants discussed delegating the production of personal content to a third party. For instance, a footvolleyer split responsibilities for his personal content production with a marketing agency:

> I coordinate the agenda with the marketing agency… Mainly, they send me what will be posted, and I approve it. Let’s say on Thursday is coming out a video about a tournament that I played. So then on Tuesday, I say: “this is approved. Schedule it in the system.” So, it is going to be posted at a certain hour on social media… I have access to the account as well. I do the day-to-day things like my Instagram story. (Athlete #23, M)

Because all content produced by the agency had to go through an approval process before being posted, the athlete had the chance to modify the post if he did not like it. Thus, the athlete believed it was “authentic,” which highlights that sometimes, it is not the act of creating own content that gives the athlete a sense of authenticity but rather a coordinated consistency (cf. Peterson, 2005). Several other athletes presented the idea of outsourcing personal branding as aspirational. When asked if it would still be authentic
to them, they said that having well-coordinated communication with their manager would ensure content is “authentic.”

**Model of Authenticity Negotiation in Athletes’ Personal Branding on Social Media**

Drawing on the generated concepts, I synthesize the dynamic relationships between the themes and theoretical dimensions through a model which connects the stages of authenticity negotiation (Figure 3.2). The dark gray arrows show the flow of the initial conceptualization of self-presentation, the white arrows signify the audience’s feedback, and the dashed arrows represent feedback loops. On the left side of the model are factors stimulating athletes’ search for authenticity, which are classified into intrinsic and extrinsic. The search is commanded by internal pushes and impulses as athletes seek to fulfill their private needs underscored by the linkages between authenticity and core psychological states such as autonomy and self-actualization (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Additionally, this search is prescribed by society where the ability to display authenticity becomes a necessary condition for personal brand success (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Relatedly, athletes’ definition of authenticity revolves around a dual-meaning concept, including feeling true and natural and revealing the inner self, as well as maintaining a level of consistency between self-presentation in online and offline settings. In this fashion, authenticity online is about assessing how authentic the constructed self feels and appears.

However, athletes’ self-presentation must be negotiated in the face of constraints, stemming from organizational-, market-, and platform-level influences. Together, authenticity motivations and constraints create conflicting demands on athletes’ self-
presentation, which leads to tensions addressed through a set of self-presentation tactics. The tactic of self-authentication bypasses constraints because it encompasses athletes’ purest and most sincere attempts to preserve a sense of self. In Figure 3.2, this is demonstrated with a direct link from the ellipsis of authenticity to the self-authentication tactic. The other two tactics – authenticity refinement and authenticity orchestration – are shaped through the adjustment of self-presentation to existing constraints, which is demonstrated with arrows pointing from the authenticity ellipsis to constraints and from constraints to authenticity refinement and orchestration. The three categories of tactics comprise athletes’ ongoing self-presentation.

The presence of an audience in the model signifies athletes continuously engage with external feedback to inform their self-presentation (cf. Goffman, 1959). Athletes’ process of authenticity negotiation is cyclical. Through self-evaluation and evaluation of external feedback, they assess how their self-presentation satisfies internal needs and external factors that stimulated the search for authenticity. Along this process, athletes’ perceptions of authenticity, relevant constraints, and choice of tactics are re-shaped and re-produced. In the model, this is demonstrated with dashed lines signifying feedback loops. This cyclical negotiation of self-presentation allows athletes to adjust their self-presentation strategy over time to present authenticity in formats that meet personal, industry, and/or situational demands.

**Theoretical Contributions**

As one of the first studies in the space of authenticity management for elite athletes, current research contributes to knowledge on athlete brands (Carlson &
Donavan, 2013) and authenticity in self-presentation (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lehman et al., 2019), through uncovering the authenticity negotiation process that individuals go through as they engage in personal branding. I contribute in three main ways, namely by 1) conceptualizing authenticity in personal branding from the perspective of the branded athlete; 2) bridging the conceptual gap between the experiential and strategic facets of authenticity and showing how branded athletes navigate the different meanings of authenticity in their personal branding; and 3) identifying authenticity management tactics in personal branding.

My first contribution is an insight into the meanings of authenticity in personal branding from the perspective of branded individuals. While authenticity can have different connotations (Lehman et al., 2019), prior research has mostly focused on the consumer perspective (e.g., Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kucharska et al., 2020), whereas an explicit conceptualization of how it is experienced by branded individuals have lacked from prior research. In line with prior literature, I find that athletes experience an internal impulse to retain experiential authenticity in personal branding (Clavio et al., 2013; Geurin, 2017), which bears a eudemonic dimension for branded individuals manifested through expressing and constructing their identities such as through creative usage of technological interface and social media affordances. Participants’ references to negative feelings when experiential authenticity through creativity and self-expression is breached align with prior research on the importance of authenticity for psychological well-being (cf. Ryan & Ryan, 2019; Wood et al., 2008). I also extend prior research on the congruence between athletes and their brand identity (cf. Linsner et al., 2020), showing
how consistency between the real-world and online identities is a part of experiential authenticity. In this way, authenticity also attains a socially constructed dimension as this implies that the online brand must correspond to external expectations imposed on the athlete persona.

Second, the findings in the grounded model presented in Figure 3.2 depict the process that individuals go through as they negotiate the experiential and strategic authenticity elements in their personal branding, which contributes to prior research on authenticity in self-presentation by connecting the frontstage and backstage perspectives on authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019). This model addresses questions raised in extant literature that suggested the importance of authenticity in athletes’ personal branding yet questioned its feasibility (Geurin, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018), as it shows how experiential and strategic authenticities can co-exist. Relatedly, I show how in the “backstage” of athletes’ personal branding experience, athletes may face internal tensions arising from a conflict between who they are, their personal feelings and experiences, and a desirable identity that they feel they need to project to sports stakeholders, sponsors, and fans. The deliberate adjustment of self-presentation in response to these constraints is the moment when athletes transition from operating with the pure intrapersonal form of authenticity to learning how to express it in a controllable and externally appealing fashion as a strategic social performance in front of the audience. Evidently, due to existing constraints, an athlete’s personal branding on social media is rarely purely authentic in experiential terms as their autonomy of self-presentation is limited (cf. Ryan & Deci, 2004; Ryan & Ryan, 2019), although the occasional acts of self-authentication
point to the attempts to retain a sense of self under the external pressures. This finding introduces a novel, psychological lens to brand relationships in sports (Doyle et al., 2020; Kunkel et al., 2013), showing that athletes are susceptible to partly relegating the autonomy in personal branding to serve as desirable brand allies by aligning self-presentation with parent and partner brands and signaling brand ties.

Third, I identify authenticity communication strategies employed by athletes, advancing research on personal branding by showing how individuals strategize their self-presentation to enhance their brand (Arai et al., 2013; Audrezet et al., 2020; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Whereas prior literature has identified singular acts individuals engage in to construct authenticity online such as integrating content about everyday life or no-make-up selfies (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Geurin, 2017), I offer a more comprehensive overview of strategies, laying out a foundation for testing their effects in future research. Thus, I reveal there are multiple ways to enact ‘authenticity’, ranging from the periodic infusions of more raw forms of self through sharing peak experiences or personal vulnerabilities, to selective refined self-presentation through self-filtering and strategic framing, to orchestrated authenticity through staging or outsourcing content production. Feedback loops through evaluations of the audience’s feedback and personal feelings help assess how self-presentation tactics satisfy inner needs and external demands and update perceptions of authenticity and relevant constraints (cf. Goffman, 1959). These insights reaffirm that performing authenticity is not inherently inauthentic (cf. Peterson, 2005), as in constructivist terms, these behaviors are a form of authenticity since they are perceived as such by the branded athlete.
Practical Implications

Although it is widely recommended, “just being yourself” in personal branding is not a trivial matter. My research points to a host of constraints on athletes’ self-presentation coming from the external stakeholders and environment. Under these influences, athletes may experience stress and tension, and some even choose to step away from social media. Relatedly, my work points to actionable insights for athletes, their agents, and sports organizations to help optimize athletes’ personal branding, resolve tensions, and enhance their brands.

First, athletes are reminded that it is important to keep personal branding intrinsically fulfilling, whereas building an authentic bond with others requires a willingness to self-disclose, even if at times it is a risk (Wood et al., 2008). Retaining an inner sense of authenticity in personal branding through identifying instances when it is okay to be a real self and express feelings, vulnerabilities, and passions, is a means to keep personal branding meaningful on a personal level. Second, much of athletes’ personal branding activity is based on selective and strategic impression management. This requires a careful study and understanding of the audience’s tastes and interests, as well as self-reflection to identify how to frame a personal narrative in a manner that is congruent with the athlete’s inner feelings (Linsner et al., 2020) yet also resonates with the audience. Given the potential complexity of this task, sports teams and player agents are advised to train athletes on how to use analytics tools that allow them to measure brand engagement, particularly in the online space, as well as reflect on brand identity and strategize content templates to relieve the creative load and optimize engagement.
Third, brand relationships where athletes must adjust their self-presentation to align with partner brands’ explicit and implicit expectations have emerged as perceived constraints on authenticity or even a burden. Relatedly, on one hand, athletes must work with brands with whom they have an alignment of beliefs and values. On the other hand, when discussing contracts with organizations such as teams and sponsors, it is crucial that athletes explicitly negotiate branding-related clauses in ways that are supportive of their individuality and offer creative control over self-presentation (Audrezet et al., 2020).

**Limitations and Future Research**

The current research was not without limitations that represent opportunities for future research. One weakness of my study is that while I reconstruct the ongoing cyclical process of authenticity negotiation, methodologically, I do not track how an understanding of authenticity evolves. Achieving this would require a study design where researchers engage with participants over time, from the earlier to more advanced stages of brand development. This could help shed light on how athletes’ interpretations of authenticity change as their brands mature and show the learning stages as individuals master self-presentation in personal branding. Second, the introduced model indicates feedback loops in authenticity negotiation, revealing the links between athletes’ personal branding and psychological experiences. Yet, it does not investigate how personal branding impacts athletes beyond the experiences of authenticity. Future research should explore how athletes’ psychological well-being, including mood, self-esteem, and self-evaluation are influenced by the process of personal branding and its outcomes.
Conclusion

In personal branding on social media, athletes face the demand to be authentic. However, a systematic perspective on how they negotiate and construct their authenticity has been lacking. The current research integrates the ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ perspectives on authenticity in athletes’ personal branding, revealing athletes’ authenticity motives, perceptions, constraints, and resolution tactics. The research highlights how the interplay between athletes’ individual-level needs and the brand environment, informed through feedback loops, stirs them toward specific authenticity management strategies. The insights contribute to prior research on athlete branding by shedding light on the experiential component of personal brand building and the influence of brand environment norms and conventions on athletes’ self-portrayal.
CHAPTER 4
ACCENTUATING FIT THROUGH AUTHENTICITY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETE BRAND AUTHENTICITY AND SITUATIONAL SELF-DISCLOSURES IN CAUSE PROMOTIONS

Introduction

Athlete endorsement marketing is a promotional strategy that leverages athletes to enhance the exposure and brand image of endorsed brands and generate favorable changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kunkel et al., 2020). Managing consumer perceptions regarding the motives of the involved parties is a critical aspect of endorsement marketing (e.g., Koernig & Boyd, 2009). Specifically, positive promotional outcomes are typically observed when consumers perceive a genuine affection and connection between the endorser and the endorsed brand (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Such a perception is established through various indicators of the partnership, including the coherence between the endorser and the brand, as well as specific characteristics of the endorser (Pérez & del Bosque, 2013). Therefore, in examining promotional outcomes, it is essential to consider both brand partnership perceptions, endorser perceptions, and their joint influence on the outcomes.

Previous research has explored the interplay between brand partnership perceptions, often in terms of the match between the endorser and the brand, and various endorser attributes, including endorser credibility, attractiveness, prior interaction styles, demographics (e.g., gender), and likability (e.g., Buvár et al., 2022; Fink et al., 2012; Lee & Koo, 2015; Wymer & Drollinger, 2015). However, existing studies have primarily...
focused on observable cues (e.g., appearance or belonging to a specific category) or the outcomes of endorser actions (e.g., effects of credibility following transgressions) when evaluating the joint influence of partnership and endorser perceptions (e.g., Lee & Koo, 2015; Parker & Fink, 2012). There is a lack of research on how perceptions of endorser personality-level characteristics interact with perceptions of the brand alliance (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). This research gap is particularly noteworthy given the considerable interest in celebrity personalities in the real world.

Genuineness and authenticity are increasingly valued by consumers in human brands, such as (micro)celebrities (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). Scholars link consumers' desire for brands and content that appear authentic to the broader public quest for authenticity in a commercialized society (Beverland, 2005). Consequently, understanding the interactions between brand partnership cues and endorser authenticity is crucial for designing an effective marketing strategy. For example, companies actively seek endorsers who not only align with their brand but also contribute a flare of authenticity to enhance marketing efforts (Zniva et al., 2023). Media outlets also highlight the importance of considering athletes' authenticity in the promotional outcomes of brands they collaborate with. For instance, when tennis player Naomi Osaka and gymnast Simone Biles disclosed personal information about their mental health to contribute to public conversations, marketers speculated about how this authenticity aligns with the cues conveyed through their brand alliances (e.g., Newcomb, 2021). Athletes are increasingly incorporating authenticity into sponsorship activation on social media such as through personal narratives and sharing personal experiences or
information with their audience. This raises the question of how these appeals to authenticity interact with the cues that establish congruence at the brand level.

To address this question, the present research investigates the joint effects of fit and athlete endorser authenticity on promotional outcomes. While doing so, the study also clarifies the meaning of authenticity in the context of athlete branding by developing and validating an athlete brand authenticity scale. Additionally, the study examines the interactions between fit and two interpretations of authenticity: enduring pre-existing athlete brand authenticity perceptions, as well as authenticating appeals through the use of situational self-disclosures, which are instances of deliberate sharing of personal information in promotional messages (Leite & Baptista, 2021). The research comprises a series of studies featuring scale development and validation followed by an experiment examining the interactive effects of fit and authenticity. Situated within the domain of athlete corporate social responsibility marketing (AxCSR), findings from the experiment research contribute to the understanding of brand dynamics in a highly relevant area, where both authenticity and fit have emerged as significant concerns (e.g., Ilicic & Baxter, 2014). The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

**Theoretical Background**

*Communication Model and Brand Fit*

The relevance of considering interactive influences of partnership and endorser characteristics emerges from the understanding of the triadic nature of relationships that is at the core of endorsement marketing. The communication model that is commonly used to explain what drives the effectiveness of endorsement marketing is derived
through the integration of balance and attribution theories (Mowen & Brown, 1981). On one hand, balance theory suggests that to be effective, a brand partnership needs to entail a triad of relationships where consumers perceive a bond between an endorser and a brand as well as a relationship with their audience (Heider, 1946). On a strategic level, this implies the importance of creating a partnership that not only facilitates a fit between the endorser and the brand but also features an endorser who is relatable, engaging, and able to successfully build a relationship with the audience.

On the other hand, according to attribution theory, consumers gather promotional cues to form causal judgement (Kelley & Michela, 1980). An athlete engaging in a promotional attempt for a brand raises the question of the motives underlying the brand partnership. Characteristics of the partnership as well as perceptions of who the endorser is as a person create contextual peripheral cues that inform that judgement (Petty et al., 1983). Thus, for an endorsement to be effective, it must communicate an impression that the partnership is founded upon congruent dispositions, whether it be shared values, product experience, or other relevant attributes and qualities, rather than a purely commercial intent (Silvera & Austad, 2004). This suggests the importance of considering the higher-level alignment and logic of brand partnerships in conjunction with who the endorser is as a person since both aspects contribute potential information about the motives. Collectively, the balance and attribution theories suggest that an effective partnership implies a distinguishable logic behind the endorser and the sponsor brand as well as the ability to deflect consumer skepticism through carefully managed partnership perceptions and athlete brand perceptions.
In investigating the cues that evoke dispositional inferences, most research has focused on the notions of matchup hypothesis at the partnership level (Kamins, 1990) and source credibility at the endorser level (Ohanian, 1990). The matchup hypothesis suggests that to be effective, a partnership needs to engender a fit between an endorser and a brand (Kamins, 1990). This is underpinned by the assumption that when consumers perceive a partnership as logical they are more likely to distill a link between the sponsor and the brand as well as have trust in the genuine intent underlying the partnership (Kamins, 1990). Empirical insights have supported that higher levels of brand fit are desirable for partnership success, as they help alleviate suspicions of purely commercial intent in promotions and facilitate information processing (Illicic & Baxter, 2014; Yuksel et al., 2016).

Further, to address perceptions formed at the endorser level, scholars have employed the source credibility model highlighting how the attributes of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, enhance promotional outcomes by signaling the authority of the endorser in a promotional attempt (Ohanian, 1990). Addressing the potentially interactive effects between brand partnership perceptions and endorser-level characteristics, scholars have examined how source credibility and brand fit attributes interact, seeking to capture the joint influences of partnership and endorser cues. For instance, Lee and Koo (2015) showed the endorser credibility interacts with brand fit at high levels of fit. Nevertheless, this research stream on fit and source credibility has limitations as it does not account for the effects of traits of an endorser's personality and their self-presentation, beyond certain aspects of trustworthiness (cf. Silvera & Austad,
2004). For instance, while endorsers may possess expertise, and truthfulness, and exhibit a good fit with a brand, the influence of other factors such as the other brands they endorse or the number of brands they collaborate with provides additional information that is likely to affect promotional outcomes but is not considered in the current model (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Similarly, aspects such as an endorser's self-presentation patterns, their standing in relation to the current market (e.g., how distinct or mainstream they are), or the extent to which their self-presentation evolves can generate additional effects that influence perceptions (Buvár et al., 2022). This raises the question of how the dimensions of endorser personality and self-presentation can further amplify the effects of brand fit on promotional outcomes.

**Moderating Effects of Athlete Brand Authenticity**

While fit communicates a sense of logic and alignment behind a brand partnership, authenticity adds a personal touch by encompassing how original, consistent, and genuine the athlete’s brand concept is (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). In this way, it provides information about the endorser beyond the facets of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990), bringing it to a more personality-level evaluation. Athlete brand authenticity is a perception that an athlete is “true to self,” which is a part of an athlete’s brand’s equity as a specific positively noted characteristic that consumers associate with the brand (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Importantly, authenticity is not merely about being genuine or sincere. Rather, it is a complex notion that spans multiple aspects of self-presentation (Lehman et al., 2019). Relatedly, Moulard et al. (2021) identify multiple referents of authenticity evaluations,
suggesting authenticity is assessed with respect to the entity’s “self” (“true-to-self authenticity) as well as with respect to factual accuracy (true-to-fact” authenticity) and overarching ideal (“true-to-ideal” authenticity). Being “true-to-self” implies being inner-directed and uncompromising on own individuality (Wood et al., 2008). Relatedly, originality has been recognized as an important quality of authentic brands (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Further, being “true-to-fact” implies alignment between what is communicated and the actual state of affairs and includes openness and transparency in self-expressions and actions (Moulard et al., 2021). For example, an individual is true-to-fact, when they are truthful in their self-expressions. Finally, being “true-to-ideal” is a symbolic alignment between situational self-presentations and an overarching image created by a brand over time, which for traditional brands has been reflected in the perceptions of reliability and commitment to traditions (Bruhn et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2014).

Thus, brand authenticity can be understood as the overall fit between the image of the public persona and the living person behind it based upon verification of the consistency of self-presentation and how it adheres to societal expectations for authenticity (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) and self-presentation patterns (Moulard et al., 2021). Relatedly, perceptions of authenticity are informed by athletes’ multidimensional brands embedded within brand associations tied to their performance, appearance, and lifestyle cues (Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donavan, 2013) and constructed through an interplay of onstage and backstage performances (Doyle et al., 2022). With authenticity being a desirable quality that can potentially affect promotional outcomes for human
brands and affiliated entities, it becomes relevant to examine the implications of authenticity perceptions for the relational dynamic of the endorsement.

I posit that perceptions of athlete brand authenticity, manifested in various ways, will augment the effects of brand fit on promotional outcomes by adding sentiments of coherence, relatability, and consistency beyond what is captured in the brand fit perceptions. Specifically, being “true-to-self” should augment the effects of fit because it communicates that an athlete engaging in the partnership is self-directed and therefore acting on their inner motives rather than in search of external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, being “true-to-fact” signals the perceived openness, transparency, and genuineness of the athlete, communicating that logical fit is not simply an image but rather a reflection of aligned values (Kamins, 1990). Additionally, establishing fit is better accentuated when an endorser stays true to an overarching stable model of their self-presentation (Moulard et al., 2021). In this way, authenticity will augment the relational triangle of the endorsement relationship (Mowen & Brown, 1981) strengthening the linkage from the endorsed brand to consumers. Thus, when there is an alignment between the brands, combined with an ongoing authentic self-presentation by an athlete endorser that is self-directed, sincere, and stable, the effects of partnership congruence on promotional outcomes are likely to be strengthened.

**Hypothesis 1a-c.** Perceptions of athlete brand authenticity, including being a) true-to-self, b) true-to-fact, and c) true-to-ideal interpretations, positively moderate the relationship between endorser brand fit and promotional outcomes.
**Moderating Effects of Situational Self-Disclosures**

While authenticity is generally thought of as an enduring trait of brand personality (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014), scholars observe authenticity can be communicated on a situational basis such as through the integration of instances of self-disclosures as persuasion appeals within an endorser brand narrative (Leite & Baptista, 2022; Leite et al., 2022). Self-disclosures encompass a broad range of behaviors that allude to sharing personal information, such as opinions, beliefs, aspirations, or elements of the personal story (see Appendix E for literature review). Social penetration theory (SPT) helps disentangle how these effects occur (Taylor & Altman, 1987). According to SPT, social relationships are developed through a progressive information exchange where self-disclosure is a core mechanism eliciting a sense of intimacy and reciprocity and evoking a response back (Greene et al., 2006; Taylor & Altman, 1987).

When perceived as appropriate in depth, focus, or number of details shared (e.g., AlRabiah et al., 2022), self-disclosure can be an effective tactic for driving promotional outcomes, including changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors. This suggests that when studying self-disclosures, one needs to account for the perceptions of the appropriateness of the message (AlRabiah et al., 2022). When effectively integrated, self-disclosures make the message appear more genuine and personable and help make the logic and linkage underlying the partnership more salient for consumers (Leite & Baptista, 2022). They also position the endorser as sincere, down-to-earth and genuinely invested in an endorsement (Lee & Eastin, 2022), which is typically appreciated by consumers and further helps amplify positive perceptions of the partnership (Taylor &
Altman, 1987; Audrezet et al., 2020). The assumption of the effectiveness of self-disclosures explains the proliferation of self-disclosures as promotional tactics, with endorsers seeking to increase the perception of fit with the sponsor brand by integrating these concealed story-telling cues in their promotional messages (Chung & Cho, 2017; Zhu et al., 2022). For example, in research focusing on the Twitter context, it was found when celebrities included personal content, it enhanced their social presence and enticed consumer engagement (Kim & Song, 2016). Similarly, in her promotions of the anti-migraine drug Ubrelvy, former tennis player Serena Williams consistently integrates details of her personal story of struggling with migraine attacks to accentuate her fit with the brand. Thus, through appropriate self-disclosures, endorsers can clarify their fit with the brand, enhancing promotional outcomes.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of brand fit on behavioral intentions is positively moderated by situational performances of authenticity through self-disclosures.

Individuals’ willingness to self-disclose and/or reciprocate as well as the resulting relational dynamics develop over time (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Thus, the effectiveness of self-disclosures as a situational manifestation of authenticity depends on how well it aligns with the broader trends in an athlete’s self-presentation, whereas inconsistencies can be perceived as a breach hindering the effects of self-disclosures as persuasion appeals (cf. Greene et al., 2006). The amplifying effect of self-disclosures on the relationship between brand fit and promotional outcomes will be influenced by how it interacts with the perceptions of athlete brand authenticity. Relatedly, I hypothesize a three-way interaction between brand fit, athlete brand authenticity, and self-disclosures
on promotional outcomes, such that when an athlete is perceived as more authentic, that strengthens the brand fit/promotional outcomes link.

**Hypothesis 3.** There is a positive three-way interaction between brand fit, athlete brand authenticity, and self-disclosure.

**Figure 4.1**

*Hypothesized Model*

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**Method**

The work features a series of two studies. The first study focuses on the development of an athlete brand authenticity scale. Consumer perceptions of athlete brand authenticity are a part of the hypothesized model; hence it is necessary to account for the different dimensions of authenticity when evaluating athlete brands (Moulard et al., 2021). Yet, prior research has employed two unidimensional authenticity scales for (micro)celebrity brands, which do not account for such as multidimensionality (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). While recent scholarship has contributed a social media influencer-specific authenticity scale that includes the dimensions of sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness (Lee & Eastin, 2021), scholars typically draw a distinction between traditional (micro)celebrities and social...
media influencers as these brands emerge and operate differently and elicit different consumer perceptions (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). For example, Lee and Eastin (2021) integrate truthful endorsements and expertise within the topical domain of social media influencer promotions as dimensions of the scale, whereas not all traditional (micro)celebrities engage in sponsorships. Additionally, Lee and Eastin’s (2021) self-exposing visibility aligns with a perspective on how social media influencers operate (Duffy & Hund, 2015), but stands in contrast with assumptions of discreteness as an antecedent of authenticity for traditional (micro)celebrity brands (cf. Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). Furthermore, consumers develop category-specific brand associations toward athlete brands (Arai et al., 2013), whereas authenticity norms can differ across domains (Lehman et al., 2019). This suggests there is a need for a category-specific comprehensive measure to assess an athlete's brand authenticity while accounting for the different potential dimensions of authenticity (Moulard et al., 2021). Addressing this gap, I developed and validated the scale of athlete brand authenticity.

Further, building on the scale developed in the first study, the second study tests the proposed hypotheses via a 2 x 2 experiment, with a focus on athlete promotions in the context of AxCSR marketing.

**Study One: Athlete Brand Authenticity Scale Development and Validation**

The procedure for scale design and validation followed the recommendations outlined in prior literature (Churchill, 1979; Hinkin, 2005), specifically, steps included 1) construct definition and domain specification, 2) item generation, 3) purification of the measure, and 4) scale validation. The study featured a total of six instances of data
collection, including a qualitative phase with interviews, two pilot tests, two rounds of surveys for item purification, and a validation test survey.

**Construct Definition, Domain Specification, and Item Generation.** The first step in my approach was defining the athlete brand authenticity construct, its domains, and conceptual boundaries (Churchill, 1979). While Hinkin (2005) points out that approaches to domain specification and item generation can range from deductive to inductive, it is common to see a combination of both approaches in business literature (Sendjaya et al., 2019). Given prior scholarly developments on brand authenticity and relevant scales (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Napoli et al., 2014) yet also research suggesting unique expectations for athlete brands (Arai et al., 2013), I integrated both deductive and inductive elements, namely literature review and qualitative interviews. Following literature review on existing authenticity scales (see Appendix F), endorser marketing (Ohanian, 1990), and athlete branding (e.g., Arai et al., 2013; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Kunkel et al., 2020; Linsner et al., 2020; Taniyev & Gordon, 2022), I understand athlete brand authenticity as a benchmark of genuineness, truthfulness, and realness. Based on this literature review, I develop a definition of athlete brand authenticity: *Athlete brand authenticity is an attribute of athlete brand equity that communicates a consumer-based perception of a match between an athlete’s presented and ‘true’ self. Athlete brand authenticity integrates diverse aspects of an athlete’s self-presentation across interactions on and off the sports arena, evaluating how these instances contribute to a genuine and unified image of a public persona in an athlete’s profession.* The review of prior authenticity scales suggested that five domains could be
depictive of the authenticity construct: sincerity (i.e., being open, transparent, and genuine), integrity (exhibiting high moral qualities), intrinsic motivation (exhibiting passion and engaging in self-authored, pro-active behaviors), athletic talent (expertise in sport), and symbolism (symbolic meaning added to consumers lives). A detailed account of domains and items that emerged from the literature review is presented in Appendix G.

Supplementing the literature review, I conducted 10 interviews with sports consumers (six in-person and four virtually). Six of the participants were undergraduate sport management students and four were general sport spectators with an age range of 18-30 years old. Participants were asked to think about “authentic” and “inauthentic” athletes and discuss how they perceived them. The interview protocol is presented in Appendix H. Analysis of the qualitative data allowed to revise the list of generated domains and items. For example, interviews indicated consumers associated authenticity with such qualities as uniqueness (being unlike everyone else), relatedness (feeling like one has something in common with the athlete), and consistency (exhibiting similar patterns of self-presentation over time), whereas athletic talent and symbolism did not appear relevant. Overall, from the literature review and interviews, I generated a list of 68 items.

The list of items, dimensions, and their definitions were presented for judgement to an expert panel of four sport management academics. The experts assessed the domains’ and items’ relevancy and clarity (both on a 5-point Likert scale) as well as commented on the wording. Items with average ratings below 4 on either parameter were excluded. This refinement process led to narrowing down the list to four dimensions and
28 items. Specifically, the experts recommended excluding relatedness as it can potentially be an outcome of authenticity. Further, it was decided to re-frame the “integrity” dimension as “citizenship” because of a focus on behavioral patterns on and off the field. I define each of the potential dimensions identified at this stage below.

- Uniqueness represents the extent to which an athlete is perceived to be one-of-a-kind, remarkable, special, and unusual in their way, differentiating them from others.
- Genuineness is an athlete’s ability to communicate honesty, openness, and truthfulness, and be who they truly are in interactions with the public.
- Citizenship is a set of athlete’s supra-role behaviors that extend beyond the actual athletic performance and show commitment to qualities desired of athletes on- and off-the-field, including morals, ethics, and caring about the greater social good.
- Consistency is an athlete’s propensity to exhibit similar patterns of behavior, attitudes, and principles over time and across different communication channels and circumstances.

**Purification of the Measure.**

**Pilot Testing.** I conducted two pilot tests on student samples to pre-test the survey prompt and assess how well each item represented a specific domain using item-total correlations (ITTs) and Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients. In the first pilot test \( (N_{\text{Pilot\_1}} = 54) \), participants were asked to write down the name of an athlete whom they found authentic and then evaluate the scale items (5-point Likert scale, 1 = “Strongly
disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”). I assessed the items’ ITTs and iteratively deleted the items with the lowest ITT from the list until there were no more items with ITTs below .300 since an item with a low ITT score does not measure the construct adequately (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). A total of three items were deleted. The Cronbach’s α measures suggested good reliability (> .800) for each domain, above the .70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Ahead of the second pretest (N_{Pilot_2} = 71), I changed the prompt and the wording for two items. As a new prompt, I gave participants a list of four athletes (LeBron James, Alex Morgan, Tiger Woods, and Russell Wilson), and asked them to choose one athlete they knew well. Based on the interviews and the first pilot study, it was common to see LeBron James and Alex Morgan being described as “authentic” and Tiger Woods and Russell Wilson described as “inauthentic.” Using these athletes allowed for variability in the data, in line with prior studies testing measurement instruments for brand authenticity (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). The second pre-test showed good reliability scores for all dimensions (Cronbach’s α > .800) and acceptable ITTs with only one item (“[Athlete] is charismatic”) requiring to be dropped.

**Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).** Two iterations of data collection and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were conducted with participants on the market research platform Prolific to identify an empirically adequate and conceptually sound combination of items for the scale. Participants were asked to choose one athlete that they were familiar with from the same list as in the second pilot study. Alternatively, if they did not know the athletes, they were asked to write down the name of an athlete they
knew. Then, participants evaluated the list of items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”). Several measures were taken to ensure the integrity of the data. First, I recruited participants who had at least a 90% approval rating on Prolific. Second, two attention checks (Liu & Wronski, 2018) were integrated and participants who failed both were excluded from the dataset. Third, I used an R package ‘careless’ (Yentes & Wilhelm, 2021) to identify and exclude responses with the signs of straight-lining. The EFA was conducted in the IBM SPSS package using principal-axis factoring as an extraction method, given it aligns more closely with the objectives of scale development to understand the latent structure of a construct than the principal component analysis (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006) and Promax rotation because based on prior theory, I assume that the factors within the authenticity construct are correlated (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). In each iteration of data collection, I iteratively worked through the EFA models, excluding one by one items with the lowest loading, until there were no more items left with loadings below .600, or items that cross-loaded on different factors (Du et al., 2015).

To conduct the first iteration of EFA, 400 participants who reside in the United States and follow sports were recruited on Prolific. After data cleaning, 40 responses were removed for failing attention checks, and 64 responses were removed for signs of straight-lining, leaving a sample of 296 valid responses (age $M = 40.34$, $SD = 13.20$, 50% female), which represented 74% of the original dataset. The EFA model conducted on the 28-item pool confirmed the multi-dimensionality of the athlete brand authenticity construct. At the same time, it put in doubt the appropriateness of the citizenship
dimension. *Citizenship* items either exhibited low loadings or strongly cross-loaded with the *genuineness* factor and purification would eventually lead to their exclusion. Therefore, I excluded the *citizenship* items and repeated the EFA on the same dataset to refine the list of items corresponding to the remaining three dimensions. The obtained model suggested a three-factor structure based on Kaiser 1 rule (eigenvalues > 1). However, after purification, only two items remained in the consistency dimension, which is below the recommended number of four to five items per dimension (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). Additionally, multiple of the remaining *uniqueness* and *genuineness* items had factor loadings below the recommended threshold of .700 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Therefore, to achieve greater stability of the scale, I revised the list of items by removing items with low loadings and adding new items to the list to better capture the emerging dimensions. Results of the second EFA indicated an improved structure of the scale and are presented in detail below.

The second iteration of EFA was conducted using a survey incorporating a revised list with 24 items. I recruited a sample of 322 consumers on Prolific, using the same criteria as in the first iteration (United States residents who follow sports). After data cleaning, 8 responses were dropped for failing attention checks and 63 responses were dropped for signs of straight-lining, leaving 251 usable responses (78% of the original dataset). Participants were on average 41.02 years old (*SD* = 13.20) and 55.4% male. The sample was 2% Native American, 7% Asian, 8% Black, 83% Caucasian, and 6% Hispanic. In terms of education levels, 1% did not graduate from high school, 35% were high-school graduates, 41% had a four-year college degree, 20% had a professional
degree, and 3% had a doctoral degree. In terms of annual household income levels, 7.2% earned below $30,000, 18% earned $30,000-50,000, 35.6% earned $50,000-100,000, and 38.2% reported earnings above $100,000, whereas 1.2% chose to not report their household income. 56.6% reported that they generally followed athletes on social media.

The survey was administered following the same procedure as the first iteration of EFA. 98% of participants chose an athlete from the list, whereas 2% (5 participants) indicated their own athlete. At the stage of pre-analysis check before EFA, I assessed: 1) sample size, 2) data distribution, and 3) factorability of the correlation matrix (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). Following the 1:10 item-to-response ratio recommended for scale development (Hinkin, 2005), this sample size was sufficient. Items’ skewness between [-1.865; -0.470], $SE_{Skewness} = 0.154$, and kurtosis between [-0.343; 4.572], $SE_{Kurtosis} = 0.306$ were generally following the ±3 cut-off guidelines for skewness and ±5 cut-off guidelines for kurtosis in prior literature (e.g., Kendall, 1948; McDonald et al., 2013). Moreover, for skewness all absolute values were within the ±2 range, whereas for kurtosis, 75% of items were within the ±2 range, suggesting that while some univariate kurtosis was present, this degree was acceptable given the majority of the items (i.e., above the recommended 60%) had a normal distribution (Ferguson & Cox, 1993; Muthén & Kaplan, 1985). To assess the appropriateness of the correlation matrix, I conducted the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity (Table 4.1). The KMO measure was .856, which was well above the required threshold of .60 (Tabachnick et al., 2019). Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1795.680$, $p < .001$).
$df = 66, p < .001$). These results indicated that the data were appropriate for factor analysis.

**Table 4.1**

*Measures of Correlation Matrix Factorability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy</td>
<td>.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</td>
<td>Approx. Chi-Square: 1795.680, df 66, Sig. &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list of items was purified by iteratively dropping items that exhibited loadings below .7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In the end, 12 items were left. Analyses following Kaiser 1 rule, scree plot heuristic, and parallel analysis (Ferguson & Cox, 1993) confirmed the retention of three factors. Specifically, three factors had eigenvalues >1. Further, the scree plot is presented in Figure 4.2 and suggests a break in the graph after the third factor. The observation was verified using the parallel analysis technique (PA; Horn, 1965) in R package ‘paran’ (Dinno, 2018), which entailed running a Monte Carlo simulation to produce an artificial random set of eigenvalues and plotting those against observed eigenvalues to identify the number of factors immediately before the point where the plots would cross (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). The final list of 12 retained items, four for each dimension, and their factor loadings are presented in Table 4.5. Overall, the final three-factor solution explained 66.07% of the variance.
**Figure 4.2**

*Scree Plot for EFA*

![Scree Plot for EFA](image)

*Note.* The scree plot shows the distribution of ‘initial’ eigenvalues representing a portion of the total standardized variance in the correlation matrix. The location of the elbow suggests retention of three factors.

**Table 4.2**

*Total Variance Explained*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Initial Eigenvalues</th>
<th>Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings</th>
<th>Rotation SSL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>% of Variance</td>
<td>Cumulative %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.920</td>
<td>41.003</td>
<td>41.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.798</td>
<td>23.314</td>
<td>64.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.217</td>
<td>10.144</td>
<td>74.461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SSL - Sums of Squared Loadings.
Figure 4.3

Horn's Parallel Analysis

![Graph showing observed and random eigenvalues]

*Note.* The plot contrasts observed eigenvalues to those produced based on random datasets. As random and adjusted eigenvalues plots cross after three factors, three factors should be retained.

Table 4.3

Horn's Parallel Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Adjusted Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Unadjusted Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Estimated Bias</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.092</td>
<td>4.520</td>
<td>0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.097</td>
<td>2.417</td>
<td>0.321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td>0.808</td>
<td>0.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>-0.052</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>-0.082</td>
<td>-0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>-0.092</td>
<td>-0.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>-0.155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adjusted eigenvalues are obtained by subtracting estimated bias (simulated eigenvalues) from the unadjusted (observed) values. The table suggests a three-factor solution as after three factors, the adjusted values turn negative (Dinno, 2018).
Table 4.4

*Items’ Commonalities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Initial $h^2$</th>
<th>Extracted $h^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UN1</td>
<td>Athlete is one of a kind.</td>
<td>.515</td>
<td>.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN2</td>
<td>Athlete has special characteristics that distinguish them from others.</td>
<td>.617</td>
<td>.658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN3</td>
<td>Athlete is unique.</td>
<td>.676</td>
<td>.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN4</td>
<td>Athlete is different from others.</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE1</td>
<td>Athlete expresses themselves rather than acting on script.</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE2</td>
<td>Athlete says what they think rather than what others want to hear.</td>
<td>.547</td>
<td>.610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE3</td>
<td>Athlete candidly expresses themselves.</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>.711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE4</td>
<td>Athlete shares what is on their mind.</td>
<td>.542</td>
<td>.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO1</td>
<td>Athlete’s self-presentation stays consistent over time.</td>
<td>.627</td>
<td>.674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO2</td>
<td>Athlete presents themselves in a similar manner on and off the sports arena.</td>
<td>.588</td>
<td>.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO3</td>
<td>Athlete’s actions in public align with what is known about them in private.</td>
<td>.611</td>
<td>.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO4</td>
<td>Athlete maintains a consistent image.</td>
<td>.657</td>
<td>.747</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5

*EFA Pattern Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN1</td>
<td>Athlete is one of a kind.</td>
<td>.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN2</td>
<td>Athlete has special characteristics that distinguish them from others.</td>
<td>.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN3</td>
<td>Athlete is unique.</td>
<td>.869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN4</td>
<td>Athlete is different from others.</td>
<td>.867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE1</td>
<td>Athlete expresses themselves rather than acting on script.</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE2</td>
<td>Athlete says what they think rather than what others want to hear.</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE3</td>
<td>Athlete candidly expresses themselves.</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE4</td>
<td>Athlete shares what is on their mind.</td>
<td>-.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO1</td>
<td>Athlete's self-presentation stays consistent over time.</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO2</td>
<td>Athlete presents themselves in a similar manner on and off the sports arena.</td>
<td>-.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO3</td>
<td>Athlete's actions in public align with what is known about them in private.</td>
<td>-.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO4</td>
<td>Athlete maintains a consistent image.</td>
<td>-.018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The table shows items retained after iterative deletion.
Table 4.6

*Correlations Between the Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Uniqueness</th>
<th>Genuineness</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.145</td>
<td>0.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness</td>
<td>0.145</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>0.637</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scale Validation.**

**Procedure and Sample.** The scale was validated using a new sample of participants from Prolific. I recruited a total of 353 participants, following the same criteria as in the EFA study (U.S. residents who regularly watch sports, with a 90% approval rating on Prolific). Like in the development survey, participants were asked to pick an athlete from the list or choose their own athlete and evaluate them based on the authenticity scale. For validation of the scale, I also added questions measuring athlete brand attitudes and commitment. All authenticity scale variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”). After cleaning the data by deleting responses that failed attention checks or had symptoms of straight-lining, 264 responses (75% of the original dataset) were retained. Following the recommended 1:10 item-to-participant ratio in structural equation modeling (Stevens, 2012), the sample size was sufficient for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM). The average age was $M = 39.68$ ($SD = 13.69$); the sample was 61.4% male. 2% of participants identified as Native American, 6% as Asian, 11% as Black, 80% as Caucasian, and 6% as Hispanic. Addressing the level of education, 4% reported not having a high-school degree, 33%
graduated from high school, 44% were college graduates, 21% had a professional degree, and 2% had a doctorate degree. Concerning annual household income, 10% reported income below $30,000, 12.5% $30,000-50,000, 39.3% $50,000-100,000, and 35.3% above $100,000. Further, 51.5% indicated they followed athletes on social media. Among these participants, 98.5% picked an athlete from the list to assess their evaluations and 1.5% (4 participants) chose their own athlete.

Descriptive statistics for the items are reported in Table 4.7 and correlations between the items are reported in Table 4.9. Cronbach’s α measures for all constructs were well above the .70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Further, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the .500 threshold for all constructs, indicating convergent validity. Discriminant validity between the factors within the CFA model was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method (Voorhees et al., 2016). Specifically, AVE for each factor was higher than the shared variance (squared correlations) with all other factors. Furthermore, the assessment of the HTMT ratio using the R package ‘semTools’ (Jorgensen et al., 2022) showed the ratios were well below the .85 threshold (Voorhees et al., 2016) for all latent constructs. Overall, the results of these tests indicated discriminant validity at the construct level. Correlations between the factors, Cronbach’s alphas, and HTMT ratios are reported in Table 4.8.
### Table 4.7

**Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Factors &amp; Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Uniqueness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN1</td>
<td>Athlete is one of a kind.</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>.904</td>
<td>.905</td>
<td>.704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN2</td>
<td>Athlete has special characteristics that distinguish them from others.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN3</td>
<td>Athlete is unique.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN4</td>
<td>Athlete is different from others.</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Genuineness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE1</td>
<td>Athlete expresses themselves rather than acting on script.</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.854</td>
<td>.839</td>
<td>.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE2</td>
<td>Athlete says what they think rather than what others want to hear.</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE3</td>
<td>Athlete candidly expresses themselves.</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE4</td>
<td>Athlete shares what is on their mind.</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consistency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO1</td>
<td>Athlete's self-presentation stays consistent over time.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.891</td>
<td>.894</td>
<td>.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO2</td>
<td>Athlete presents themselves in a similar manner on and off the sports arena.</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO3</td>
<td>Athlete's actions in public align with what is known about them in private.</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO4</td>
<td>Athlete maintains a consistent image.</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, α = Cronbach’s alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance explained.*

### Table 4.8

**Correlations and HTMT Ratios for Latent Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>UN</th>
<th>GE</th>
<th>CO</th>
<th>√AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>.629</td>
<td>.769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>.614</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>.822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. AVE = average variance explained. Pearson correlations are reported below the diagonal. HTMT ratios are reported above the diagonal.*
### Table 4.9

*CFA Correlation Matrix: Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>UN1</th>
<th>UN2</th>
<th>UN3</th>
<th>UN4</th>
<th>GE1</th>
<th>GE2</th>
<th>GE3</th>
<th>GE4</th>
<th>CO1</th>
<th>CO2</th>
<th>CO3</th>
<th>CO4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UN1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.667**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN2</td>
<td>.667**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN3</td>
<td>.731**</td>
<td>.730**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN4</td>
<td>.653**</td>
<td>.719**</td>
<td>.729**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE1</td>
<td>.129*</td>
<td>.204**</td>
<td>.146**</td>
<td>.143**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE2</td>
<td>.134*</td>
<td>.187**</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>.164**</td>
<td>.613**</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO1</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO4</td>
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<td>.093</td>
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<td>.278**</td>
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<td>.703**</td>
<td>.693**</td>
<td>.717**</td>
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*Note.* UN = uniqueness, GE = genuineness, CO = consistency.

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).** CFA was conducted in R using the package ‘lavaan’ (Rosseel et al., 2023). Results of CFA indicated an acceptable fit for the three-factor model: CFI = .968, TLI = .958, NFI = .957, GFI = .935, SRMR = .040, RMSEA = .068, $\chi^2$ (51) = 112.903, $p < .001$. These results were in line with recommendations from prior literature: Comparative Fit Index (CFI $\geq$ 0.95), Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI $\geq$ 0.95), Normed Fit Index (NFI $\geq$ 0.95), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI $\geq$ 0.90), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR $\leq$ 0.08), and Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA $\leq$ 0.08; e.g., Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair et al., 2006). Factor loadings ranged from .656 to .923, with only two items slightly below the recommended .70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Z-values indicating the relationship between each item and the corresponding construct ranged from 11.525 to 18.659 and were all significant ($p < .001$). Overall, on average 66.01% of the variance in the three factors was explained by the 12 items.
Dimensionality. To assess whether the three-factor solution was most appropriate, I evaluated rival models (Table 4.11). First, I evaluated a one-factor model, which was significantly worse than a three-factor solution (a $\chi^2$ difference of 1133.083 on 3 degrees of freedom). Second, I evaluated a two-factor model, where I combined the genuineness and consistency dimensions, whereas the second dimension was uniqueness. The two-factor model performed significantly worse than the three-factor model with a $\chi^2$ difference of 258.474 on 2 degrees of freedom. Finally, I considered a nested model, where all three first-order factors would be loaded on one second-order factor. However, the nested model had identical fit indices as the three-factor model. Hence, following the parsimony
principle, I retained the three-factor model as the final solution. This aligns with prior research suggesting there is no theoretical justification to privilege a complex second-order structure of authenticity construct (cf. Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015).

Table 4.10

Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

| Latent Variables: | \( \beta \) | \( z \)-value | \( p(>|z|) \) |
|-------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| **Uniqueness**    |             |               |              |
| UN1               | Athlete is one of a kind. | .705 | 15.386 | .000 |
| UN2               | Athlete has special characteristics that distinguish them from others. | .841 | 16.394 | .000 |
| UN3               | Athlete is unique. | .881 | 17.620 | .000 |
| UN4               | Athlete is different from others. | .832 | 16.119 | .000 |
| **Genuineness**   |             |               |              |
| GE1               | Athlete expresses themselves rather than acting on script. | .675 | 11.945 | .000 |
| GE2               | Athlete says what they think rather than what others want to hear. | .656 | 11.525 | .000 |
| GE3               | Athlete candidly expresses themselves. | .923 | 18.659 | .000 |
| GE4               | Athlete shares what is on their mind. | .811 | 15.357 | .000 |
| **Consistency**   |             |               |              |
| CO1               | Athlete's self-presentation stays consistent over time. | .747 | 13.725 | .000 |
| CO2               | Athlete presents themselves in a similar manner on and off the sports arena. | .830 | 16.011 | .000 |
| CO3               | Athlete's actions in public align with what is known about them in private. | .850 | 16.617 | .000 |
| CO4               | Athlete maintains a consistent image. | .855 | 16.771 | .000 |

*Note.* \( \beta \) = standardized regression coefficients. AVE = Average variance extracted.
Table 4.11

Comparison of Rival Models

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Comparisons</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
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<tr>
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<td>.245</td>
<td>.442</td>
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<td>.289</td>
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<td>.794</td>
<td>.767</td>
<td>.814</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.151</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three-factor model</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>.935</td>
<td>.943</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd-order factor model</td>
<td>112.903</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>.935</td>
<td>.943</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-factor model represents a model where all items are loaded on a single factor. In the two-factor model, genuineness and consistency items are combined.

**Discriminant and Concurrent Validity.** To establish concurrent validity of the authenticity scale, I tested the ability of the scale to predict athlete brand attitudes and commitment, inferring that brand authenticity is an antecedent of positive consumer attitudes and behaviors based on prior literature (e.g., Lee & Eastin, 2021). I used the brand attitude scale from Johnson, Bauer, & Arnold (2022) and adapted Neale and Funk’s (2006) brand commitment scale to test the relationships (for the list of items and correlation matrix see Appendix I). CFA was conducted to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the scale against the brand attitude and commitment variables. The solution exhibited a good fit: CFI = .976, TLI = .971, NFI = .945, GFI = .908, SRMR = .043, RMSEA = .053, $\chi^2$ (142) = 248.301, $p < .001$. The composite scores of the authenticity dimensions ranged between .845-.905 and AVE ranged between .595-.704, whereas the square root of AVE was above all correlations with other latent variables, which confirmed convergent and discriminant validity of the dimensions (Voorhees et al., 2016).
Structural equation modeling (SEM) was carried out to test the relationships between authenticity, attitude, and commitment (R package ‘lavaan’). The results of the SEM are present in Table 4.12. The model exhibited good fit: CFI = .973, TLI = .967, NFI = .942, GFI = .905, SRMR = .050, RMSEA = .056, $\chi^2 (142) = 260.934, p < .001$. All three dimensions of authenticity had a significant direct effect on brand attitude, including uniqueness ($\beta = .303, p < .001$), genuineness ($\beta = .235, p = .011$), and consistency ($\beta = .426, p < .001$). While only genuineness ($\beta = .225, p = .049$) had a significant direct effect on commitment, with the direct effects of uniqueness and consistency being non-significant, all three dimensions exhibited a significant indirect effect mediated by brand attitude, specifically $\beta = .272, p < .001$ for uniqueness, $\beta = .211, p = .013$ for genuineness, and $\beta = .383, p < .001$ for consistency. Further, the total effect of each dimension on brand commitment was significant, specifically $\beta = .322, p = .001$ for uniqueness, $\beta = .436, p = .002$ for genuineness, and $\beta = .292, p = .014$ for consistency. Overall, the results confirm the role of authenticity as an antecedent of brand attitudes and commitment.

**Discussion.** The study developed and validated the athlete brand authenticity instrument. Although in prior research scholars measured human brand authenticity with single-factor global measures (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), this stood in contrast with the conceptualization of authenticity as a multidimensional construct in other domains (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2014) and conceptualization of different levels at which authenticity is evaluated (Moulard et al., 2021).
Table 4.12

Results of the Mediation Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Direct effects</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniqueness $\rightarrow$ Brand attitude</td>
<td>.303***</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness $\rightarrow$ Brand attitude</td>
<td>.235**</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency $\rightarrow$ Brand attitude</td>
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<td>.083</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniqueness $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<td>Brand attitude $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect effects</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniqueness $\rightarrow$ Attitude $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness $\rightarrow$ Attitude $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency $\rightarrow$ Attitude $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
<td>.383***</td>
<td>4.576</td>
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<td><strong>Total effects</strong></td>
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<td>.322**</td>
<td>3.213</td>
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<td>Genuineness $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency $\rightarrow$ Commitment</td>
<td>.292*</td>
<td>2.449</td>
<td>.014</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** ***$p$ < .001, **$p$ < .01, *$p$ < .01 n = 132

Figure 4.5

Results of the Mediation Model

*Note.** Depicted are regression coefficients.
Through a series of studies featuring item generation, purification, and validation of the scale, a psychometrically sound instrument was developed. The scale consists of three dimensions: uniqueness, genuineness, and consistency, with each being composed of four items. These factors align with the vision of authenticity as evaluated against different referents. Thus, *uniqueness* captures authenticity as being “true-to-self,” *genuineness* captures authenticity as being “true-to-fact,” and *consistency* signifies “true-to-ideal” authenticity evaluating alignment with the enduring image communicated by the brand (Moulard et al., 2021). Like Lee and Eastin’s (2021) social media influencer authenticity scale, the current scale highlights the importance of genuineness and uniqueness in human brand evaluations. Unlike Lee and Eastin’s (2021) scale, it points to the lack of considerations for sponsorships or opinion leadership, which are components of a social media influencer brand (Schouten et al., 2020), yet are not as applicable to (micro)celebrities such as athletes whose prominence emerges in the real world rather than on social media. Further, unlike Lee & Eastin’s (2021) scale, the authenticity scale in this study uncovers the importance of consistency across self-presentation channels, revealing that while this may not be of primary concern for social media stars, whose fame has originated within the social media realm, maintaining consistency is of concern to traditional (micro)celebrities such as athletes.

At the same time, the scale does not contain extensive category-specific traits. Thus, beyond the item that measures consistency in an athlete’s self-presentation when they are on versus off the sports arena (and could be adapted to other human brand contexts), all other items and domains appear broad enough to include other categories of
human brands. While this warrants further validation of the scale in a new human brand context beyond athlete branding, the study contributes a more wholistic evaluation of human brand authenticity, encompassing the multiple interpretations of authenticity with a focus on athlete brand. The internal consistency of the factors is high, and the scale has been validated by establishing expected relationships with athlete brand attitude and commitment. Therefore, the scale was incorporated to measure authenticity perceptions in the Study 2 experiment.

**Study Two: Testing the Interactive Effects Between Brand Fit, Authenticity, and Situational Self-Disclosures**

The second study tested the hypothesized model featuring the interactive effects between brand fit and the perceptions of athlete brand authenticity and self-disclosures on promotional outcomes operationalized as donation intentions in the context of AxCSR marketing.

**Context.** The study is positioned in the context of AxCSR marketing. CSR marketing is a special case of promotional activities aiming at improving brand image through “doing good” (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2003). With athletes being faced with role model demands (Arai et al., 2013), AxCSR marketing is a means of achieving corporate social responsibility (Pharr & Lough, 2012). Both brand fit and endorser authenticity have been identified as key concerns in AxCSR marketing, since for a campaign to be successful, it must be perceived as a genuine intent (Ilicic & Baxter, 2014). Furthermore, non-profits and charities are increasingly pursuing athlete endorsement as it allows them to stand out from the marketing clutter (Lang, 2020; Roy & Graeff, 2003). Collectively,
these considerations make this promotional context relevant and practically meaningful for examination.

**Design and Procedure.** I used a 2 x 2 between-subject factorial design, where I manipulated cause brand fit (high vs low) as well as self-disclosure (present vs absent). The procedure was administered in line with previous research on advertising appeals and endorsement marketing where respondents viewed a hypothetical advertising scenario and subsequently completed a survey, whereas hypotheses were tested by comparing differences in aggregate data based on groups (e.g., Carlson et al., 2020; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Vignette design was appropriate considering the task of conducting a field experiment represented a practical challenge (Bauer et al., 2022).

Respondents were told that the goal of the study was to investigate athlete branding strategies. After this, participants were instructed to imagine that they used the social media platform Instagram and came across a post by the National Basketball Association (NBA) player LeBron James where he promoted a cause. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions: high fit/self-disclosure, low fit/self-disclosure, high fit/no self-disclosure, and low fit/no self-disclosure. As stimuli, participants were exposed to material that looked like an Instagram post and a caption by LeBron James, which they had to watch for 45 seconds before moving to the questions. LeBron James was used because he is an example of a celebrity athlete who is widely known and engages in charitable work. Using a real-world rather than a hypothetical athlete was necessary considering that one of the measured variables – i.e., authenticity – included a dimension of consistency, which alludes to the
judgement of athletes’ self-presentation across media and time. The photo in the post featured the athlete and a charity logo. Two charities – Hoops for Kids\(^3\) and Waste Aid\(^4\) - were selected for manipulation of high and low fit, respectively, using a pre-test. The caption to the post included a promotional message where the athlete introduced and advocated for donating to the charity. Self-disclosure was manipulated in line with prior literature (e.g., AlRabiah et al., 2022; Lee & Johnson, 2022) by including additional details about athletes’ opinions and personal stories. Differences in perceptions of self-disclosure, appropriateness of the message, and realism of the posts were pretested. The stimuli are presented in Appendix J.

**Pre-test 1: Brand Fit Manipulation.** The goal of the first pretest was to identify causes that would be appropriate for high and low fit conditions. The pretest was conducted with 50 participants from the market research platform Prolific who follow sports. Participants were consecutively exposed to four promotional scenarios that represented the same visual for a social media post but different names and logos of the promoted charity. The order of the four stimuli was randomized for each participant. Following prior research, I evaluated perceptions of fit for two charities in the sports category and two charities in the non-sports category and then chose brands with the highest and lowest ratings (Carlson et al., 2020). The brand fit was evaluated on a five-point differential measuring a set of six items in response to the following prompt “Do

\(^3\) Hoops for Kids is a charity that works to help at-risk youth by teaching essential life skills to support these children in becoming healthy, successful, and community-oriented individuals through the sport of basketball.

\(^4\) WasteAid works with communities and policy makers to implement waste management and recycling programs and contribute to a cleaner and healthier future for all.
you think that the combination of the [charity] brand and LeBron James’ brand is…” (Bigné et al., 2012). Items are presented in Table 4.14.

As a result of the pretest, charities Hoops for Kids (fit measurement Cronbach’s $\alpha$ = .974) and WasteAid (fit measurement Cronbach’s alpha $\alpha$ = .950) were chosen. A paired samples $t$-test indicated that the mean of brand fit perceptions for Hoops for Kids ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .80$) was significantly higher than the mean for WasteAid ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.04$) with $t(49) = 12.193$, $p < .001$. Notably, the average brand fit score for WasteAid was below the midpoint of the Likert scale (i.e., below 3). There was no significant difference in participant familiarity between the causes, with Hoops for Kids ($M = 1.26$, $SD = .63$) and WasteAid ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .548$), $t(49) = 1.941$, $p = .058$, based on a single-item measure “How familiar are you with [charity]?” (Martin et al., 2005), measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “Not familiar at all” to 5 = “Extremely familiar”). Overall, these results confirmed the validity of brand fit manipulation.

Pretest 2: Self-Disclosure Manipulation. The goal of the second pretest was to ensure that the self-disclosure manipulation worked. To manipulate self-disclosure as the integration of additional personal information to the promotional message (e.g., e.g., AlRabiah et al., 2022; Lee & Johnson, 2022), I identified relevant topics that typically score high on the self-disclosure continuum based on prior literature, such as details related to family, things that elicit pride, desires, and opinions (Rubin & Shenker, 1978). Further, I surveyed LeBron James’ interviews that discussed the above-mentioned topics to identify points to integrate, including interviews on James’ engagement in charitable work and his aspirations. After these details were identified, I closely reviewed LeBron
James’ content on social media and styled the textual stimuli after his style. Resultantly, in a no-self-disclosure condition, participants saw a message that solely shared information about the charity and advocated to support it with a donation. In self-disclosure condition, the text also contained a more personal message about what motivated the athlete to engage in philanthropy and why he supported this cause specifically. A pre-test with 40 respondents from Prolific showed that the manipulation was successful. Specifically, the mean scores for self-disclosure measures (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .966$) adopted from Kim and Sung (2021) were significantly higher in the self-disclosure condition ($M = 4.15, SD = .44$) than in the no-self-disclosure condition ($M = 2.22, SD = .92$), $t(38) = 7.953, p < .001$. Furthermore, participants perceived the promotional message as appropriate ($M = 4.35, SD = .89$) and realistic ($M = 4.20, SD = .99$).

Sample. A total of 309 participants were recruited on the market research platform Prolific. The sample included participants who were residents of the United States, followed sports and had a 90% approval rating on the platform. After data cleaning and deletion of responses that included failed attention checks or signs of straight-lining, 272 valid responses (88% of the original dataset) were retained. The average age was $M = 40.73, SD = 13.87$; the sample was 50% female. 1% identified as Native American, 10% as Asian, 10% as Black, 79% as Caucasian, and 5% as Hispanic. 4 reported not having a high-school degree, 39% were high-school graduates, 43% earned a college degree, 14% earned a professional degree, and 3% held a doctorate degree. In terms of annual household income, 12% earned below $30,000, 18% earned
between $30,000-50,000, 34.1% earned $50,000-100,000, and 35.6% earned above $100,000. 48.2% reported following athletes on social media.

**Measures.** The promotional outcomes toward charity were operationalized as donation intentions, in line with prior research (Lee & Babiak, 2019). Overall, the survey included the measures of consumer perceptions of athlete brand authenticity, cause-athlete brand fit, perceived self-disclosure, familiarity with the athlete, and sport involvement. The athlete brand authenticity was measured before exposing participants to the stimuli, using the scale developed in Study 1. Next, I exposed participants to the visual stimuli and a textual description of the charity and measured their perceptions of fit for manipulation check. This way, it was possible to isolate ratings of fit before introducing the textual stimuli. Finally, the remaining constructs were measured after introducing the stimuli using scales from prior literature. Specifically, brand fit was measured using a six-item scale from Bigné et al. (2012), like in the first pre-test. Perceived levels of the athlete’s self-disclosure were measured using a four-item scale adapted from Kim and Sung (2021), like in the second pre-test. Finally, donation intention was measured using a three-item measure from Lee and Babiak (2019). Brand authenticity and perceived self-disclosure were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”), whereas brand fit and donation intention were measured using a five-point semantic differential. Two attention checks were integrated in the survey to increase data quality and participants who failed both were excluded (Liu & Wronski, 2018). All measures and their items are included in Table 4.14.
Table 4.13

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Experiment

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Variables</th>
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<th>7</th>
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</table>

Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

Control Variables. Prior research suggested that behavioral outcomes toward celebrities and affiliated entities may be impacted by involvement and familiarity (Um, 2013). To address the potential extraneous effects, I measured consumers’ sport involvement using a three-item scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .831$) from Beaton et al. (2011) and athlete brand familiarity using a single item: “How familiar are you with LeBron James?” (Martin et al., 2005). Both constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”).

Analysis and Results.

Construct Validity and Assumption Check. Before conducting the analyses, I evaluated data distribution, descriptive statistics, psychometric properties of the constructs, and the correlation matrix. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 4.13. Skewness ranged [-1.706; - .006] and kurtosis ranged [-.976; 3.655], suggesting no issues with multivariate normality (Kline, 2015).
Table 4.14

*Psychometric Properties of Constructs and Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions and Items</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>( \alpha )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uniqueness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James is one of a kind.</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>.743</td>
<td>.920</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James has special characteristics that distinguish them from others.</td>
<td>.868</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James is unique.</td>
<td>.904</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James is different from others.</td>
<td>.837</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genuineness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James expresses themselves rather than acting on script.</td>
<td>.792</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James says what they think rather than what others want to hear.</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James candidly expresses themselves.</td>
<td>.826</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James shares what is on their mind.</td>
<td>.783</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consistency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.860</td>
<td>.606</td>
<td>.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James’ self-presentation stays consistent over time.</td>
<td>.779</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James presents themselves in a similar manner on and off the sports arena.</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James’ actions in public align with what is known about them in private.</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeBron James maintains a consistent image</td>
<td>.816</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Donation intention</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.909</td>
<td>.767</td>
<td>.901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improbable/Probable</td>
<td>.924</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikely/Likely</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impossible/Possible</td>
<td>.951</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand fit</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>.794</td>
<td>.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not congruent - Congruent</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompatible - Compatible</td>
<td>.900</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningless - Meaningful</td>
<td>.775</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not complementary - Complementary</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes together - Does not go together</td>
<td>.935</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illogical - Logical</td>
<td>.910</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-disclosure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.955</td>
<td>.845</td>
<td>.956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think this Instagram post contains a message about the athlete’s personal life.</td>
<td>.861</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete shares information about themselves.</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete shares information about their personal life.</td>
<td>.972</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete shares details of their personal story.</td>
<td>.904</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sport involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.870</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>.831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really enjoy watching sports.</td>
<td>.695</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching sports plays a central role in my life.</td>
<td>.923</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching sports says a lot about who I am.</td>
<td>.820</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before testing the hypotheses, I administered a CFA to examine the psychometric properties of the constructs. The results of the CFA indicated a good overall fit, CFI = .968, TLI = .964, NFI = .922, GFI = .879, SRMR = .043, RMSEA = .047, \( \chi^2 \) (329) = 530.655, \( p < .001 \). All items significantly loaded on their respective factors. Item loadings, AVEs, and composite reliability scores are included in Table 4.14. Examination
of the correlation matrix showed significant correlations between control variables and the dependent variable, supporting their use as controls.

**Manipulation Check.** To ensure that manipulations worked as expected, I conducted a pair of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) on the composite measures of cause brand fit (Cronbach’s α = .957) and self-disclosure (Cronbach’s α = .956) to compare the mean scores across conditions. There was a significant main effect of brand fit on the brand fit composite measure, $F(1, 276) = 113.364, p < .001, \eta^2 = .291$.

Specifically, perceptions of brand fit in the high cause brand fit condition ($M = 4.41, SD = .735$) were significantly higher than in the low cause brand fit condition ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.000$). Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of self-disclosure presence on the composite measure of self-disclosure perceptions, $F(1, 276) = 188.249, p < .001, \eta^2 = .586$. Perceptions of self-disclosure in the self-disclosure condition ($M = 4.099, SD = .659$) were significantly higher than in the no-self-disclosure condition ($M = 2.139, SD = .995$). Overall, these results confirmed that manipulations were effective.

**Moderating Effect of Athlete Brand Authenticity.** To test the hypotheses, I conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) hierarchical moderated regression (HMR; Anderson, 1986). Given authenticity levels were measured with continuous constructs, this allowed to maintain the total population without breaking it down into subgroups based on authenticity scores (Anderson, 1986). The modeling was administered through a series of steps (Table 4.15). In Model 1, I entered the control variables. Model 2 features the introduction of the cause-brand fit dummy variable (high = 1, low = 0). In Models 3-
I entered interaction terms between fit, authenticity dimensions, and self-disclosure. I used ANOVA tests to compare the increase in explanatory power between the models. To minimize the multicollinearity and make the results more interpretable, I employed the residual centering technique\(^5\) (Lance, 1988), used in prior research (e.g., Bottomley & Holden, 2001; Storey & Hughes, 2013). The process was performed using the R package ‘rockchalk’ (Johnson, Grothendieck, & OrfanosGabor, 2022) and entailed a two-step regression procedure where each interaction term (e.g., cause brand fit \(\times\) uniqueness) was regressed on its two component variables (i.e., cause brand fit and uniqueness). The resulting residuals were then saved as a new term and entered into the OLS model instead of the original interaction term (Lance, 1988). Evaluation of the variance inflation factors (VIFs) suggested that no issues with multicollinearity were present in the model after this adjustment, with VIFs equal to or below 1.458, which is well below the cut-off threshold of five (Hair et al., 2006). This suggested that multicollinearity was not an issue in the model.

First, I examined the main effect of fit. Model 2 showed a significant increase in variance explained compared to Model 1 which only contained control variables (\(\Delta R^2 = .079, p < .001\)), confirming that fit was a significant predictor of changes in the donation intentions. Consequently, I transitioned to hypothesis testing. Hypothesis 1 tested whether

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\(^5\) Although the most common way to address the issue of multicollinearity in moderated regression modeling is mean-centering the predictors, literature suggests this method is not always effective (Echambadi & Hess, 2007). In fact, mean-centering predictors did not resolve multicollinearity issues in this study. Therefore, I decided to employ the residual centering alternative. While I only report results of the regression modeling that featured residual centering technique, I compared these results to models with mean-centered predictors. While there were small changes in the values of coefficients, in terms of the significance testing, the results were similar.
the effects of cause-brand fit on donation intentions are moderated by perceptions of the athlete brand authenticity, including “true-to-self”, “true-to-fact,” and “true-to-ideal” types of authenticity.

Comparison of the models using ANOVA revealed a significant increase in variance explained in donation intention with the authenticity construct dimensions added as moderators ($\Delta R^2 = .104, p < .001$). I assessed the coefficient of the interaction between cause-brand fit and uniqueness. Unlike hypothesized, the results showed that there was a negative interaction between the levels of cause-brand fit and endorser uniqueness, i.e. “true-to-self” authenticity (Model 3: $\beta = -.418, p = .02$). Simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) visualized in Figure 4.6 indicated that there was a significant difference in slopes between the high and low levels of uniqueness ($\Delta \beta = .638, p = .019$). Specifically, when participants perceive a higher level of athlete’s uniqueness (+1 SD), an increase in the level of fit did not lead to significant changes in donation intentions ($\beta = -.057, p = .750$). However, when participants perceived a lower level of athlete uniqueness (-1 SD), a change in the level of fit was positively associated with significant changes in donation intentions ($\beta = .581, p = .001$). However, while significant, this effect was different from what was hypothesized, hence Hypothesis 1a was not supported.

Further, I assessed the interaction coefficient for fit and genuineness (“true-to-fact” authenticity). The coefficient of the interaction was not significant (Model 3: $\beta = .001, p = .993$). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was also not supported. Finally, assessing the coefficient for the interaction of brand fit with consistency (“true-to-ideal” authenticity), I found a positive moderating effect of consistency (Model 3: $\beta = .436, p = .02$), which
offered support for Hypothesis 1c. The simple slopes test was significant ($\Delta \beta = -.689, p = .016$). Simple slopes analysis visualized in Figure 4.6 suggested that for participants who had high perceptions of athlete consistency (+1 SD), the level of cause-brand fit had a positive effect on donation intentions ($\beta = .607, p = .001$), however for those who had low perceptions of athlete consistency (-1 SD), the level of cause-brand fit had no significant effect on donation intentions ($\beta = -.083, p = .654$).

**Figure 4.6**

*Moderating Effects of Uniqueness, Consistency, and Self-Disclosure*

*Hypothesis 2* suggested that the effects of cause-brand fit on donations intentions will be stronger when a self-disclosure appeal is present within the promotional post than when it is absent. Model 4 features the addition of self-disclosure as a moderator and shows a significant increase in variance explained ($\Delta R^2 = .019, p = .042$) compared to Model 3. I find a positive moderating effect of self-disclosure (Model 4: $\beta = .567, p = .02$). The interaction is further visualized in Figure 4.6. The simple slopes are significantly different across self-disclosure conditions ($\Delta \beta = .567, p = .016$). This illustrates that when self-disclosure is present, with an increase in the level of fit,
donation intentions increase \( (\beta = .525, p = .001) \). However, when self-disclosure is absent, the slope coefficient becomes non-significant \( (\beta = -.043, p = .806) \). This finding supports Hypothesis 2.

### Table 4.15

Results of Hierarchical Moderated Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport involvement</td>
<td>0.238***</td>
<td>0.245***</td>
<td>0.208**</td>
<td>0.218**</td>
<td>0.216**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete familiarity</td>
<td>0.153*</td>
<td>0.152*</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause-brand fit (FIT)</td>
<td>0.271*</td>
<td>0.261*</td>
<td>0.266*</td>
<td>0.267*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness (UN)</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuineness (GE)</td>
<td>0.114</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency (CO)</td>
<td>0.281**</td>
<td>0.287**</td>
<td>0.291**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-disclosure (S-D)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x UN</td>
<td>-0.418*</td>
<td>-0.414*</td>
<td>-0.416*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x GE</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x CO</td>
<td>0.436*</td>
<td>0.413*</td>
<td>0.408*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x S-D</td>
<td>0.567*</td>
<td>0.566*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN x S-D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE x S-D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO x S-D</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x UN x S-D</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x GE x S-D</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIT x CO x S-D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Model summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R2</th>
<th>.096</th>
<th>.112</th>
<th>.216</th>
<th>.235</th>
<th>.236</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta R^2 )</td>
<td>.016*</td>
<td>.104*</td>
<td>.019*</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R2</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td>.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F             14.66***</td>
<td>11.52***</td>
<td>8.219***</td>
<td>7.343***</td>
<td>4.743***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** \( n = 278. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. \)

Finally, Model 5 featured an addition of three-way interaction terms between fit, and authenticity dimensions to the regression. The increase in variance explained was not
significant, suggesting moderators did not add additional explanatory power (Anderson, 1986). Furthermore, none of the three-way interaction terms was significant. Thus, *Hypothesis 3* was not supported. An interesting tangential observation from the analysis was that, while accounting for all other variables entered in the regression, the control variable sport involvement was significant in all five models. This likely suggests that while accounting for fit and authenticity, consumers who are highly involved in sport are more likely to donate to a cause endorsed by an athlete than those who are not.

**Discussion.** Study 2 investigated the moderating effects of two different forms of authenticity, namely pre-existing perceptions of athlete brand authenticity as assessed in relation to the three different referents (Moulard et al., 2021), and situational authenticating appeals through self-disclosure, on the relationship between brand fit and promotional outcomes within the context of AxCSR marketing. The research findings point to significant moderation effects in this relationship: the interaction between fit and authenticity was found to be influenced by two dimensions of pre-existing perceptions of authenticity. Specifically, cause-brand fit and the perceived uniqueness of the athlete brand, which aligns with “true-to-self” authenticity, exhibited a negative interaction, indicating that at high levels of perceived uniqueness, the relationship between fit and donation intentions weakens. This is surprising given that based on prior research, one could infer that perceptions of self-directedness and individuality of the endorser should enhance the perceptions of genuineness (and thus coherence) of the partnership through assumptions of intrinsic motives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is likely the case because
perceptions of uniqueness may render an athlete’s brand unpredictable, undermining the desired stability that can help infer dispositional interferences (Mowen & Brown, 1981).

Unlike expected genuineness as “true-to-fact” authenticity did not moderate the relationship between fit and donation intentions. This finding could be specific to the AxCSR context given consumers do not assume an explicit calculative intent behind the partnership and therefore, the importance of inferring genuine motives is not as pronounced. Relatedly, it would be interesting to re-examine the interaction between fit and genuineness on promotional outcomes in a commercial rather than AxCSR context. Further, consistency, which aligns with “true-to-ideal” authenticity, also emerged as a significant moderator, yet consistent with proposed with the model, it positively moderated the relationship between fit and promotional outcomes. This is likely because a more stable and consistent athlete brand concept helps distinguish the fit element of the partnership more easily (Kamins, 1990). In this way, the study supports the importance of stability for human brands similar to traditional brands (cf. Bruhn et al., 2012).

Situational self-disclosures were identified as another significant moderator in the relationship between fit and donation intentions. Specifically, the integration of self-disclosure amplified the effect of fit. This aligns with a view of self-disclosures as having the potential to make the message more relatable and personable, while also augmenting the logic behind the endorser’s support of the brand (cf. Leite & Baptista, 2022). However, the study did not find a three-way interaction between fit, self-disclosure, and authenticity. This could suggest that self-disclosures being a common authenticating attempt in promotional content (e.g., Lee & Johnson, 2022), does not explicitly interact
with overarching perceptions of authenticity. Overall, this implies that authenticity and self-disclosure impact the strength of the relationship between brand fit and donation intentions but do so individually rather than jointly.

**General Discussion and Theoretical Contributions**

The work contributes to scholarship in three main ways. First, as a part of addressing the interaction between perceptions of brand fit and athlete brand authenticity, it investigates what the perceptions of athlete brand authenticity constitute, advancing prior research on human branding. While scholars have commonly measured human brand authenticity using unidimensional scales (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), this stood in contrast with the conceptualization and measurement of authenticity in other domains such as authenticity of traditional brands (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Relatedly, this study reconciles this inconsistency by deciphering the domains of authenticity for a human brand such as an athlete and supplying a multidimensional measure. The findings show that perceptions of authenticity rest upon the perceptions of uniqueness, genuineness, and consistency, which generally stays in line with the understanding of authenticity from the entity-referent correspondent perspective (Moulard et al., 2021) supporting a view of a multidimensional interpretation of authenticity through verification of purity and consistency of self-presentation against multiple referents.

Second, the study uncovers, within the context of AxCSR marketing, what authenticity dimensions interact with brand fit in their influence on promotional outcomes. This addresses calls in prior literature to look beyond the source credibility
model and consider what other endorser characteristics interact with brand fit as a part of the communication triad and affect promotional outcomes (cf., Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Silvera & Austad, 2004). The study shows that different authenticity dimensions can have differential effects on the relationship between fit and promotional outcomes.

Specifically, when athletes score high on uniqueness, which signals they are “true to self”, that can take away from the relational dynamic between fit and attitudinal changes, likely because athletes who are unique and different from others enrich consumer brand schemas with new information, making preconceived notions of fit less relevant. Notably, this may not necessarily be a negative implication as engaging these unique athlete endorsers could activate other mechanisms rendering the promotional attempt effective and memorable. Such a possibility should be explored in the future. Nevertheless, the findings show that the positive effect of fit weakens in this case.

Additionally, the findings establish the consistency dimension of athlete authenticity, which aligns with being true to a pre-established ideal (Moulard et al., 2021), as an important factor in helping amplify the brand fit. While prior research has suggested brands are not considered in isolation (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), this further elevates the importance of considering not just perceptions of a specific brand alliance, but rather how they are constructed in relation to consumer knowledge about the athlete (cf., Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), including temporal and self-presentational components.

Third, the study addresses the role of situational authenticity appeals such as the integration of self-disclosures on the relationship between fit and promotional outcomes. This likely indicates that self-disclosures that elaborate on the link between the athlete
endorser and the promoted cause help clarify the concept, strengthening its impact on consumer intentions. While prior research has focused on how self-disclosures impact evaluations of influencers (e.g., Leite & Baptista, 2022; Leite et al., 2022), these findings uncover the value of self-disclosures within the promotional context such as driving a change in consumer intentions through amplifying the effects of brand fit.

Managerial Implications

Previous research has acknowledged the significance of brand fit and endorser authenticity as key factors influencing consumer behaviors (Moulard et al., 2015). However, translating these insights into actionable strategies often remains a challenge for practitioners (Gensler et al., 2013). This study addresses this concern by providing a more concrete understanding of consumer perceptions of athlete brand authenticity and its potential to amplify the effects of brand fit. The study provides four main actionable insights for marketers, sponsors, and agents working with athletes.

First, it offers tools for monitoring and cultivating consumer perceptions of athlete brand authenticity, which can be done using the instrument developed in this study. The findings suggest practitioners should focus on three facets of athlete brand personality: uniqueness, genuineness, and consistency, to ensure perceptions of authenticity. For example, by identifying differentiating aspects of an athlete’s brand personality, athletes and their agents can reinforce consumer perceptions of athletes’ authenticity. The scale also highlights the importance of consistency, both temporally and across various contexts and media of self-presentation. Second, the findings highlight the intrinsic link between authenticity and self-disclosure in athlete branding. Specifically, emphasizing
genuine self-expression rather than scripted behavior is critical, considering genuineness represents an authenticity dimension. Integrating self-disclosure and sharing personal insights, goals, and aspirations can be a relevant strategy in this respect.

Third, the study demonstrates how authenticity – both enduring and situational, such as acts of self-disclosure – can impact the outcomes of athlete brand alliances, particularly in the context of AxCSR marketing. In this work, the findings reveal that situational self-disclosures in promotional posts can help cause promotions because they strengthen the linkage between consumer perceptions of the brand alliance fit and donation intentions toward the charity. Thus, athletes can leverage social media platforms to share personal insights, articulate their goals, and express why specific charitable causes resonate with them. By engaging in such self-disclosure, athletes enhance consumer processing of their brand messages and strengthen the association between brand fit and behavioral intentions.

Fourth, the findings reveal joint effects of brand alliance fit and perceptions of athlete brand authenticity on consumer behaviors such as donations toward a cause. The findings show that charity brands who seek to leverage brand fit for promotional outcomes may need to be cautious when considering the selection of an endorser who is particularly unique as this can dissolve the link between brand fit and desired outcomes. At the same time, the findings stress the importance of choosing endorsers who are consistent in their self-presentation because this quality is highly valued by consumers in relation to athlete brands and it increases the persuasive power of athletes in the AxCSR marketing context.
Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations, which offer opportunities for future research. First, the experimental design implies limitations with respect to the external validity of the findings. Although the goals of the manipulations were achieved, the study only considered the effects for one athlete, using a pair of brands, and in a mock format. Thus, future research should examine these effects on different athletes and brands, and in a real-world context, for instance, through collaborations with real-world athletes or influencers and surveying their followers or tracking their social media engagements.

Studying the concept of human brand authenticity and its interactive effects with brand fit in a different promotional context can advance the knowledge on authenticity theoretically since authenticity norms can vary across domains (cf., Lehman et al., 2019). While the study distills the meaning of brand authenticity for athlete brands, applicability of the scale for other types of human brands needs to be tested. Thus, future research should validate the scale in other contexts of human brands and/or investigate the dimensions of human brand authenticity in other contexts. Additionally, in this research, authenticity emerges as a predominantly positive characteristic, although controversial figures in sport and beyond can also be authentic. Thus, future research should investigate what potentially controversial and/or negative interpretations can be tied to authenticity and how it impacts both athlete brands as well as the value that they provide as endorsers.

Furthermore, the patterns of the interactive dynamic between authenticity and brand fit demonstrated in this study may also be idiosyncratic to the context featured in
the experimental condition, that is AxCSR marketing. Athletes face the expectations to be role models and are known to engage in AxCSR marketing and charitable work (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2022), which can affect how consumers perceive these instances. Therefore, future research should investigate what authenticity dimensions interact with perceptions of brand fit for other celebrity brands and in other promotional contexts.

This work concurs with prior research in demonstrating that self-disclosure can be a potent strategy in affecting consumer behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Leite et al., 2022), yet I operationalized self-disclosure in a single manner. Prior research suggests the effects of self-disclosures vary depending on the format, appropriateness, and composition of self-disclosure, with a potential to enhance or hinder branding outcomes (e.g., AlRabiah et al., 2022). While the appropriateness of self-disclosure was accounted for and pre-tested when designing the stimuli, I did not manipulate its format. Thus, future research could inquire into the interactions of different self-disclosure types both with perceptions of athletes and their brand partnerships. Finally, how participants were sampled also represents a limitation. The study relied heavily on student samples for the pilot tests and examined the hypotheses using panel data such as Prolific. While the usage of market research platforms is common in social science research, these participants may be different from typical consumers. Thus, it is important to replicate the findings using the sample of actual sport consumers.

**Conclusion**

While prior research has established the importance of brand fit in athlete endorser marketing, how these perceptions interact with perceptions of athletes’
personality traits such as authenticity has not been investigated. This research addresses this gap by investigating moderating effects of enduring perceptions of authenticity as well as the integration of self-disclosure as a situational manifestation of authenticity on the relationship between brand fit and promotional outcomes in the context of AxCSR athlete marketing on social media. As a part of doing so, the study develops and validates a psychometrically sound scale to measure athlete brand authenticity. Through an experiment design, it tests the impact of authenticity dimensions and self-disclosure on the intention to donate to a charity. The work shows that the dimensions of uniqueness and consistency interact with perceptions of brand fit on promotional outcomes. Furthermore, the work establishes the potential of self-disclosure to improve the relationship between brand fit and donation intentions. The work advances research on endorsement marketing and human brands and provides practical implications to athletes and stakeholders working with them.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This dissertation investigated issues related to athlete personal brand management and monetization on social media, delving into unique aspects of managing a human brand. Prior research on human brands has predominantly focused on consumer-based perspectives such as perceptions, brand associations, and behaviors toward these brands. Yet, these studies often borrowed concepts and theories from research on product and service brands, failing to acknowledge the distinctiveness of human brands. This stands in contrast with conceptual arguments suggesting the “human” in the human brands holds the potential to alter the brand dynamic and meaning, warranting the need to re-examine what makes these brands unique. In response to this gap, the current dissertation has refrained from taking the existing branding concepts “as is” and ventured to reconstruct the elements of managing a human brand, particularly concerning its psychological and self-presentation aspects. Resultantly, it contributed a collection of three individual essays, each examining a distinct element of managing a human brand. A multi-study approach, with a particular emphasis on inductive elements, helped accomplish this goal, extending the theoretical and conceptual view of the human brand concerning interactions with the environment, self-presentation negotiation, and brand content narrative.

The Essay I brought attention to the intricacies of building an athlete’s personal brand with a focus on how this activity emerges under the influences of personal motivations, individual-level, and environmental factors. Specifically, building on prior
research that suggests human brands are not built in isolation but rather through interactions with relevant stakeholders, it integrated a personal branding perspective with a theoretical lens on fit experience. Specifically, drawing on a grounded theory approach and interviews with NCAA student-athletes, the study constructed a model of fit experience in personal branding, elucidating three distinct levels and six facets of fit that capture identity, lifestyle, organizational, and market-level aspects. In doing so, it accentuated the nuances that differentiate the experience of fit in personal brand monetization from other domains. These considerations included market niche fit, the salience of identity-related concerns, and a relational triangle where organizational resources are juxtaposed against market demands. Positioned within the college athletics context, the study addressed the emerging issue of NIL monetization within the sports industry. The findings of the study provide actionable insights for both student-athletes and relevant stakeholders, offering guidance on how to best support student-athletes through the NIL monetization experience.

Building upon the experiential perspective presented in Essay I, Essay II shifted the focus toward examining how athletes operate at the verge between the front and back stages of personal branding, examining the negotiation of self-presentation and authenticity production processes. It examined the cyclical processes that individuals go through as they strategize how to present themselves in a manner that both appears real and truthful, yet also effectively balances the emotional, structural, financial, and publicity pressures and concerns. Specifically, through a grounded theory approach and interviews with an international sample of niche-level elite and professional athletes, the
study identified the stages of the authenticity negotiation process, encompassing motivations, authenticity conceptualization, barriers, and strategies. The study revealed six different ways in which individuals understand and enact authenticity in personal branding within the online environments, while also shedding light on athlete brand context-specific concerns, such as sport brand ecosystem influence and role model socialization and expectations. Overall, the study advanced the understanding of authenticity in the online context as a deliberate balancing of raw and performative elements in self-presentation.

Finally, in Essay III, the focus remains on the person-centric aspects of athlete branding yet shifts from an athlete-level perspective to a consumer-based viewpoint. The research examines how authenticity elements are perceived by consumers and interact with perceptions of fit in influencing donation intentions toward a charity supported by the athlete. To investigate consumers’ understanding of athletes’ authenticity, the study develops and validates a scale of consumer-based athlete brand authenticity. The findings identify three dimensions that underpin this construct: uniqueness, genuineness, and consistency. By introducing a view of this multidimensional structure of athlete brand authenticity, the study offers a novel perspective on authenticity within the realm of human branding, departing from prior literature that viewed human brand authenticity as a global construct. This also addresses the inconsistency between the understanding of authenticity in human branding versus other domains such as traditional branding and psychology where authenticity is traditionally viewed as comprising multiple dimensions. Further, the study uncovered the moderating effects of perceptions of athlete brand
authenticity and situational authenticity through self-disclosures on the relationship between brand fit and promotional outcomes. This adds a theoretical perspective on the interaction of judgements about endorser personality and self-presentation and brand partnership-level perceptions of promotional outcomes, confirming the importance of accounting for the ‘person’ component within the human brand and providing actionable insights to practitioners.

Through an examination of athletes’ experiential perspective on the negotiation of fit and authenticity, as explored in Essays I and II, and an investigation into consumer perceptions of fit and authenticity in athletes’ promotional activities, as presented in Essay III, this study offers an insightful opportunity to contemplate the interrelation between the backstage and frontstage aspects of athletes’ self-presentation. In this way, the inquiry allows for assessing whether the approaches and tactics employed by athletes yield the desired outcomes. It is revealed that, concerning fit in promotional activities, an athlete’s perspective is notably more intricate than that of the audience. While the audience is primarily concerned with image-based alignment in promotional activities as they assess fit, the findings from Essay I suggest that what the audience sees is only the tip of the iceberg. To construct such a perception of an alignment, athletes engage in a rigorous and cyclical negotiation process pertaining to identity, ability, value, and vision-based aspects as part of their involvement in personal brand monetization and specific brand partnerships. Failure to establish fit along these multifaceted dimensions likely renders the projection of an impression of fit and authenticity unattainable.
Moreover, the comparative analysis of athletes’ authenticity perceptions in personal branding, as experienced by the athletes themselves and perceived by consumers, reveals the existence of potential tensions. Essay II demonstrates that a crucial element of athletes’ authenticity perceptions lies in their eudemonic, self-directed self-expression, providing them with the liberty to experiment with their identity. Nevertheless, Essay III suggests that this self-directedness and the associated uniqueness in self-expression may not always be advantageous, as it can undermine the impact of brand alignment on promotional outcomes. Conversely, the degree of consistency in self-expression, as a fundamental aspect of authenticity, holds value for both athletes and their audiences. Essay II underscores athletes’ understanding of authenticity as consistency through an alignment for their online and public personas, while Essay III uncovers the essentiality of aligning self-presentation across various communication channels to achieve an authentic self-presentation. It should be noted that some tactics identified in Essay II for projecting authenticity remain beyond the scope of investigation for Essay III. However, one notable revelation is that authenticating self-disclosures, encompassing personal stances, opinions, and narratives of personal experiences, can enhance the outcomes of promotional activities that athletes engage in. Overall, the disparities in athletes’ assessments of their self-presentation compared to the audience’s evaluations underscore the significance of bridging the perspectives of the branded individuals and their audience. This scholarly endeavor constitutes a promising avenue for future research, allowing for the evaluation of the effectiveness of athletes’ self-presentation strategies.
The collective contribution of the three essays advances the literature on human brands as a distinct research stream. This dissertation draws attention to the psychological aspects involved in managing a human brand and demonstrates how the brand is negotiated in relation to identity, lifestyle, entourage, and personal values. Moreover, it expands the view of dynamics impacting human brands, encompassing social, organizational, media, and structural elements, which are evident in the grounded models contributed by this work. Finally, the work emphasizes the importance of storytelling and how humanness and authenticity can be leveraged to enhance brand success. By exploring these dimensions of human brand management, the work provides a platform for future investigations. Notably, the cyclical nature of self-negotiations in brand building emerges as a recurring theme in the findings, suggesting the potential to investigate its temporal dimensions in the personal branding process. Understanding how brand identity is built and evolves, both on the intrapersonal level and through stakeholder interactions, is an area that has been largely overlooked in existing research. Additionally, the research highlights the influences of social interactions and collaborations with stakeholders, prompting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the patterns and dynamics within these relationships. Future work should examine how these relationships are established, managed, and communicated to consumers, providing deeper insights into their impact on human branding. Finally, while the research contributes to our understanding of athlete brand authenticity through the development of an authenticity measure, it also uncovers the rich potential for future investigation. Exploring the relationship between authenticity dimensions and other key variables in
athlete branding research within commercial, social, and AxCSR contexts holds significant promise for further contributions in this domain.


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APPENDIX A

ESSAY 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductory Questions

1. What place does NIL monetization pursuit hold in your life?
2. What NIL opportunity (or opportunities) have you pursued or considered?
3. How much time do you dedicate to NIL monetization pursuit on a weekly (monthly) basis?

Key Questions

Decision-making stages

1. How do you navigate the process of NIL monetization?
2. How did you become interested in pursuing a NIL opportunity? What motivated you?
3. How have you started? How has your experience been so far?
4. How did you determine the NIL opportunity that you want to pursue?
5. How do you evaluate the outcomes of NIL monetization?
6. What keeps you going?
7. How do you integrate the pursuit of NIL opportunities into your schedule?
8. Through your involvement, did you learn anything that you think could benefit you in the future personally or professionally? If yes, what is it? How can it benefit you?
9. Has your involvement in the NIL opportunity been valuable to you (financially/socially/otherwise)? How? Why or why not?
10. What do you think is most challenging about pursuing a NIL opportunity? Why do you think so?

11. What do you think is most rewarding about pursuing a NIL opportunity? Why do you think so?

**Influence of individual-level factors**

12. How have your personal tastes and values impacted your pursuit of NIL monetization?

13. How has your financial situation affected your pursuit of NIL monetization?

14. How has your lifestyle affected your pursuit of NIL monetization?

15. How have the opinions of your parents impacted your pursuit of NIL monetization?

16. How has your major and professional aspirations impacted your NIL monetization?

**Influence of organizational and market factors**

17. What are your strategies for balancing this involvement with your other responsibilities?

18. Has your lifestyle been affected by your pursuit of NIL opportunities? If yes, then how?

19. How has the support provided to you by your university affect your NIL monetization?

20. How have people in the athletic department affected your pursuit of NIL monetization?
21. How has your understanding of the state of the market affected your pursuit of NIL monetization?

22. How has your geographic location affected your pursuit of NIL monetization?

**Probe Questions**

1. Can you give me an example?

2. Is there other factor influencing your decision / perception?

3. Please describe what you mean.
APPENDIX B

ESSAY 1: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Warm-Up

1. Please introduce yourself. What are your major, sport, year in the program?
2. What do you know about the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) policy?
3. How did you learn what you know?

Questions on Interest in Pursuing a NIL Opportunity

1. Have you ever been interested in potentially pursuing a NIL opportunity?
   a. Why or why not?
2. Have you engaged in an NIL opportunity?
3. (If the answer is yes) What kind of opportunity and why?

Probes (if necessary)

Could you please elaborate…

Could you please tell more about…

Questions on Factors Shaping Pursuit of a NIL Opportunity

1. For you, what factors or thoughts shape your decision on whether to get involved in the pursuit of NIL opportunities?
   a. What challenges do you think may be associated with pursuing a NIL opportunity?
   b. What benefits do you think may be associated with pursuing a NIL opportunity?
Probes

And what about

• Academic schedule
• Athletic schedule
• Social responsibilities
• Personal preferences and interests
• Personal thoughts and feelings
• People that surround you
• Lifestyle
• Information/level of familiarity with the topic
APPENDIX C

ESSAY 2: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Warm-Up

1. How did you begin your sports career?

Factors Contributing to Authenticity Search

2. How did you start communicating about your career on social media?
3. What role does social media play in your career?
4. Who is the audience that evaluates your content?

Perceptions of Authenticity

5. How do you brand yourself on social media?
6. What image do you seek to project?
7. What do you think about when creating a post?
8. How do you communicate with your followers about the highs and lows of your career?
9. What does it mean to ‘be yourself’ on social media?
10. Sometimes, one concern that athletes indicate in relation to their personal branding is authenticity. Is it important for you to be authentic in your personal branding?
11. How would you define being authentic?
12. How would you define being inauthentic?
13. Could you please give an example, in as many details as possible, of a time when you felt like you were being your true self on social media?
Authenticity constraints

14. Do you feel like you can fully express yourself on social media? Why or why not?

15. What challenges do you experience concerning personal branding?

16. What people or organizations influence how you brand yourself? How do they influence you?

17. Could you please give an example, in as many details as possible, of a time when you created a post but felt like it was not quite reflective of you?

Authenticity Management Strategies

18. What strategies and tools do you use?

19. How do you react to positive and negative feedback on social media?

20. Did it ever happen to you that you created a post but it did not receive the engagement you hoped for? If yes, how did it influence your branding?

21. How do you evaluate social media trends and engagement with your posts?
APPENDIX D

ESSAY 2: EXEMPLARY QUOTATIONS

Factors Contributing to Authenticity Search

Intrinsic Factors

I like to be authentic and true to myself, and I don’t want anything to be put out by myself or let alone somebody else, that has nothing to do with my perception of myself or how I see myself. I think people get lost in social media and the content that they see, and they want to project themselves to be different from how they are. And that’s just something I’ve never been into. (Athlete #30, M)

I want people to come to me because they know who I am and what I stand for. (Athlete #5, F)

For me also, using social media there’s got to be a reason behind it. If I’m posting something, I want to [be positive] whilst also showing that sometimes it’s okay to not be okay and everyone struggles because in life people will have challenges. I think it’s good to put that across. This makes you human and makes you relatable. I’m just another person, I have a personality, I have feelings, I care, and I’m not an untouchable person. We all laugh, we all cry, and it’s good to acknowledge that. (Athlete #22, F)

Extrinsic Factors

I have gained so much in the dark, low places of my life, and I’ve gained momentum from crawling out of that and surviving it. No one wants to see this fairytale-like “oh, my life is perfect”, even though we feel like we have to display that for whatever reason or we’re too prideful. But people don’t want to see that. People want to see someone who has a survival story or just has more to their story than ‘this was just handed to me.’ And so highlighting those challenges has helped me gain a following and a fan fanbase. (Athlete #27, F)

Just individual messages from people who say that I really appreciate how real you are. I appreciate how you’re not trying to be, you know, trying, I guess, to be a certain way. (Athlete #24, F)

If people find out [about inauthenticity] essentially, then they’re not even going to listen to you anymore. They will be like, this guy he’s so fake. He just promotes things that he doesn’t even like, what’s the point? (Athlete #28, M)
Authenticity Perceptions

Revealing the True Self

Authentic would be when you talk about what was going on in your mind and it might be something that you maybe do not necessarily want to share. Maybe you’re a little embarrassed by it. As soon as you bring out the emotions that you have, that becomes more authentic. For example, in some videos, I would talk about me being worried about a race or scared of my competition or something else that as professional athletes, it’s not something we want to admit to the public. (Athlete #28, M)

I got quite a philosophical mind, I write in ways that express how I think, my inner thoughts. So, again, for me, it [being authentic] is just being as real as I can and giving people me. And not trying to give them just what they want. But giving them what they want through my lens kind of thing. (Athlete #3, M)

I think that I’ve gotten pretty good at just telling a very raw, authentic story, even the ugly parts of it. I love writing, I’m a writer as well, so I can really utilize captions to express my personality. Words are powerful so they can touch people, I am also a strong photographer. So tying those two things together has been my strength and has really shown my personality through that and told my story through that. (Athlete #27, F)

Consistency Between the Online and the Offline Self

People know that my life’s not always perfect and happy and everything works out exactly as I plan it. Being able to share times when I struggle or any sort of low points, I feel like just kind of bring it back into my own authenticity. (Athlete #24, F)

There shouldn’t be anything different in what I say to you personally from how I present myself on social media. (Athlete #10, M)

That’s who I am and I’m like that in real life too. I don’t really change in front of anyone. I’ve been feeling that – not just with athletes, but also with this new wave of celebrities – people are being more real and more open. I feel like the athletes also stopped being just like the athlete, the power figure, and are a little more open about the struggles of their athlete life and how they feel for real. (Athlete #19, F)
Authenticity Constraints

Institutional Norms

Before you go to the [Olympic] Games, it is kind of like Dos and Don’ts class. So as a USA athlete, they give you a list of things that you cannot post, things that you cannot say. They would like for you to shy away from political talk. They tell you how to engage with the interviews and post them on your social media. (Athlete #4, F)

And just seeing what my teammates posted, it’s hard not to do the same thing that everyone else is doing. Something happens in our day-to-day and everyone kind of does a similar post. It is tough to think outside the box and do something different because you want to put the team first. Our team’s very close and you don’t want to do anything on social media to take away from that. So I’m always second-guessing what I’m posting and how this will affect the team. Last year, our coach asked us to not post our training on social media because we have a competitive advantage, and he didn’t want people to see what we were doing. At that point, everyone was like, this isn’t realistic. We want to share our journey with everyone. (Athlete #26, F)

I’m thinking about potential sponsors or partners and want to make sure that I am portraying the best version of myself. You’ll rarely see a picture of me with like a drink in my hand or something like that, or I can’t even think of what else I might be doing that would possibly be perceived as bad. Just thinking about those potential – so not only sponsors but young kids who might be looking up to me and how they might be perceiving me, I make sure what I’m wearing is appropriate and what is in the caption is appropriate. (Athlete #9, F)

Commercial Incentives

There is some competition between all the Paralympic athletes. We’re always looking at [each other’s] accounts and being like, “Oh no, they’re past me. I got to catch up, look at me.” (Athlete #19, F)

If a coach has two players who are on the same basketball level and they see that one has more followers, and more fans, probably they will choose that one. They will promote the team more; more followers means more sponsors for the team. (Athlete #11, F)

You need to have engagements for your sponsors to want to keep sponsoring you, which is why I try to post things that I know people will like. (Athlete #25, F)
Commercial Protocols

I got told off by my agents like last year because I didn’t post enough. (Athlete #7, F)

I have had one partnership – it was a mattress company – where I had a set contract in place. You had to post four times a month. I didn’t enjoy it, to be honest. I know that that’s the way of doing things, but for that same reason, it was like, I just don’t want to post. And if I don’t feel like posting, it’s just like checking the boxes. So, I think I would think twice before doing something like that again. (Athlete #26, F)

If you’re not aligning with the brand, that’s another big one. That’s going to be a big issue with the company and just how they see you if you want to be working together. It’s taken a lot of work for me on my end. I’ve had to reach out to people higher up in the company and form relationships with them. And any slogan that the brand uses, you want to use that. You want to use the hashtags that they use. Every picture that I post needs to be in their clothing and not really any other clothing. (Athlete #27, F)

Social Media Risks

I do not post too much personal stuff on Instagram because people are watching me, and I do not want to put my address, I do not want to put where I live because it is very easy for people to go: “oh, she is always at this address at this time” and I definitely had issues where, you just do not feel comfortable with people like seeing everything I post. So my kind of formula is: general but still personal. (Athlete #1, F)

I think there are a lot of times people don’t go ahead, they do too much, they might say too much that might turn off their demographic. (Athlete #18, M)

You publish photographs and then bookmakers find you on social media and send you a lot of negative stuff. That is also a big disadvantage of social media. (Athlete #14, F)

Authenticity Management Tactics

Self-Authentication

I’m pretty creative and I like to create cool content that is catchy and stands out from the normal [...] I write poems sometimes. And I have a book of poems that I’ve written, and they are very, very expressive, and I posted a few on Instagram
and Facebook just to let people have insight into a different side of me. (Athlete #30, M)

Doing the same stuff over and over again burns me out. I get tired of it because it is a lot of your time trying to post something for people. It’s not really about the people, it is about you. You want people to not just see you always training, you want to have some humor in that content. That way, people can really see who you are as well. Let’s say, I am with a friend, we’re doing something silly or maybe we are dancing, just having fun. It’s not always good to always be boring and train all the time. You gotta live a little. (Athlete #29, F)

In my off-season for bodybuilding, I showed you don’t have to be lean year around. It’s okay to gain weight. It’s okay to eat more food. It’s okay to have more body fat. The driving factor at that was because I felt good at that moment. I felt confident. And I, I wanted to be able to post that and share it and look back when I’m really lean to be like, you know, what? You were really comfortable then as well. And you were happy and confident. (Athlete #24, F)

For Pride Month, I posted about my partner and me. I tried to kind of give them a little bit of an insight into how things have been like. That’s me being authentic when I’m describing something I’ve gone through – mental health, being gay, that type of stuff. I feel like those always leave me feeling good. I just feel like I’m showing my audience who I fully am. (Athlete #26, F)

**Authenticity Refinement**

I try, when possible, not to post anything assertive on my social media to avoid conflicts with anyone who disagrees. It is kind of hard to understand both sides via social media because there is not much interaction or give them a chance to completely explain themselves. So I think I am trying to stay away [from controversial topics]. (Athlete #6, M)

The image that I wanted to portray for myself is being a respectable, serious, young professional woman. I’m not like an Instagram model in a bikini or with a wine glass in my hand. I’m not in leggings showing my behind off. I’m not in crop tops showing off my chest. I’m not in sexy clothing. I’m not showing off to try to be sexy. I’m in my uniform. I’m in my tracksuit. If I’m in regular clothes, I’m fully covered. Even with my facial expressions, I’m very limited in showing even a few smiles. I do have content that does show that I do have personality, but I keep everything conservative. (Athlete #21, F)

The demographic of the age group that I interact with on Instagram is different from that on Facebook. Just within USA volleyball, that crowd within itself is a
younger group, girls within maybe 13 through 18, whereas on Facebook it is an older group around the 50s, 60s, and 70s, so the way I interact with people on Instagram is completely different from the way I would interact on Facebook. (Athlete #4, F)

You can take my caption and you can break it down into different levels. So maybe I will say something that’s going to target one audience in a part of it, and then another audience in the other part of it. (Athlete #24, F)

**Authenticity Orchestration**

Some athletes do that [post staged content] if they’re injured and they don’t want to tell. (Athlete #28, M)

So sometimes I go on the road for a bike ride and it is beautiful. So I would create one of those posts. And then for the other one, I would just put it in a draft. And so then I can use that when I’m not in the mountains when I’m at home, and when my life is boring by my standards for like a week, then I would post that. But I wouldn’t be like, hey, this is a flashback. That and then like a sponsored post and it’s usually enough of a filler to keep the content coming. (Athlete #25, F)

I have a video of a training session where we try to implement some branding [of sponsors], but so that the focus is on the brand and not the person. So it has to be authentic, has to be natural. It’s difficult. But because we work with the production company, they can do that. Like not looking at the camera, making sure that I’m acting normal, that I’m having a conversation or exercising, and not looking at the camera or trying to be in a pose that makes it seem like I’m promoting the brand. That is organic and that is not forced in any way. (Athlete #23, M)

I think if there was communication between me and my social media manager, that would be something that I would want to go for. I think if we sat down and planned it out, it would still be authentic, especially with the message and me not fully giving it out that I am giving it [social media] off to someone to do as a job, but me staying involved in the process as well. (#Athlete 21, F)
## APPENDIX E

### ESSAY 3: LITERATURE REVIEW ON SELF-DISCLOSURE IN BRANDING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition of Self-Disclosure</th>
<th>Type/Operationalization</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AlRabiah et al. (2022)</td>
<td>The intentional and sincere verbal revelation of ordinary private information about the self to others.</td>
<td>Integration of personal stories into an SMI’s post with variation in depth (i.e., intimacy) and breadth (number of topics) of disclosure.</td>
<td>The breadth and depth of self-disclosures were negatively associated with perceived appropriateness, trust, and purchase intent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee &amp; Johnson (2022)</td>
<td>Marketing tactic, which includes revealing one’s face and intimate information (e.g., relationships, food preferences, emotions).</td>
<td>SMIs show faces and narrate personal experiences in the advertising.</td>
<td>No significant effects on endorser authenticity, credibility, ad and brand attitude WOM, and purchase intention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leite &amp; Baptista (2021)</td>
<td>The revelation of information with the goal of establishing a sense of intimacy in relationships with consumers. Self-disclosure can be factual (facts), emotional (depth of feelings), and cognitive (thoughts and beliefs).</td>
<td>The enduring trait of SMIs.</td>
<td>SMIs intimate self-disclosure was positively associated with parasocial relationships and self-brand connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leite &amp; Baptista (2022)</td>
<td>Various behaviors revealing personal information, including biographical data, feelings, thoughts, desires, values, and beliefs.</td>
<td>An enduring trait of SMIs measured using the intimate self-disclosure (ISD) scale (Berg &amp; Archer, 1982).</td>
<td>Higher ISD was associated with greater parasocial relationships, source credibility, brand trust, and purchase intention.</td>
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</table>
## Definition of Self-Disclosure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition of Self-Disclosure</th>
<th>Type/Operationalization</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leite et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Communication when individuals provide others with personal information, which varies in the degree of intimacy from superficial to intimate.</td>
<td>Inclusion of personal stories and opinions in SMIs posts, which vary based on high intimacy versus low intimacy of information.</td>
<td>Greater intimacy of self-disclosure had a negative direct effect on source credibility and a positive direct effect via relatedness need fulfillment, moderated by perceived appropriateness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang &amp; Hu (2022)</td>
<td>Voluntary sharing of personal information such as feelings, thoughts, values, and faith. Expression of oneself to others through sharing personal information.</td>
<td>Self-disclosure through sharing information about private life and opinions.</td>
<td>Both personal life sharing, and opinion self-disclosure enhanced a sense of companionship, following, and normative commitment.</td>
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## APPENDIX F

**ESSAY 3: SUMMARY OF EXISTING BRAND AUTHENTICITY SCALES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Dimensions and Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Bruhn et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Brand authenticity deals with the authenticity of market offerings (objects and services) in contrast to the authenticity of human beings. Brand authenticity is based on the evaluations of individuals rather than being solely related to the inherent attributes of the brand. Brand authenticity corresponds to a variety of attributes since there is no unique definition of the authenticity concept, particularly in the branding context. (p. 567)</td>
<td><em>Continuity</em> - stability, endurance, and consistency. <em>Originality</em> - particularity, individuality, and innovativeness. <em>Reliability</em> - trustfulness and credibility <em>Naturalness</em> - genuineness and realness.</td>
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<td>Morhart et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Brand authenticity arises from the interplay of objective facts (indexical authenticity), subjective mental associations (iconic authenticity), and existential motives connected to a brand (existential authenticity). Brand authenticity emerges to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves.</td>
<td><em>Continuity</em> - stability over time, timelessness, and historicity. <em>Integrity</em> – caring and responsibility <em>Credibility</em> - honesty, fulfillment of claims, and being truthful to consumers. <em>Symbolism</em> - supporting identity creation in consumers</td>
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<td>Napoli et al. (2014)</td>
<td>A subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers</td>
<td><em>Quality commitment</em> - craftsmanship and being driven by integrity and intrinsic motives. <em>Heritage</em> - nostalgia and symbolic meaning beyond original identity. <em>Sincerity</em> - honesty and genuineness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>Ilicic &amp; Webster (2016)</td>
<td>Being true to the self in terms of an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflecting their true identity.</td>
<td>Unidimensional</td>
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<td>Moulard et al. (2014)</td>
<td>The perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self.</td>
<td>Unidimensional</td>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>Source</td>
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<td>Dimensions and Definitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social media influencers</td>
<td>Lee &amp; Eastin (2021)</td>
<td>“Portrayal of an unpolished personality, behaviors and beliefs that are practiced backstage or with trusted companions” (p. 825)</td>
<td>Sincerity – reflection of honesty and truthfulness. Not staged.</td>
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<td>Truthful endorsements – engaging in intrinsically motivated partnerships.</td>
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<td>Visibility – being open and transparent.</td>
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<td>Expertise – being knowledgeable on a particular topic.</td>
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<td>Uniqueness – being real and original rather than a copy of someone else.</td>
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## APPENDIX G

### ESSAY 3: LIST OF PRELIMINARY ITEMS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Relevant Items from Literature Review</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Sincerity** | Expression of self as opposed to acting on a script. | 1. The athlete is genuine.  
2. The athlete seems real.  
3. The athlete is true to themselves.  
4. The athlete shows a consistency between beliefs and actions.  
5. The athlete resists pressures of the external environment to do things contrary to their beliefs.  
6. The athlete is honest.  
7. The athlete seeks to express who they really are.  
8. The athlete is down to earth.  
9. The athlete openly shares information about their personal life, feelings, and emotions. |
| **Integrity** | Moral purity, adherence to good moral values, and leading by example. | 10. The athlete has strong moral principles.  
11. The athlete is true to a set of moral values.  
12. The athlete cares about other people.  
13. The athlete gives back to the sports community.  
14. The athlete admits mistakes and failures when they occur.  
15. The athlete is self-aware.  
16. The athlete is guided by moral standards in their actions.  
17. The athlete always stands by what they believe in. |
Appendix G. (continued)

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<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Relevant Items from Literature Review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Intrinsic motivation | Involvement in sport and brand activities is driven by internal compass and passions. | 1. The athlete loves their sport.  
2. The athlete has a true passion for their sport.  
3. The athlete is excited about their sport.  
4. The athlete is dedicated to their sport.  
5. The athlete is committed to their sport.  
6. The athlete’s brand partnerships reflect their personality.  
7. The athlete promotes the products that they use. |
| Athletic talent    | Possession of extraordinary athletic talent that distinguishes the athlete from others in the field. | 8. The athlete is skilled in their sport.  
9. The athlete is very knowledgeable in their sport.  
10. The athlete is a top performer in their sport.  
11. The athlete demonstrates natural ability in their sport.  
12. The athlete is an expert in their sport. |
| Symbolism          | Athlete brand’s ability to represent the greater symbolic value of their sport. | 13. The athlete brand has a strong connection to their sport culture.  
14. The athlete brand has a strong link to the past of their sport.  
15. The athlete brand exudes a sense of sport tradition.  
16. The athlete brand reinforces the values and traditions of their sport.  
17. The athlete brand adds a meaning to people’s lives.  
18. The athlete brand connects people with their real selves.  
19. The athlete brand connects people with what is really important. |

*Note.* The items are drawn from review of existing brand authenticity scales, including traditional/firm brands (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014), celebrities (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), artists (Moulard et al., 2014), social media influencers (Lee & Eastin, 2021), the authentic personality scale (Wood et al., 2008), and the authentic leadership inventory (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011).
APPENDIX H

ESSAY 3: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ITEM GENERATION

Warm-Up

1. What sports and athletes do you follow?

Athlete Authenticity

2. Are there athletes whose personal brands you would describe as “authentic”?
3. What constitutes a personal brand authenticity for an athlete brand in your eyes?
4. What are the characteristics or behaviors that made you believe that the athlete that you named earlier is authentic?
5. Can you please provide specific examples?

Athlete Inauthenticity

6. Are there athletes whose personal brands you would describe as “inauthentic”?
7. What constitutes a personal brand inauthenticity for an athlete brand in your eyes?
8. What are the characteristics or behaviors that made you believe that the athlete that you named earlier is inauthentic?
9. Can you please provide specific examples?
10. How did the setting influence your perceptions of authenticity (inauthenticity) of an athlete?
# APPENDIX I

## ESSAY 3: CONSTRUCTS FOR SCALE VALIDATION

Constructs and Items

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Construct and Dimensions</th>
<th>Items</th>
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<td>Johnson, Bauer, &amp; Arnold (2022)</td>
<td>Athlete brand attitude</td>
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<td>Dislike/Like</td>
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<td>Unfavorable/Favorable</td>
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<td>I am loyal supporter of [athlete].</td>
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<td>Win or lose, I am a loyal fan of [athlete].</td>
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Correlations Matrix

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<td>.634**</td>
<td>.600**</td>
<td>.624**</td>
<td>.901**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.893**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>CM3</td>
<td>.270**</td>
<td>.257**</td>
<td>.238**</td>
<td>.271**</td>
<td>.396**</td>
<td>.371**</td>
<td>.381**</td>
<td>.305**</td>
<td>.329**</td>
<td>.342**</td>
<td>.342**</td>
<td>.241**</td>
<td>.619**</td>
<td>.674**</td>
<td>.633**</td>
<td>.628**</td>
<td>.878**</td>
<td>.893**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX J

ESSAY 3: STIMULI FOR THE EXPERIMENT

Visual Stimuli

A. Visual in the high fit condition.

B. Visual in the low fit condition.
### Textual Stimuli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High fit condition, charity description</th>
<th>Low fit condition, charity description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hoops for Kids works to help at-risk youth by teaching essential life skills to support these children in becoming healthy, successful, and community-oriented individuals through the sport of basketball.</td>
<td>WasteAid works with communities and policy makers to implement waste management and recycling programs and contribute to a cleaner and healthier future for all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High fit condition, self-disclosure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Low fit condition, self-disclosure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A kid from Akron, Ohio, from the inner city, I always dreamed about making the world a better place and giving back to the community and people who raised me. Reflecting on my personal journey and where I come from, I know basketball became my ticket to a different life and has given me a voice and a platform for impact. As I watch my three amazing kids grow up, teaching them what life is about and how to be their best selves is everything to me. Every day, I wake up thinking that I want to make them proud, lead by example, and make the world better for them. On this #InternationalDayofCharity, I want to take time to highlight a great nonprofit called Hoops for Kids. Their vision closely aligns with mine as I always cared about sports, mentoring young minds, and providing them with the support and skills they need. Hoops for Kids helps at-risk youth by teaching them life skills through the game of basketball, helping them become healthy, successful, and community-oriented individuals. 🏀🙏</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap the link in my bio to donate and make a difference #HoopsForKids #GivingBack #MakeADifference</td>
<td>A kid from Akron, Ohio, from the inner city, I always dreamed about making the world a better place and giving back to the community and people who raised me. Reflecting on my personal journey and where I come from, I know basketball became my ticket to a different life and has given me a voice and a platform for impact. As I watch my three amazing kids grow up, teaching them what life is about and how to be their best selves is everything to me. Every day, I wake up thinking that I want to make them proud, lead by example, and make the world better for them. On this #InternationalDayofCharity, I want to take time to highlight a great nonprofit called WasteAid. Their vision closely aligns with mine as I always cared about innovation, environment, and improving the lives around us. WasteAid works with communities and policy makers to implement waste management and recycling programs, contributing to a cleaner and healthier future for all. 🌍🙏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap the link in my bio to donate and make a difference. #WasteAid #GivingBack #MakeADifference</td>
<td>Tap the link in my bio to donate and make a difference. #WasteAid #GivingBack #MakeADifference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High fit condition, no self-disclosure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Low fit condition, no self-disclosure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On this #InternationalDayofCharity, I want to take time to highlight a great nonprofit called Hoops for Kids. Hoops for Kids helps at-risk youth by teaching them life skills through the game of basketball, helping them become healthy, successful, and community-oriented individuals. 🏀🙏</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap the link in my bio to donate and make a difference. #WasteAid #GivingBack #MakeADifference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K

IRB APPROVALS

Amendment Approval

Date: 26-May-2022

Protocol Number: 26903
PI: THILO KUNKEL
Review Date: 25-May-2022
Committee: A1
Risk: Minimal risk
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: Athletes' experiences with self-branding and monetization of personal brands through social media.

On 25-May-2022, the IRB approved the amendments requested in Submission #26903-0007. A summary of the approved Amendments is below:

You would like to verify the effectiveness of these strategies by gaining a consumer perspective, which will help to subsequently highlight what strategies work and what do not. For this, you plan to integrate interviews with consumers, which will help gauge their perceptions of athletes' personal branding activities.

If you amended the consent form for a non-Exempt study, you can access your IRB-approved, stamped consent document or consent script through ERA. Open the “Attachments” tab within the approved submission (#26903-0007) and open the stamped documents by clicking the View link next to each document. The stamped documents are labeled as such. Copies of the IRB approved stamped consent document or consent script must be used in obtaining consent.

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

If you would like to tell us how we are doing, please complete this 5-minute Satisfaction Survey: https://forms.gle/9FcpYGDEFANxMw37
Amendment Approval

Protocol Number: 29235
PI: THILO KUNKEL
Review Date: 19-May-2022
Committee: A1
Risk: Minimal risk
Sponsor: NATIONAL COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION
Project Title: Exploring factors shaping NCAA student-athletes' interest to pursue NIL opportunities

Date: 24-May-2022

On 19-May-2022, the IRB approved the amendments requested in Submission # 29235-0003. A summary of the approved Amendments is below:

Your request for amendment is necessitated by the need to add an additional recruitment method and data collection method (i.e., interviews).

The application for amendment contains four attachments:
- Updated recruitment material
- Individual interview guide
- Updated 503 Investigator Protocol
- Updated student-athlete NIL interest consent form

The updated recruitment and data collection method will allow for greater flexibility and control over sampling and data collection, which stands at the core of grounded theory as a research design and methodology, making the objectives of the study more feasible and helping generate more comprehensive theoretical and practical insights.

If you amended the consent form for a non-Exempt study, you can access your IRB-approved, stamped consent document or consent script through ERA. Open the “Attachments” tab within the approved submission (# 29235-0003) and open the stamped documents by clicking the View link next to each document. The stamped documents are labeled as such. Copies of the IRB approved stamped consent document or consent script must be used in obtaining consent.

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

If you would like to tell us how we are doing, please complete this 5-minute Satisfaction Survey: https://forms.gle/9EcgYGDEEANevMw37
Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects Research that is Approved as Exempt

Protocol Number: 30392
PI: THILO KUNKEL
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approved On: 27-Feb-2023
Risk: Minimal risk
Committee: A2
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: The pros and cons of being real: Testing the impacts of self-disclosure on athlete brand authenticity and attitudinal outcomes

The IRB approved the protocol 30392.

The study was approved under Exempt review. The IRB determined that the research does not require a continuing review, consequently there is not an IRB approval period.

As this research was approved as Exempt, the IRB will not stamp the consent or assent form(s).

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee (“MRC”), Radiation Safety Committee (“RSC”), Institutional Biosafety Committee (“IBC”), and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee (“TUSCC”). Please visit these Committees’ websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit the following:

- Amendments - Any changes to the research that may change the Exempt status of this study must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Examples of such changes are: including new, sensitive questions to a survey or interview, changing data collection such that de-identified data will now be identifiable, including an intervention in the methods, changing variables to be collected from medical charts, decreasing confidentiality measures, including minors or adults lacking capacity to consent as subjects when previously only adults with capacity to consent were to be enrolled, no longer collecting signed HIPAA Authorization, etc. Please reach out to the IRB Staff with any questions about if a change to the study warrants an Amendment.
- Reportable New Information - Using the Reportable New Information e-form, report new information items such as those described in HRP-471 Policy - Prompt Reporting Requirements to the IRB within 5 days
- Closure report - Using a closure e-form, submit when the study is permanently closed to enrollment; all subjects have completed all protocol related interventions and interactions; collection of private identifiable information is complete; and analysis of private identifiable information is complete

For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the HRP-970 Policy – Investigator Obligations, the Investigator Manual (HRP-910), and other Policies and Procedures found on the Temple University IRB website: https://research.temple.edu/irb-forms-standard-operating-procedures.

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.