

From Followers to Consumers: Parasocial Identification with International Football Athletes and Its Influence on Brand Credibility, Purchase Intention, and Brand Loyalty

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DOI: <https://doi.org/ijssrr.v9i9.3494>

ABSTRACT

Social media has revolutionized how athletes engage with their audience, providing a platform for direct interaction and fostering emotional connections. For example, if you take the case of football, Cristiano Ronaldo is able to communicate with people through social media, which can result in what is known as parasocial identification. This is a one-directional psychological relationship characterized by feelings of trust, attachment and intimacy towards the athlete. With the increasing significance of athlete endorsements and personal brands in modern marketing it is essential that the role of parasocial identification on consumer behaviour is understood. The literature review method is used to analyze the relationship between parasocial identification and the credibility of brands, the intention to buy and brand loyalty among football fans. Through the study's research on sports marketing, celebrity endorsements, consumer behaviour, and social media communication, the findings and results are compiled to provide insights into how consumers' emotional connections with sports stars influence their attitudes and behaviours. Based on the findings of the review, social media presence and athletes' personal disclosure is vital in fostering parasocial identification. The stronger the connection between fans and athletes, the more likely they are to see the athletes as more credible and authentic, thus increasing brand credibility. Furthermore, the fans' emotional attachment makes them more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the brands sponsored by such athletes, which enhances their purchase intent and brand loyalty. Results showed that parasocial identification is not only a key mechanism that athletes provide emotional value and trust to brands but also an essential element for effective marketing. Moreover, the review points out some gaps in current research, especially the lack of focus on football-specific scenarios and the impact of new technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual influencers. Future studies are needed to address these issues and advance knowledge of the development of parasocial identification in sports marketing.

Keywords: *Parasocial Identification; Football; Athletes; Brand Credibility; Purchase Intention; Brand Loyalty*

1. Introduction

1.1 Football, Media, and Global Fan Engagement

In the 20th century, football was the most diffused of all sports. There is professional football on every continent and the professional players are constantly on the move, seeking to join the most lucrative clubs in Europe. Using the football players' market as an example, this highlights some key features of economic globalization: the new international division of labour, the ever increasing role played by intermediaries to bind the demand and supply of work on a transnational scale, and the setting up of spatially fragmented trade circuits. These processes constitute the foundations of the

globalization of footballers, a market where clubs and championships fulfil complementary functions and are now more than ever working together in a functional way without the barrier of the national border (Poli, 2010).

Consumers enjoy following the well-known faces and learning out about their lifestyle, food choices, or designer clothing they wear. These behaviours of the consumers are influenced by their favourite celebrities. Marketers know about such celebrity admiration, and often employ celebrities in marketing communication strategies. This study tests a model testing how connectedness to the celebrity, attitude toward the celebrity, receptivity toward the celebrity-endorsed message, and purchase intentions of the celebrity-endorsed market offering are related, based on the theories of parasocial relationship and social connectedness. Structural equation modelling was used to explore these relationships. The results suggest that the connectedness of the person with the celebrity is positively associated with the receptivity towards the celebrity endorsed message as well as the purchase intention of the celebrity endorsed market offering. On the theoretical side, the integration of parasocial relationship and social connectedness theories explain the processes through which celebrity endorsements impact consumers' attitudes and behaviours. From a marketing perspective, the results indicate that when selecting celebrity endorsers for an advertisement, marketers need to take into account how constituent constituents are likely to relate to the selected celebrity in their key target markets. However, in addition to consumers' connection with the celebrity, the results also indicated that receptivity toward the celebrity endorsed message is a crucial component in the pathway between the celebrity endorsed message and the purchase intention of the celebrity endorsed offering (Tran et al., 2019).

In the contemporary landscape of sports communication, social media is a tool that has become essential, it has revolutionized the way athletes connect with their audience worldwide. This body of work will highlight the powerful example of Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the world's most followed athletes in a variety of social media platforms, and examines how social media can promote fan interaction, extend the personal brand and influence public perception. The study identifies that social media is a strong platform for athletes to develop authenticity and build a sense of community, which can drive up the commercial value of their brand and strengthen their fan base through direct and constant interaction. However, these advantages are coupled with considerable challenges, including heightened vulnerabilities in privacy management, the potential spread of misinformation, and intensified public scrutiny that can lead to reputational risks. In response to these dual aspects, the researcher proposed strategic guidelines for athletes and their management teams to optimize social media usage emphasizing content consistency, active engagement techniques, and crisis communication protocols. Furthermore, they identified emerging trends and suggested directions for future research, particularly regarding the impact of new digital platforms, the evolution of parasocial relationships, and the long-term effects of social media on athletes' mental health and career sustainability. The work contributed significantly to a nuanced understanding of social media's role in sports communication, illustrating its capacity to create opportunities as well as complexities in the digital age (Li, 2025).

1.2 Parasocial Relationships: Definition and Formation

The term parasocial relationship was first theorized by Horton and Wohl (1956) and refers to one-way emotional relationships that an audience develops toward media figures that they haven't encountered in real life. The ability to connect these relationships is especially potent for adolescents, as they are in a critical period of identity formation that is highly vulnerable to them from long-term exposure to social media (Gleason et al., 2017). Although this type of relationship is fundamentally non-reciprocal (Hoffner & Bond, 2022), seeing a star athlete like Cristiano Ronaldo repeatedly on a social media platform like Instagram, and seeing them train, see their personal achievements, and see their personal emotions, puts the young fans into a zone of familiarity and attachment, the same as they experience in real interpersonal relationships.

This concept of parasocial involvement, an illusion of intimacy between media consumers and media professionals, is one of the most intriguing communication phenomena ever. First discussed by Horton and Wohl in 1956, this concept has since occupied a prominent place in communication studies. While enjoying longevity, its development, much like its many counterparts in social science, has followed an interesting, inverted U, pattern. Initially, it did not draw much attention from communication researchers. This might have been due to the fact that it was overshadowed by the then-dominant "effects" paradigm. Its being published in a psychiatry journal, also, may have delayed its debut in the communication arena. Then, its popularity started growing around the early 1970s, escalating throughout the decades. The zest on the topic, however, has arrived at a plateau in early to mid- 1990s and since then has been on the decline. The primary goal of this essay is to organize, review, and interpret parasocial research published since the seminal work of

Horton and Wohl (1956). The first part of the essay summarizes the central notions of parasocial involvement as presented by Horton and Wohl. It then traces the evolution of subsequent research-its conceptual and methodological approaches, major findings, difficulties, and development of new lines of work. Towards the end is a series of suggestions that are logically derived from the preceding review. Overall, the essay is intended to re-vitalize the paradigm through a comprehensive and systematic understanding of related issues (Tsao, 2004).

Chung and Cho (2017) extended existing marketing literature on parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) by shifting the focus from brand accounts to personal social media personas — a framework that applies with particular force to a figure like Ronaldo, one of the most followed individuals globally. Cognitively, the followers' perception and sense of relational closeness is influenced by his values, opinions and lifestyle. In terms of emotion, posts that are emotionally charged, be it happy or sad, can stir up feelings of empathy and change moods for millions of users. In behaviour, his endorsements and motivational messages are a clear directive of what to do online and off – whether making purchases, engaging in fitness, or any other action (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). The tripartite effect suggests that parasocial relationships are not limited to a brand's interactions but are felt most keenly in global personal personas, emphasizing the essential role personal influence plays in today's digital marketing landscape.

Continuing research on the development of parasocial relationships, the present study modernized a seminal study conducted by Rubin and McHugh (1987) investigating the relationship among communication, liking, and intimacy in forming a relationship with a television character. This study applied this research to the YouTube video sharing platform to see if such a relationship was evident on social media. Results of a structural equation model closely replicate the original findings, and confirmed that exposure to YouTube predicted both social and physical attraction. This attraction was related to parasocial relationship formation, which then positively increased the relational importance. Overall, the results provide justification for extending the theoretical expectations of parasocial interaction to the YouTube context (Kurtin et al., 2018).

Research by Wang et al. (2008) investigates how unfulfilled interpersonal needs due to loneliness are met by mediated communication, specifically through parasocial interaction. Emotional (family and romantic), social, chronic, situational, and transient loneliness are differentiated. Different types of loneliness are expected to predict different uses of parasocial interaction, with gender serving as a moderator of these effects. Based on a college-student sample (N = 154), social loneliness was negatively related to the use of parasocial interaction. Gender interacted with family, romantic, and chronic loneliness in predicting parasocial interaction. For women, greater family loneliness predicted greater parasocial interaction, whereas for men the effect was negative. For men, greater chronic loneliness led to more parasocial interaction, whereas for women this effect was negative. Finally, for men, greater romantic loneliness was associated with less parasocial interaction, whereas for women this relationship was slightly positive. The findings were interpreted in terms of the uses and gratifications perspective, which relates interpersonal and mass communication

1.3 Social Media as the Engine of Parasocial Connection

Social media has fundamentally transformed athlete–fan communication. Social media platforms like Instagram allow athletes to connect with millions of followers at once, bypassing the traditional media filter, and allow them to display a more genuine and authentic image of themselves, thereby building trust and loyalty over time. In an examination of 472 Instagram posts from Ronaldo and Messi, the researchers discovered that both players posted more personal than football content and that, despite the higher number of likes earned on football posts, personal content received more comments, indicating that content type in meaningful ways influences the type and nature of engagement within their follower base (Mahmoudian et al., 2024).

The social interaction of online is one of the mechanisms for this deepened engagement – athletes disclose authentic moments in an online environment that feel spontaneous, and this is seen as having greater effect in sport than in entertainment, precisely because the athletic content, whether that's an unexpected match-winning moment or an unscripted emotional reaction, feels like it's happening spontaneously and is not scripted (Hu et al., 2024). It is this perceived genuineness that builds deeper and faster parasocial connections between athletes and followers compared to more conventional forms of celebrity communication (Nzuva, 2021).

Using social media for crisis communication has been proposed as an effective strategy because it allows teams to build parasocial relationships with fans. The researcher focused on the early elimination of Germany during the 2018 Fédération Internationale de Football Association World Cup to examine the effects of communication on Facebook. The

authors compared the Facebook posts of the German team, captain Manuel Neuer, and team member Thomas Müller and examined the emoji reactions each received. Although Neuer posted text identical to that of the team, his post received a smaller proportion of angry emoji reactions. Müller received fewer angry reactions than the team, but more than Neuer. The authors also used data from a two-wave panel to study changes in evaluation and parasocial relationships and perceived authenticity as potential mediators. Only the team was evaluated more negatively after the elimination than before. Parasocial relationships mediated the effect of exposure to social media posts on evaluation (Utz et al., 2020).

1.4 Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Behaviour

The commercial implications of parasocial bonds are well established in the literature. Stronger parasocial relationships are associated with more favourable consumer attitudes toward endorsed brands and products (Um, 2022). Celebrities shape fan behaviour across dimensions ranging from lifestyle choices to purchasing decisions (Quan et al., 2022), and brands have recognised that this depth of cultural influence cannot be manufactured artificially (Kapitan et al., 2021). As a result, corporations invest substantially in athlete endorsement partnerships — not merely for the athlete's reach, but for the reservoir of trust they have built with their audience over years of authentic engagement (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Parasocial identification with an athlete thus functions as a prime antecedent of purchase intention, as well as a driver of sustained brand loyalty (Lacap et al., 2023a).

Research by Gong and Li (2017) confirms that both parasocial interaction and traditional source-credibility factors including perceived expertise and celebrity-product congruence significantly influence endorsement effectiveness. Similarly, Um (2022) demonstrated, using a sample of 253 college students, that a consumer's personal emotional connection with a celebrity positively shapes perceptions of advertising authenticity and celebrity-brand fit, both of which in turn foster more favourable consumer attitudes. These findings collectively suggest that the psychology of celebrity endorsement is deeply relational; its effectiveness is rooted in the perceived intimacy that fans have developed with the endorser over time.

Research by Centeno & Wang (2018) examines the effects of narrowed social distance with celebrity endorsers (i.e., via close relationship categories) and their origin (i.e., local or international) on consumer evaluations towards their endorsed advertisements. It is proposed that employing a relational approach in celebrity endorsement where celebrities are framed as socially close personae leads to increased attitudes toward the advertisement. A pilot test on actual advertisements and three laboratory studies show that the celebrity endorsement is more effective when the advertisement features the celebrities as socially-close personae than when they are more distant; and these effects are more pronounced when the celebrity is local than foreign. Finally, the study proposes that consumer self-referencing towards celebrities mediates these effects. Anchored on construal level and social identity theories, implications on relational approach in celebrity endorsements and on international marketing communications are discussed complementarily with Asian culture inherently subscribing to relational celebrity endorsements

Football fans are consumers with a special behaviour with their football club brand. Football is the most popular sport in the world. Demographically, organisations worldwide are becoming increasingly homogeneous. A study by Cayolla & Loureiro (2013) aimed to explore why football fans are willing to make some kind of sacrifices in order to continue their relationship with their preferred club brand. Therefore, 97 telephone interviews (from a list of 123 potential respondents) were conducted with entrepreneurs, managers, students, lawyers, retired employees (public and private), professors, athletes, coaches. Participants were contacted in accordance with the procedures of snowball sampling type starting with finding the perpetrators of personal contacts that fit the profile request for the study: the main criterion of the integral elements of this first study is to be people who really like football, people who have the willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of their relationship with the football club brand and team. The findings revealed four major facets: passion/soul, be different, leave all behind, personal risk. The study contributes to knowledge in the marketing field, as well as provides insights to brand managers

1.5 Trust, Credibility, and the Athlete–Brand Relationship

In sport, there is a strong link between parasocial relationships and the perception of source trustworthiness. An athlete with years of “real and honest” social media interactions has built up a bank of trust that positively contributes to brand credibility at the moment of endorsement (Sun & Wu, 2012). For Ronaldo, it is even more difficult to separate his product from his personality, as his fanbase has grown to follow him not just as a player, but as a person, his values, and even his

aesthetic preferences, all of which can be traced back to the many years of social media engagement, documentary material, and his unscripted public appearances (Li, 2025).

This is where the brand is becoming synonymous with the athlete. Ronaldo's likeness is not just being used to sell a product, it's being used to sell the emotional capital he has accumulated over millions of fans throughout his career. Such deep connections between athlete and audience can't be bought with advertising money — and when the bond between athlete and audience feels like it's forced or it's not aligned, all that borrowed credibility goes out the window (Hayat et al., 2024).

The question of how these strategies may impact consumer trust in the athlete has not been extensively investigated as athletes embrace a new business model, moving away from traditional endorsements to co-investment and self-branding. Using the foundational theory of signaling, the current study focuses on the costliness of the athlete-brand relationship as a signal of athlete involvement, one unobservable attribute that is known to influence trust. In both U.S. and Chinese experiments, high cost signals (co-investment and self-branding signals) proved more effective than low cost signals (endorsements) in influencing perceived involvement and trust, especially among skeptical consumers. It contains empirical evidence to support the logic of separating the equilibrium, and offers practical implications for athlete branding, influencer marketing, and digital entrepreneurship in the social media environment (Xu et al., 2026).

These days athletes need to have social media to communicate with their fans at all times, with their fans on and off the pitch. There is a notable development of parasocial relationships or parasocial bonds in these interactions. PSRs are one sided, emotional relationships between "fans" and influential people who are usually celebrities, like athletes. 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 (Kharabanda, 2025). Footballers have to embody integrity and empathy to serve as a symbol of connection. Clubs can enhance their brand by encouraging team and ethical behavior. Sponsors, in turn, gain from linking up with players with a combination of performance and relational and moral qualities. The configurational approach uncovers several pathways for influencing the brand, and thus, athlete-brand congruence and authenticity are emphasized more than mere brand visibility (López-Tenorio et al., 2025). It is observed that celebrities' self-disclosure on personal social media accounts, particularly Twitter and Instagram affects fans' perceptions. An online survey was utilized among a sample of 429 celebrity followers on Twitter. Results demonstrated that celebrities' professional self-disclosure (e.g., sharing their work-related life), personal self-disclosure (e.g., sharing their personal life such as friends and family), and fans' retweeting behaviour, enhanced fans' feeling of social presence, thereby positively affecting parasocial interaction with celebrities. Further, it was found that the effects of self-disclosure and retweeting on parasocial interaction were mediated by social presence. Implications and future research directions are provided (Kim & Song, 2016).

A systematic review by Azhar et al. (2026), drawing on 37 documents indexed in Scopus via the PRISMA framework, identified a steady rise in parasocial relationship research since 2018, with the United States leading contributions and growing input from Asia and Europe. The review identified 15 theories and 35 variables within the field and proposed a conceptual model for understanding and leveraging parasocial bonds in influencer selection strategies. Notably, however, the majority of existing research has concentrated on entertainment celebrities — particularly figures associated with Korean popular culture — with comparatively limited attention paid to the domain of sport and athlete endorsement (Liu, 2023).

On the basis of social identity theory, Carlson and Donovan (2008) showed that the feelings of identity and attachment of the consumer to the athlete endorser directly affected the purchasing intentions and brand loyalty of the fans, and that approximately 60 per cent of all celebrity-sponsored ads around the world feature an athlete. In spite of this commercial success, theoretical models connecting parasocial identification specifically to brand credibility, purchase intention and brand loyalty in a sports context are under-researched. In addition, the majority of the research has been conducted on general consumer groups or entertainment audiences, and there has been little research that has focused on football fans as a distinct group and as an internationally important group of audiences. In this study, this gap is filled by analysing the effect of parasocial interaction with foreign football players on three consumer responses — brand credibility, purchase intention and brand loyalty. The study aims to empirically identify the pathways between parasocial identification and their consumer responses which are commercially relevant, and to add to the expanding knowledge base of athlete endorsements in the digital era, using a validated, multi-scale questionnaire conducted among fans of international footballers.

1.6 Emerging Trends and Future Directions

The rise of deep-fakes, fabricated media and interactive persona-based agents and tools are affecting the way fans engage with footballers, especially international stars like Cristiano Ronaldo. They impact on fans who have already built up emotional and parasocial relationships with athletes, such as Ronaldo. These existing relationships make it easier for fans to accept and interact with the AI-generated content, making it easier to confuse the real from the fake. There can be a lot of confusion for FansFans between the real athlete and the AI created athlete, causing conflicts between real distance and virtual closeness. This brings up significant ethical issues regarding consent and identity misuse, plus the potential damage to Ronaldo's public image and reputation (Yuan et al., 2026). Short form moving images such as YouTube shorts, TikTok videos and Instagram reels can be conceptualized as symbiotic parasitic artificial organisms that live only when they occupy a viewer's attention and otherwise lie dormant in status like viruses or within the unconsciousness of the viewer. The discussion is directed towards the life cycle of a short-form video, from its latent zero-view state to its activation during viewing, during which it affects the host's cognition and behavior (often leaving an aftereffect or afterglow post-exposure). Also showing the buyside of how athletes do not have any show to see a replay or to perform the task multiple times until its perfect, they are to perform on the spot and give it their best on and off the field (ALshammari, 2024).

Cristiano Ronaldo has transformed from a footballer into a global brand icon, CR7. This shows how his identity extends beyond sports into fashion, fitness, lifestyle, and global influence, Cristiano Ronaldo more than a footballer he's a living legend and a living brand. The Short name CR7 persona is a perfectly balanced world phenomenon of sports, body, lifestyle and social media. Cristiano Ronaldo is a role model and "idol" that engages viewers and turns them into loyal customers of his products. His total 1 billion followers across all his social media are not only football fans, they are also potential customers for his brand of CR 7 apparel, hotels and brand deal, as the study shows CR7 is a commercial brand and cultural phenomenon that affects fans, markets, and even nations (Vijay & Shaji, 2025). Elite footballers are subject to unprecedented levels of mental health stress and challenges. Footballers are experiencing mental health problems that have become a major focus in the modern era, and there is not much systematic evidence linking the concepts of stress management, mental health and sporting performances. Mental health is a key element of elite football performance but one that is not being sufficiently addressed. Evidence-based psychological interventions, organizational support systems, and stress management protocols significantly improve both mental well-being and athletic performance. Elite football clubs and governing bodies must prioritize systematic mental health assessment, evidence-based intervention implementation, and support infrastructure development (P, 2023).

The ability to interact and communicate effectively in different cultural contexts has never been more relevant for football coaches because cultural diversity in football has increased in the past decades. Yet, there is a reduced number of institutions that are currently offering cultural training to coaches, and it is unknown whether coaches feel the need for such training. Most coaches perceived a benefit from cultural training in preparation for international appointments, but some felt that coaches already had cultural awareness because they manage individuals and adjust easily to different cultures. This explores the perceptions of football coaches about cross-cultural awareness and training needs and provides insights to providers of coach education (Borges et al., 2023).

2. Synthesis of the Literature

Taken together, this body of literature examines digital media's impact on the rise of football fandoms and parasocial relations involving football, particularly Cristiano Ronaldo. Existing research data indicate that fans grow strong emotional connections to athletes because of social media. Social media gives fans that touch of intimacy, but it's a parasocial relationship. This review builds on that research and shows how AI technology, such as deepfake technology, contributes to even more parasocial connections through a lowered critical threshold that is more belief and engagement. The remainder of this section synthesises the factors and dimensions underlying these relationships.

The research results clearly demonstrate the relevance of the proposed relationships because all of them are actually true, which means that the social media interactions have a significant influence on the perception and behavior of an audience. In fact, self-disclosure is found to be positively and significantly influenced by social media engagement. When content creators interact more with the audience, it will result in them expressing their own thoughts, experiences and feelings in an open manner. This openness generally establishes an authenticity and familiarity for the viewers, and they

feel more connected to the creator. Additionally, self-disclosure plays an important role in the development of parasocial relationships, as audiences tend to be more drawn to developing a one-sided emotional bond with creators that appear authentic and transparent. The results also indicate that self-disclosure is an important mediating factor in the relationship between social media communication and parasocial relationships, and is worthy of attention. Moreover, social media interactions and parasocial relationships also have positive impacts on the perceived credibility of the source. The more audiences interact with creators and connect with them on an emotional level, the more likely they are to consider them a trustworthy, honest and credible source of information. This boosts the sense of trustworthiness, leading to greater brand credibility and a crucial aspect in consumer attitudes. Finally, when brand credibility is stronger, people will be more loyal to the brand and are more willing to support, trust and commit to the brand in the long term (Lacapa, et al., 2023).

Further, the same evidence indicates that the likelihood of purchasing products is significantly affected by the content that has been viewed and experienced by the users on social media. Users will encounter product suggestions, opinions, and endorsements from content creators and influencers, which can greatly influence their brand perception. The more they trust and believe in those products, and feel that they are authentic, the more willing they will be to accept it. Plus, positive interactions and emotional ties created via social media influence their views, both of the influencer and the brand being promoted, in a positive way. This helps to improve their confidence in the purchase. The results show that purchase intention is not only related to the product, but also to relationships such as trust and emotional attachment (Lacapa et al., 2023). Which means that social media platforms are a big arena for influencing consumer behavior: brands and influencers can make significant connections with their followers and engender greater purchasing intent and likelihood.

This trend is confirmed by other research in the area. One of these papers explores the intriguing realm of para-social interaction (PSI) from a consumer perspective and the impact of this relationship on their trust in the source and brand's reaction to celebrity-involved advertising. For this reason, two studies were conducted which aimed to collect data via online surveys. Results of the analyses using structural equation modeling show that attractiveness and expertise of the celebrity are significant in determining the intensity of PSI between consumers and celebrities. This linkage, in the end, allows customers to establish a personal link with the brands that these celebrities advocate and consequently to react more positively to these brands. What is interesting, however, is that if this celebrity exhibits a single qualification, whether it be physical appeal or their knowledge of a specific field, the audience's need to interact with the celebrity increases as their skill increases. But when a celebrity is in both looks and skill, the audience's willingness to interact is more influenced by changes in their "look. Based on this study, the importance of consumer-celebrity PSI in transferring the symbolic meaning of the celebrity to the consumers' self-identity is brought into focus, which will be useful for future research into the consumer-celebrity relationship in endorsement advertising. Furthermore, it brings useful information to source credibility and brand attitude models (Zhang, 2020).

Concurrently, the emergence of social media has made celebrities' endorsements more than just media, as they are now able to build an exceptionally close bond with their fans by communicating directly with them. This study will come from the concept of Parasocial interactions and celebrity endorsements which will provide a framework of understanding the factors that contribute to and result from these specific interactions on social media. The answers were collected by an experimental survey method and obtained 270 valid answers that were analyzed by partial least square structural equation modeling. The findings revealed that parasocial interactions completely mediate the link between social media engagement and celebrity attachment. Moreover, it was discovered that celebrity attachment had a direct and indirect effect on purchase intentions via cognitive (e.g., brand credibility) and emotional (e.g., brand attractiveness) components of the construct. Interestingly, the need to belong was demonstrated to moderate the relationship between social media interactions and parasocial connections as well as between celebrity attachment and brand attractiveness. An exploratory analysis also investigated if certain social platforms were more effective in creating these parasocial relationships. Overall, this research examines the impact of celebrities' involvement in social media on their brand and the importance of parasocial interactions and need to belong in influencing these interactions and the resulting effects (Aw & Labrecque, 2020).

Overall, however, in the past decade, research regarding parasocial interactions in the field of marketing has increased considerably. Since the early 2000s, the concept of media and communication has entered into the marketing conversation in a gradual manner. Despite its increasing relevance, a systematic literature review regarding this topic, which is specifically focussed on the domain, is not present. To fill this void, we undertook a systematic literature review which

we delved into 117 articles in ABDC (last 25 years). Our main goal was to explore the existing literature by looking at theoretical advancements, key characteristics, and methodological trends through the TCCM framework. The purpose of this research is to pave the way for future studies, and to elucidate the relationship between constructs in different settings. We illuminate the influence of parasocial interaction in various industries such as influencer marketing, celebrity endorsement, branding, live streaming, consumer behaviour and chatbots and more. This study aims to offer a contemporary overview of the research on PSI and to pave the way for future studies in this intriguing field (Nadroo et al., 2025).

3. Conclusion

This literature review highlights the growing importance of parasocial relationships in shaping the attitudes and actions of football fans, particularly in the digital age. Footballers have a new way to communicate with fans, share their experiences, and interact directly with them through social media platforms. While these relationships are unbalanced, repeated exposure to the personal stories, values, achievements and lives of athletes creates strong emotional connections for fans, and these connections can be as strong as those they would expect to have with a real person. Throughout all of these studies, it has been found that these parasocial relationships are strengthened when athletes are engaging, open, and sincere on social media. Consider, for example, global football stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, who uses social media as an effective tool to build emotional connections with millions of fans across the world who can feel a connection to the athlete beyond his or her games. In this context, parasocial relationships have become an essential element in the field of sport communication and digital marketing.

The research we've looked at shows that parasocial relationships can really boost brand credibility, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty. When fans relate to an athlete on an emotional level, they feel the athletes' brands are more trustworthy, credible and authentic. As athletes transfer their trust onto the brand, endorsement campaigns become more effective and attitudes towards the products and services associated with that athlete are shaped positively. Further, it is noted that the literature has highlighted that when the consumers develop a strong emotional attachment towards the celebrity endorser, the buying intention of consumers is boosted. This is because these relationships help to alleviate doubt and instill confidence in their buying decisions. Furthermore, parasocial relationships are also integral to building sustainable brand loyalty, as they help consumers maintain positive attitudes and continued engagement with the brand of their preferred athletes. Therefore, what you take away from this is that brand marketing isn't all about visibility and advertisement expenditure; it's more about how much athletes can engage the fan in a dialogue through social media that is rich with emotion.

From both theoretical and practical angles, the literature shows that parasocial relationship theory and social connectedness theory offer valuable insights into how athlete-fan interactions shape consumer behavior. The studies reviewed suggest that emotional attachment plays a key role in connecting social media engagement to important outcomes like trust, brand value, purchase intention, and loyalty. However, the review also uncovers several significant gaps that need further exploration. Most existing research has centered on entertainment celebrities and influencers, leaving football athletes and their fans relatively overlooked. Additionally, there's a lack of studies that examine brand credibility, purchase intention, and brand loyalty together in a cohesive framework. With the rise of new developments like artificial intelligence, deepfakes, virtual influencers, and changing social media platforms, there are fresh challenges and opportunities that haven't been thoroughly investigated yet. Therefore, future research should zero in on football-specific contexts, take a longitudinal approach, and delve into how these emerging digital technologies impact the creation and effectiveness of parasocial relationships in influencing consumer behavior and brand outcomes.

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