From Field to Feed: The Impact of Parasocial Bonds and Athlete Credibility on Brand Loyalty

Ranbir Singh Kharabanda

The British School, Chanakyapuri, India

E-mail: ranbirsk@gmail.com

Abstract

Athletes these days require social media to engage with their fans at all times, forming bonds with their fans on and off the field. These bonds notably develop into parasocial relationships (PSRs). PSRs are one sided, emotionally driven bonds formed by fans with influential celebrities such as athletes. This study explores the impact of parasocial relationships and athlete trustworthiness through their authenticity and credibility on brand loyalty. Purposive sampling was used for a sample of 100 respondents. Data was collected through a questionnaire with instruments such as the celebrity-persona parasocial interaction scale and brand authenticity scale. Statistical analyses involving t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, regression were conducted from the data collected. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between athlete trustworthiness and brand loyalty with athlete trustworthiness emerging as a strong predictor when regression analysis was conducted. Even though parasocial interaction had a positive correlation with brand loyalty, it did not emerge as a significant predictor when tested through regression analysis. Additionally, notable differences in parasocial relationships and brand loyalty were observed on the basis of athlete ethnicity but ethnicity did not significantly predict either athlete trustworthiness or brand loyalty as per the t-test results. Furthermore, there were significant differences in parasocial interaction, brand loyalty and athlete trustworthiness amongst respondents of different ages as per ANOVA results. These results emphasize the importance of perceived athlete trustworthiness which stands as a major factor in influencing one's loyalty towards a brand endorsed by their favourite athlete.

Keywords: *Parasocial Relationship; Brand Loyalty; Athlete Trustworthiness; Athlete Credibility, Consumer Choices*

1. Introduction

The modern landscape of sports marketing has been redefined with the rise of social media. Athletes nowadays, transcend their interactions with fans as they not only perform on the field but also

interact with their fans on multiple social media platforms. As a result, athletes form bonds with their fans on and off the field, these bonds notably developing into parasocial relationships (PSRs). PSRs are one sided, emotionally driven bonds formed by fans with influential celebrities such as athletes (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985). As the world inclines towards climbing a social ladder, the influence of PSRs rely heavily on already established influencers to whom users online look up to on social media platforms such as instagram and X rather than on the outdated television or radio. These channels of marketing and advertising boosts credibility and trust becoming the sole purpose of such relationships while also building a deeper connection with fans in order to achieve this purpose. Research by Lacap et al. (2023) revealed that brand loyalty and PSRs hold a correlation such that when fans express high levels of PSRs, the brand loyalty also observes a rise. Furthermore, suggesting that the quality of PSRs play an integral role in determining consumer trends and behaviour.

Over recent years, social media integration into everyday communication has changed sports fans' interaction with sports figures. Prior research suggests a one way media exposure to create a parasocial relationship, however, recent studies illustrate the interactive nature of these relationships. Sports fans now have greater than ever access to athletes' personal lives and opinions by accessing social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. These habitual interactions create a greater sense of friendliness, familiarity and belongingness between the fans and the athletes while also increasing their PSRs. Lacap et al. (2023) found stronger parasocial bonds are tied to greater brand loyalty and provided a compelling reason for examining how authenticity and credibility impact this outcome. This study explores the impact of elements of parasocial relationships such as authenticity, credibility with sports players on brand loyalty.

1.1 Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are deemed to be one sided, long term relationships fueled by emotional attachments created by an audience with a media personality, who is not aware of their personal existence, as stated in Horton & Wohl (1956). Parasocial relationships are built over time through repeated exposure and interactions where the audience gradually forms a perspective on the media personality, about their values, behaviour, lifestyle and personality (Valero, 2013).

PSRs have been surmised by social learning theory and uses and gratifications theory that argue that media personalities are role models and sources of friendship for their audience/ fans (Rubin et al., 1985). The social learning theory as stated by Bandura (1977) suggests that people tend to pick up new behaviours, attitudes by observing others and implementing the same in their own lifestyle. In Parasocial relationships, fans observe the behaviour and lifestyle of sports figures through social media to better their understanding of the sports personality they admire without any direct, face to face interaction. For instance, when a sports personality displays authenticity and confidence on social media, fans may internalize these traits and develop a sense of connection while associating these traits with the athlete in future as well.

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) deviates the point of attention from what the media does to people to why people choose specific media content in the first place. According to UGT (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), audiences are active agents who resort to their preferred social media platform based on the need to please certain demands, some examples include entertainment, educational content and for social purposes. Thus, fans may approach the content put up by sports figures with various intentions. Some may want the entertainment only while others may be viewing the content for personal relevance and some sort of indirect companionship of sorts, perhaps motivational. These theories remain very relevant as fans observe and imitate the behaviors of sports figures (social learning theory), and they actively choose media content featuring these figures because it meets their personal needs (uses and gratifications theory). This integrated perspective helps in providing a strong understanding of why

factors like authenticity and credibility stand out as critical in PSRs influencing outcomes such as brand loyalty.

PSRs can be positive or negative (Hartmann, 2010). Positive PSRs evoke a sense of fondness and affection influencing the behaviour of viewers to follow a similar lifestyle or routine. However, negative PSRs can induce feelings of disapproval and hostility. PSRs not only influence fans' emotional engagement but also their behavioral responses including the viewers' responses to endorsed brands (Lacap et al., 2023).

1.2 Role of Authenticity & Credibility

Authenticity and credibility are crucial in the formation of parasocial relationships and in determining athlete trustworthiness. Authenticity is referred to as one's quality to be genuine and original, while credibility enforces trust and expertise. In today's world, with the help of social media, individuals are able to evoke authenticity and credibility through the documentation of their everyday life.

Sports celebrities rely on behind-the-scenes content, daily vlogs, and personal anecdotes to entice the audience with genuineness while also portraying themselves as more relatable. This continuous exposure to unfiltered, real-life moments allows fans to feel and experience the athletes lives as if they truly know the athlete beyond their on-field performances.

Live streaming has further transformed these dynamics by providing real-time interaction during live sports events. Recent viewership statistics indicate that during high-profile matches, live streams can attract tens of millions of viewers (StreamCharts, 2025). This not only expands the perceived authenticity of the sports figure but also intensifies the emotional connection that fans develop whether it be during an interview, halftime show or the game itself. These unedited interactions foster credibility and this credibility makes the athlete appear more trustworthy and reliable, qualities that are crucial when they endorse products or brands. For example, during the recent Champions Trophy, live streaming on platforms like JioHotstar attracted over 5 billion total platform viewers (The Hindu, 2025). This shows how real-time, authentic content can deeply engage audiences and help strengthen the parasocial bond.

The construction of such an interactive relationship also aids these sports celebrities as they endorse brands, as they tend to sound more real and reliable. When athletes share their feats, personal moments and personal stories on social media, it enhances their credibility in the eyes of fans, who are more likely to trust what they recommend and perceive the endorsed brands as equally genuine. This trust is critical for transforming an emotional connection into tangible consumer behavior, such as repeat purchases or increased brand loyalty.

Moreover, the influence of authenticity and credibility extends beyond admiration as it shapes the way fans interact with the brands associated with their favorite sports figures. Numerous studies have concluded that authenticity and credibility have played a huge role in increasing a brand's consumer base and the number of repeated customers, which seems to be a cause of a rise in loyalty (Lacap et al., 2023). When sports celebrities maintain an authentic presence online, they not only foster deep parasocial relationships but also drive behavioral responses that can boost a brand's reputation.

Through social media channels, sports celebrities are now able to combine personal insight with professional achievements. This not only makes the celebrity a more relatable figure but also provides a steady stream of content that reinforces their reliability. As a result, viewers who engage with this content have a greater likelihood of developing a sustained, trust-based relationship with the athlete, which in turn positively influences their perceptions of associated brands.

1.3 Parasocial Relationships & Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is determined by the number of repeated customers attained by a brand, while other brands compete in the same market offering similar products and services. The foundation of a firm's brand loyalty lies in the firm's efforts to reach as many customers as possible through word of mouth, advertisements, endorsements, while ensuring high standards of service and customer care.

These brands attract a wider customer base through endorsing influential individuals such as sports personalities and signing them as brand ambassadors due to their ability to form strong and positive parasocial relationships with the public. For instance, Global brands like Nike and Adidas have leveraged endorsements from sports icons such as LeBron James and Lionel Messi. Their consistent uploads often involving content not seen otherwise like behind the scenes content and personal storytelling on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have not only enhanced their perceived authenticity and credibility but also translated into increased consumer trust and brand loyalty (Baghel, 2023).

Once these sports personalities achieve a strong, positive, one-sided emotional connect or relation with their audiences, the audiences become potential customers due to the audience passing on similar positive feelings for the brand as well. A notable example can be seen in the case of Virat Kohli, whose engaging social media presence and relatable content have significantly influenced the perception of brands he endorses (Kalam, P., 2025). Fans feel a sense of intimacy and shared values when they view his personal and professional updates, which leads them to associate these positive sentiments with the brands he represents. Moreover, the effective use of digital channels whether through live interviews, posts, or interactive Q&A sessions enables these celebrities to maintain an ongoing parasocial relationship that continually reinforces trust.

This emotional connection fostered by parasocial relationships is a catalyst in enforcing trust, helping to gain greater brand loyalty. Numerous studies have concluded that when fans invest emotionally in sports figures, they are probable to remain loyal to brands associated with those figures (Lacap et al., 2023). In addition to the high viewership during live events, many athletes utilize their social media platforms to share personal stories and engage directly with their audience, further solidifying their role as trustworthy ambassadors. For example, when a sports celebrity shares an inspiring recovery story or discusses the challenges they have overcome, it not only enhances their own credibility but also makes the endorsed products appear more reliable and ethically aligned with the consumers' values.

This study will go in depth to explore how elements such as authenticity and credibility in parasocial relationships with sports players influence brand loyalty, while the research aims to illustrate the vast impact of these relationships on consumer behavior.

2.Methodology

2.1 Aim

The present study aims to examine the impact of parasocial relationships with athletes, particularly the elements of authenticity and credibility on consumer brand loyalty. It further investigates the role of athlete trustworthiness as a predictor of brand loyalty and explores how factors such as athlete ethnicity and endorsement engagement influence the strength of parasocial interaction and loyalty behavior among sports fans.

2.2 Objectives

I. To investigate how parasocial relationships with sports players differ across age groups ranging from adolescence to adulthood

II. To explore the influence of athlete trustworthiness on brand loyalty of brands endorsed by sports players.

III. To compare the parasocial dynamics of fans who support an Indian sports player/team versus those who support an international sports player

IV. To assess whether consumers who purchase brands endorsed by these sports figures demonstrate different levels of brand loyalty compared to non-buyers

2.3 Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant difference in parasocial interaction scores between respondents who favor Indian vs International athletes.

H2: There is a significant difference in athlete trustworthiness scores between respondents who favor Indian vs International athletes.

H3: There is a significant difference in brand loyalty scores between respondents who favor Indian vs International athletes.

H4: There is a significant difference in athlete trustworthiness scores between individuals who purchase endorsed products frequently and those who purchase them sometimes.

H5: There is a significant difference in parasocial interaction scores based on how frequently respondents purchase endorsed products

H6: There is a significant difference in brand loyalty based on the age group of the respondent.

H7: There is a significant difference in parasocial interaction based on the age group of the respondent.

H8: There is a significant difference in athlete trustworthiness based on the age group of the respondent.

H9: There is a positive correlation between athlete trustworthiness and brand loyalty.

H10: There is a positive correlation between parasocial interaction and brand loyalty.

H11: There is a positive correlation between parasocial interaction and athlete trustworthiness.

H12: Athlete trustworthiness is a significant predictor of brand loyalty.

H13: Parasocial interaction is a significant predictor of brand loyalty.

2.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The Sampling Technique used in this study was purposive sampling wherein the focus was on procuring respondents who had a favourite athlete (be it Indian or International). A sample size of 100 was used to achieve the results. Data was collected from 101 respondents with 71 male respondents and

30 female respondents. Majority of the respondents were amongst the ages 15 - 18 with 34 respondents while only 9 respondents were between the ages of 19 - 22. Around 55 respondents recorded their favourite athlete to be Indian while the other 46 respondents said that their favourite athlete was International. Around 68 respondents answered 'yes' to the question "Do you follow your favourite athlete on social media?" while the remaining 33 respondents answered 'no'. Respondents were asked to answer questions about what qualities of their favourite athlete appeal to them the most, which brands do their favourite athletes endorse, have they ever purchased from that endorsed brand and following questions were asked to be answered keeping in mind the endorsed brand and their favourite athlete.

2.5 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to assess the relationships among parasocial interaction, athlete trustworthiness, and brand loyalty. Data were collected using standardized self-report instruments administered through an online survey. A purposive sampling strategy was used to target respondents who had a favorite athlete, either Indian or international. The design enabled the use of inferential statistical techniques including t-tests, ANOVA, correlation and multiple regression, to examine group differences and predictive relationships among the study variables.

2.6 Instrumentation

I. Celebrity-Persona Interaction Scale (Brown & Bocarnea, 2006): The questionnaire consists of 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 which shows Strongly disagree and 5 which shows Strongly Agree. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha value for the scale is .80 to .90. The scale also reports a satisfactory validity. For the present study, the term "celebrity/persona" has been replaced with "my favourite athlete." An example item from the questionnaire is: "[My favourite athlete] makes me feel as if I am with someone I know well."

II. Measurement of customer loyalty (Liu, 2007): The instrument consisted of 15 items scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Internal consistency for the overall loyalty measure was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$). Four distinct factors emerged, corresponding to the phases of consumer loyalty. Each subscale demonstrated satisfactory reliability (Cognitive Loyalty $\alpha = 0.80$; Affective Loyalty $\alpha = 0.92$; Conative Loyalty $\alpha = 0.65$; Action Loyalty $\alpha = 0.83$). Even though The customer loyalty scale consists of 15 items to measure customer loyalty on four distinct phases such as cognitive, affective, conative and action. In the present study, out of the four phases, three have been utilised, namely action, conative and affective sub scales. One item was used from the action loyalty scale, two items from the conative loyalty scale and 3 items from the affective loyalty scale on a 5-point likert scale rather than the 7-point likert scale. This adaptation was aimed at improving response quality and internal consistency across scales, without compromising the conceptual integrity of the constructs being measured.

III. Brand authenticity scale (Joshi et al., 2015): The study utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to assess three constructs—Brand Authenticity (A), Self-Esteem (B), and Purchasing Willingness (C)—and evaluated both reliability and validity. Seven brand authenticity items (adapted from Bruhn et al., 2012; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Tran & Keng, 2018) yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.82, and five purchasing willingness items produced $\alpha = 0.84$. For the present research the construct of self esteem was not included.

2.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through a questionnaire made in google forms consisting of the three instruments used: The Celebrity-Persona Interaction Scale (Brown & Bocarnea, 2006), the Customer Loyalty Scale (Liu, 2007), and the Brand Authenticity Scale (Joshi et al., 2015). Each section was clearly

separated in the form, and participants were required to respond using a 5-point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was distributed to appropriate and targeted participants through social media platforms, word of mouth and school mail. Respondents were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. Once data was received for at least 100 respondents, the raw data was transformed into excel for statistical analysis.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was sought from the respondents. Moreover, confidentiality of responses was ensured, stating that all personal details will be kept confidential and data will only be used for research purposes. Before filling out the form, proper instructions on how to fill the survey were provided.
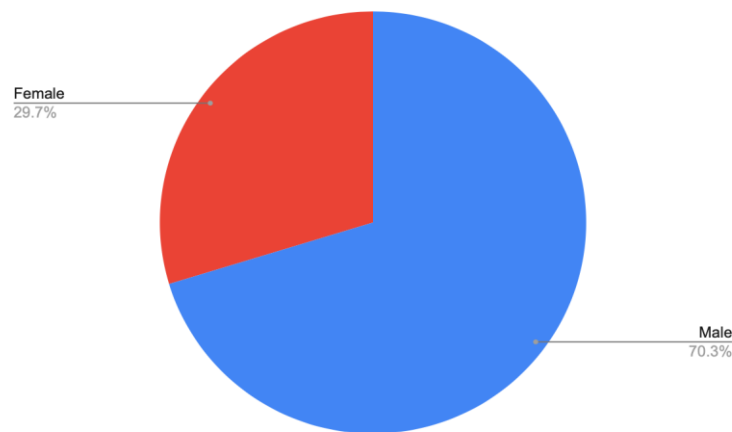
3. Results

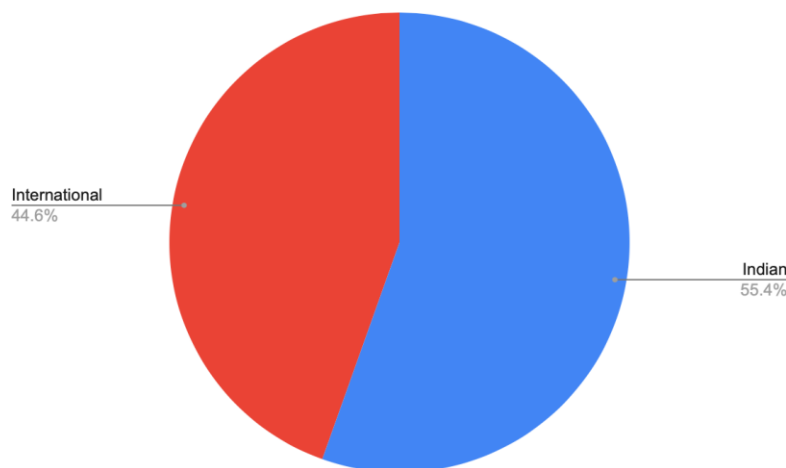

Figure 1 shows the gender of the respondents

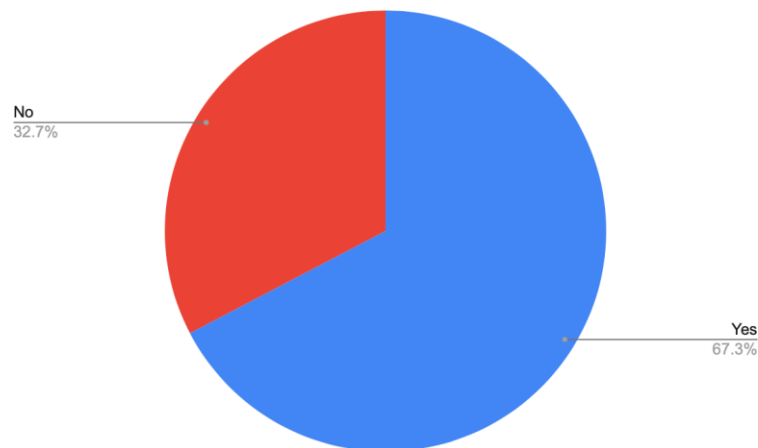Figure 2 shows the nationality of the favourite athlete of the respondents

Figure 3 shows whether the respondents follow their favourite athletes on social media
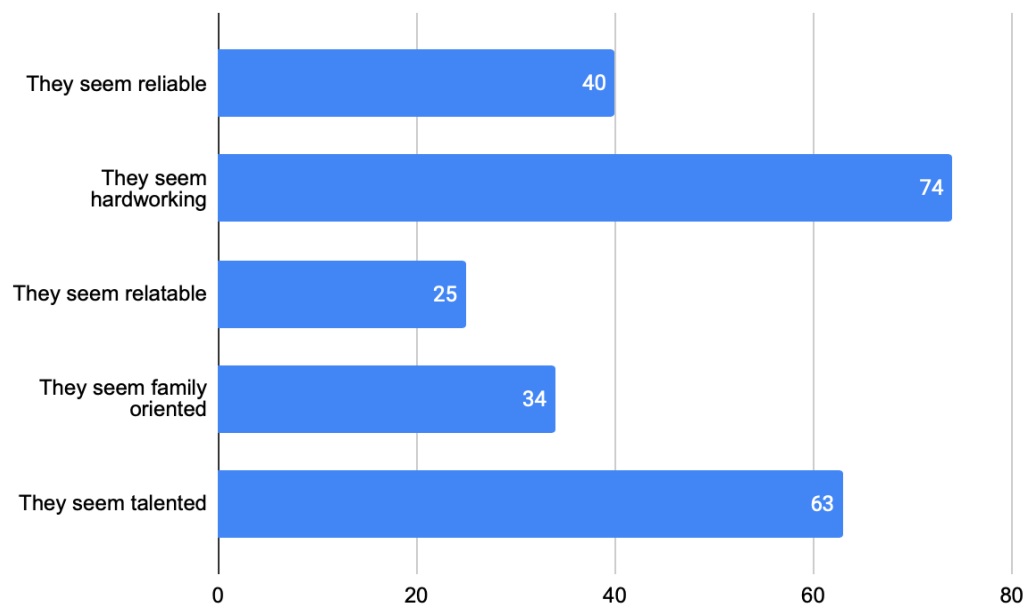

Figure 4 shows the qualities of the athlete that appeals most to the respondents

Table 1 shows the t-test value for ethnicity of favourite athlete and parasocial interaction

		n	M	S.D.	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Parasocial interaction	Indian	56	64.64	15.55	-3.55	99	.001	0.71
	International	45	74.42	11.07				

According to Table 1, there is a significant mean difference between the ethnicity of the favourite athlete of the respondents and the Parasocial interaction with the said athlete, with t= -3.55, p = .001 (p<0.05). The mean score on the parasocial interaction scale of international ethnicity athletes (M = 74.42, SD = 11.07) is higher than that of Indian athletes (M= 64.84, SD = 15.55). The Cohen's d value of 0.71 indicates a large effect size. Thus hypothesis 1 is *accepted*.

Table 2 shows the t-test value for ethnicity of favourite athlete and athlete trustworthiness

		n	M	S.D	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Athlete trustworthiness	Indian	56	22.09	19.08	-1.51	99	.134	0.3
	International	45	27.84	19				

According to Table 2, the mean score on the athlete trustworthiness scale for international athletes (M= 27.84, S.D= 19) was higher than Indian athletes (M= 22.09, S.D= 19.08), however, there is no significant mean difference between the ethnicity of the favourite athlete of the respondents and the athlete trustworthiness with the said athlete, with t= -1.51, p= 0.134 (p>0.05). The Cohen's d value of 0.3 suggests a small effect size. Thus, hypothesis 2 is rejected.

Table 3 shows the t-test value for ethnicity of favourite athlete and brand loyalty

		n	M	S.D	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Brand loyalty scale	Indian	56	14.41	12.51	-2.26	99	.026	0.45
	International	45	20.33	13.81				

According to Table 3, the mean score on the athlete trustworthiness scale was higher for international athletes (M = 20.33, SD = 13.81) than for Indian athletes (M = 14.41, SD = 12.51). A t-test, however, yielded t= –2.26, p = .026, indicating a statistically significant difference as p < 0.05. The corresponding Cohen's d value of 0.45 reflects a medium effect size.. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is accepted.

Table 4 shows the t-test results for endorsed product purchase status and athlete trustworthiness

		n	M	S.D	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Athlete trustworthiness	Yes, sometimes	45	36.87	8.35	-0.38	65	.708	0.1
	Yes, frequently	22	37.77	10.9				

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in perceived athlete trustworthiness between participants who reported purchasing endorsed products "sometimes" versus those who purchased them "frequently." The results indicated that there was no significant difference in athlete trustworthiness scores between the "sometimes" group (M = 36.87, SD = 8.35) and the "frequently" group (M = 37.77, SD = 10.90), *t*(65) = -0.38, *p* = .708. The effect size was

small with *Cohen's d* = 0.10, suggesting a negligible practical difference between the groups. Thus, H4 is *rejected.*

Table 5 shows the ANOVA values for endorsed product purchase status and parasocial interaction

Endorsed product purchased	n	M	S.D	F	p	η2
No	34	67.74	14.84	0.5	.609	0.01
Yes, sometimes	45	68.67	13.03			
Yes, frequently	22	71.64	17.09			

According to Table 5 which depicts the ANOVA results for endorsed product purchase status and parasocial interaction, there was not a significant mean difference between the three endorsed status groups of "No," "Yes, sometimes," and "Yes, frequently," with F = 0.5, p = .609 (p> 0.05). The η2 value of 0.01 indicates a very small effect size. Respondents who responded with "Yes, frequently" to endorsed product purchased reported higher parasocial interaction as M=71.64, S.D=17.09 while respondents selecting "Yes, sometimes" also reported higher parasocial interaction (M=68.67, S.D=13.03) than respondents answering "No" (M=67.74, S.D=14.84). Thus, H4 is *rejected*.

Table 6 shows the ANOVA results for brand loyalty and age

Age	n	M	S.D.	F	p	η2
28 - 40	38	19.34	11.85	4.31	.016	0.08
19 - 27	29	20.24	12.86			
15 - 18	34	11.76	14.15			

According to Table 6, which depicts the ANOVA results for brand loyalty and age, there was a significant mean difference between the age of the athlete and brand loyalty, with F=4.31, p=0.016 (p> 0.05). The η2 value of 0.08 indicates a small effect size. Respondents aged between 19-27 reported higher loyalty towards a brand endorsed by their favourite athlete as M=20.24, S.D.=12.86 and respondents aged between 28-40 (M=19.34, S.D.=11.85) as compared to respondents aged between 15-18 (M=11.76, S.D.=14.15). Hence H6 is *accepted* as there is a difference between the brand loyalty amongst different age groups of respondents.

Table 7 shows the ANOVA results for parasocial interaction scale and age

Age	n	M	S.D.	F	p	η2
28 - 40	38	65.55	15.48	5.61	.005	0.1
19 - 27	29	65.9	15.18			
15 - 18	34	75.5	10.45			

According to Table 7, one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in parasocial interaction scores across age groups, F = 5.61, p = .005, η² = .10. Respondents aged 15-18 (M

= 75.5, SD = 10.45) reported higher levels of parasocial interaction with their favourite athlete than respondents aged 19-27 (M = 65.9, SD = 15.18) and respondents aged 28-40 (M = 65.55, SD = 15.48). The effect size (η^2 = .10) indicates a small to moderate effect. Hence H7 stating that there is a significant difference in parasocial interaction based on the age group of the respondent is thus *accepted*.

Table 8 shows the ANOVA results for athlete trustworthiness and age

Age	n	M	S.D.	F	p	η2
28 - 40	38	28.34	17.26	5.7	.005	0.1
19 - 27	29	29.9	18.95			
15 - 18	34	16.06	18.93			

According to Table 8, a one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in athlete trustworthiness scores across age groups, F = 5.7, p = .005, η^2 = .10. Respondents aged 19–27 (M = 29.90, SD = 18.95) and 28–40 (M = 28.34, SD = 17.26) reported higher levels of trustworthiness compared to those aged 15–18 (M = 16.06, SD = 18.93). The effect size (η^2 = .10) indicates a small to moderate effect. Hence H8 stating that there is a significant difference in athlete trustworthiness based on the age group of the respondent is thus *accepted*.

Table 9 shows the correlation between athlete trustworthiness, brand loyalty scale and parasocial interaction scale

		Athlete trustworthiness	Brand loyalty scale	Parasocial interaction scale
Athlete trustworthiness	Correlation	1	0.94	0.27
	p		<.001	.006
Brand loyalty scale	Correlation	0.94	1	0.24
	p	<.001		.014
Parasocial interaction scale	Correlation	0.27	0.24	1
	p	.006	.014	

As shown in Table 9, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between athlete trustworthiness, brand loyalty, and parasocial interaction. A strong and statistically significant positive correlation was found between athlete trustworthiness and brand loyalty (r = .94, p < .001). This indicates that higher perceptions of athlete trustworthiness are strongly associated with greater brand loyalty. A weak but statistically significant positive correlation was observed between parasocial interaction and brand loyalty (r = .24, p = .014), suggesting that individuals with stronger parasocial connections to athletes are slightly more likely to exhibit brand loyalty. Athlete's trustworthiness has a weak significant positive correlation with parasocial interaction (r= 0.27, p= .006). The findings provide consistent support for H9, 10 and 11.

Table 10 shows the multiple linear regression for the dependent variable of brand loyalty

Model	B	Beta	S.E	t	p	R2
Constant	1.77		2.19	0.81	.42	0.89
Athlete trustworthiness	0.66	0.95	0.02	27.03	<.001	
Parasocial interaction scale	-0.01	-0.02	0.03	-0.45	.651	

*Dependent Variable = Brand Loyalty

Table 10 shows multiple linear regression for examining whether athlete trustworthiness and parasocial interaction are significant predictors of brand loyalty. Athlete trustworthiness is a statistically significant predictor with B = 0.66, Beta = 0.95 and p< 0.001. Parasocial interaction on the other hand is not a significant predictor of brand loyalty with B = -0.01, Beta = -0.02 and p = .651 (p>0.05). This suggests that parasocial interaction with the athlete did not meaningfully contribute to brand loyalty, whereas, athlete trustworthiness was associated strongly with brand loyalty. It explains approximately 89% of variants in brand loyalty (R2 = 0.89). Thus, H12 which stated that athlete trustworthiness is a significant predictor of brand loyalty is thus accepted while H13 which held that Parasocial interaction is a significant predictor of brand loyalty is rejected.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study reported a significant difference between ethnicity of the athlete and the athlete trustworthiness reported by the respondents, however after carrying out a t-test, the ethnicity of the athlete did not emerge as a significant predictor of athlete trustworthiness. This is supported by findings by Surujlal and Zhang (2009) who found no significant difference in perceived coach trustworthiness between White and non-White athletes in South Africa. However, Cunningham and Regan (2012) observed that White participants perceived African American athletes as most trustworthy when engaged in indisputable activism and displaying strong racial identity. Lord et al. (2019) demonstrated that shared ethnicity between consumer and celebrity endorser can enhance perceptions of attractiveness and trustworthiness.

There was also a significant difference between ethnicity of the athlete and the parasocial interaction reported by the respondents, with parasocial interaction being greater with international celebrities. Contradictory finding by Claessens & Van den Bulck (2015) suggests that people prefer cultural proximity with their favourite celebrities in order to develop a strong parasocial bond with them.

Furthermore, the present research revealed a significant difference in brand loyalty based on the ethnicity of the athlete, with respondents reporting higher loyalty toward brands endorsed by international athletes. However, this difference, while meaningful, did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that factors beyond ethnicity may play a more substantial role in influencing brand loyalty. This is supported with the findings of Kim and Cheong (2011), who demonstrated that an ethnicity match between athletes and audiences positively influences brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Similarly, Pan and Zeng (2023) found that athletes' ethnicities generated a main effect on viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Furthermore, Hasaan et al. (2015) emphasized that athlete brand attributes, including ethnicity, contribute to athlete loyalty, team loyalty, and sponsor loyalty among fans.

There was also a significant difference in brand loyalty and age of the respondents found through ANOVA testing, with respondents aged 19–27 and 28–40 reported higher loyalty toward brands endorsed by their favorite athletes, as compared to respondents aged 15–18. This may indicate more consistent and stable consumer preferences amongst older respondents making them more loyal to brands endorsed by their favourite athlete. This is also proven with prior research suggesting that brand loyalty strengthens with age due to greater financial independence and brand familiarity (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Casidy & Wymer, 2016). Moreover, Shibin and Azees (2024) found that relationship-based endorsements have a stronger influence on young adults compared to teenagers, who are still forming consumption identities.

Later, the study also revealed that adolescents aged 15–18 displayed significantly higher levels of parasocial interaction than respondents aged 19–27 and 28–40 as shown by the ANOVA table. This may indicate respondents of a younger age may be more emotionally connected to their favourite athletes than more mature respondents. These findings align with prior literature indicating that adolescents are more prone to forming parasocial bonds due to heightened emotional sensitivity (Giles & Maltby, 2004) (Rosaen & Dibble, 2008). Bond (2016) also reported that younger age groups, particularly teens active on Twitter, develop stronger perceived relationships with celebrities due to their frequent and intimate engagement with content.

Similarly, a significant difference was found in athlete trustworthiness across age groups. Respondents aged 19–27 and 28–40 rated their favorite athletes as more trustworthy compared to respondents aged 15–18. The findings suggest that older respondents may value authenticity and credibility more than younger respondents despite younger respondents being more emotionally connected. Prior studies suggest that with age, individuals develop more efficient judgment patterns, making them more likely to evaluate credibility based on past behavior and media consistency (Cassidy & MacDonald, 2010 ; Zebrowitz et al., 2017). Moreover, Van Reijmersdal et al. (2015) found that older adults are more likely to associate trustworthiness with credibility through factors such as professionalism and long-term reputation.

Additionally, there was a positive correlation between brand loyalty and athlete trustworthiness.When the regression analysis was carried out, athlete trustworthiness emerged as a significant predictor of brand loyalty. This is further supported by Suchao-in et al. (2023), who found that athlete personal branding significantly influences brand loyalty in sports products, with trustworthiness being a key component. Similarly, Mahmoudian et al. (2021) demonstrated that trustworthiness of athlete brand image positively affects fan loyalty. Additionally, Cheban (2023) highlighted that an influencer's perceived trustworthiness significantly impacts brand loyalty among Instagram users.

Further the present research reported a positive correlation between brand loyalty and parasocial interaction, however when regression analysis was carried out, parasocial interaction did not emerge as a significant predictor of brand loyalty. This is further supported by Lacap et al. (2023) who found that social media interactions and parasocial relationships lead to the development of trustworthiness and loyalty among consumers.

This was also reported by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), Marwick and Boyd (2011), and Lacap et al. (2023), implying that the influence of parasocial bonds may be influenced by other endorsement qualities.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the ever changing world of sports marketing in the digital age, particularly focusing on how parasocial relationships (PSRs) between fans and athletes that are fostered through social

media impact brand loyalty. Through platforms like Instagram and X, athletes share personal content such as behind the scenes content, personal narratives to enrich their audiences with a sense of authenticity and trust. Ultimately allowing fans to form stronger emotional bonds with them, which can influence consumer behavior. These emotionally driven, one-sided connections known as Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) have become vital in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. As suggested by Lacap et al. (2023), strong PSRs can significantly increase brand loyalty particularly when built on the basis of credibility and emotional connect.

The present study aimed to explore how elements such as athlete trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility shape brand loyalty through parasocial interaction. Findings revealed that while parasocial interaction showed a positive correlation with brand loyalty, it did not significantly predict it in regression analysis. While, athlete trustworthiness emerged as a significant predictor of brand loyalty, reinstating that fans are more likely to stay loyal to brands endorsed by athletes they perceive as credible and reliable.

This is well supported by existing studies which explain the importance of ethical perception (acquisitive intent or protective intent), resonance in lifestyle, reliability in influencing consumer choices of their fans.

Additionally, although there were differences in parasocial interaction and brand loyalty based on the athlete's ethnicity, with international athletes often evoking stronger PSRs and brand loyalty, however, ethnicity was not a statistically significant predictor in itself. These results suggest that while PSRs remain important in fan-brand dynamics, trustworthiness of the athlete plays a more direct and influential role in shaping brand loyalty. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, the relationships identified reflect associations rather than causation. Nonetheless, these findings highlight the central role of perceived athlete credibility in driving consumer loyalty toward endorsed brands. As social media continues to foster a false reality in the lens of their users, this study highlights the utmost importance of authenticity and reliability in shaping loyalty towards athlete endorsed brands.

These results can be even more efficiently understood and recognized through the perspective of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which asserts that people learn behaviors and form attitudes by observing others, particularly those perceived as credible and influential. In the context of this study, fans who perceive athletes as trustworthy and authentic are more likely to continue living off that trust through being loyal to brands they endorse. Thus, athlete trustworthiness emerged as a stronger predictor of brand loyalty than parasocial interaction alone. Similarly, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973 ; Verywell mind, 2022) emphasizes the role of audiences in selecting online platforms for needs such as companionship, information, and entertainment. Fans may turn to athletes on social media to satisfy these needs, reinforcing parasocial bonds. However, it is ultimately the perceived utility and credibility of the athlete that determines whether this interaction transforms into sustained brand loyalty.

6. Limitations of the Study

I. The sample size was limited and lacked representation from broader geographic and socioeconomic segments, which restricts the generalizability of findings.

II. The surveys were collected through self reported questionnaires, thus there may be a bias at the time of filling the survey which may not reflect the actual behaviour of the respondent towards the athlete or the brand endorsed by the athlete.

III. Since the research was focused only on athletes, it limits the opportunity of recording data for other influencers, celebrities that foster different types of PSRs to promote brands endorsed by them.

IV. The survey did not account for the ethnicity of the respondent thus, cultural proximity, cultural beliefs or even the varying interpretations of trust goes unaccounted for. This may hinder how respondents evaluated international or local athletes.

V. The study did not accord for the particular type of product being endorsed and whether that has an effect on the variables under investigation

7. Future Recommendations:

I. Future studies should survey a larger sample size consisting of a more diverse group of respondents varying across different geographical locations, socioeconomic background, age, gender and cultural background to effectively make an improved generalization of the findings.

II. Incorporating actual purchasing behavior, brand engagement metrics, or social media analytics would provide a better measure of brand loyalty beyond self-reported questionnaires.

III. Future research could explore whether trustworthiness and parasocial interaction function similarly with other types of endorsers (actors, influencers, political figures) to examine the broader implications of PSRs.

IV. Future studies could investigate how parasocial interactions vary across platforms (Instagram vs YouTube vs TikTok) and whether certain platforms affect perceptions of authenticity, credibility, or trustworthiness in athletes.

V. Future research could also investigate the type of sport, whether individual or team. Can modulate the strength of parasocial influence on consumer behavior.

VI. Exploring whether consumer choices, brand loyalty due to PSRs is influenced by the type of product endorsed by the athlete (Luxury product like a car vs fitness products like protein powder).

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