Why Do We Follow Inauthentic Sports Influencers on Social Media? A Comprehensive Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the underlying factors driving individuals to follow inauthentic sports influencers on social media, employing a phenomenological approach to uncover the motivations and perceptions of followers.

Methods: Given the novelty of the research topic and the absence of comprehensive prior studies, a qualitative methodology was adopted. Participants consisted of active followers of inauthentic sports influencers, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected via in-depth, unstructured interviews until theoretical saturation was reached (n=17). Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 Plus, involving iterative coding, categorization, and conceptual mapping of the data.

Results: Analysis yielded 295 initial codes, refined into 210 unique concepts and further consolidated into 84 distinct themes. These were organized into nine key factors influencing follower engagement: lifestyle portrayal, physical appearance, content production strategies, consistent social media activity, psychological and social drivers, innovative advertising techniques, perceived service benefits, influencer commitment and responsibility, and visual content quality.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the multifaceted appeal of inauthentic sports influencers, emphasizing the need for stricter content regulations to curb misinformation. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should stress that athletic success and health are rooted in scientific knowledge, training discipline, and movement literacy not merely physical attractiveness. This study contributes to the emerging discourse on digital influencer authenticity and audience behavior in sports media.

Keywords: Inauthentic Influencers, Sports Influencers, Influencer Marketing, Social Media, Consumer Behavior, Phenomenology

Introduction

In the current era, smartphones are more than just communication tools; they are gateways to a world of endless information and interactions. These powerful devices have transformed social media into an indispensable part of our daily lives (Chen et al., 2024). Through these platforms, the way we communicate has been revolutionized unprecedentedly (Radmann et al., 2021). and users can now easily create and share their own content on various topics (Audrezet et al., 2020). This transformation has also redefined the concept of fame; it's no longer necessary to possess specific talents in traditional fields (Athletes and artists). Instead, gaining a large following on social media has become a new path to celebrity (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). As a result, the notion of a celebrity has expanded to include individuals active as influencers on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, even if they don't belong to traditional celebrity categories such as actors or athletes (Willoughby et al., 2024). Social media influencers, also known as "micro-celebrities" (Janssen et al., 2022), are defined as individuals who have built credibility with large audiences due to their expertise and knowledge in specific areas. They exert substantial influence over the purchasing decisions and behaviors of their followers (Ki & Kim, 2019). Influencers combine personal branding, storytelling skills, and business acumen to cultivate and sustain their followings, positioning themselves as powerful opinion leaders (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Influencers often build close and trusted relationships with their audiences, which fosters a sense of intimacy and makes them appear more trustworthy than traditional celebrities (Wasike, 2023). As a result, they are perceived as more reliable and relevant sources of consumer information, particularly among younger audiences (Janssen et al., 2022).

There are various types of influencers, categorized by the content they produce, the number of followers they have, or even the platforms they use. One prominent group is fitness influencers, who are active on platforms like Instagram. These individuals, often personal trainers or amateur athletes, share health and fitness-related content to engage with their audiences (Willoughby et al., 2024). They typically provide diet and exercise tips aimed at helping followers achieve their fitness goals (Baranow, 2019). Given that many young people (53%) actively use social media to find health-related content, primarily concerning physical activity, diet and nutrition, and body image, fitness influencers have a significant impact on their followers' lives(Camacho-Miñano et al., 2022). Fitness influencers build trust by creating visually appealing content focused on body shape and explaining how diet and exercise can impact physical appearance (Willoughby et al., 2024).

Despite their widespread influence, fitness influencers are acknowledged as key sources of information, advice, and motivation within the Instagram fitness community (Shine et al., 2022). However, their content can have negative effects, such as promoting excessive social comparisons, body dissatisfaction, depression (Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2023), eating disorders (Sokolova & Perez, 2021), and spreading misinformation or endorsing potentially harmful products (Han & Balabanis, 2024). One reason is that content creators in the fitness and health space may lack the proper training, credentials, or practical expertise required to share accurate information (Buchanan et al., 2023). The credibility of influencers is measured by two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness requires the perception of an influencer's integrity, honesty, and believability, while expertise refers to their relevant skills, knowledge, or experience (Janssen et al., 2022). Currently, the absence of regulations governing the information shared by influencers, coupled with flaws in verification processes, allows for the unchecked spread of false information (Deutsch, 2023). A study conducted in Europe found that only one in nine influencers adhered to health and fitness guidelines when offering advice to their followers, with most failing to meet several credibility standards (Willoughby et al., 2024).Influencers often curate their content based on self-presentation theory, sharing only positive messages and images to

create a favorable image and elicit positive responses from others (Doyle et al., 2022). With the availability of online enhancement tools, users can manipulate their images to appear more attractive to viewers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). As a result, followers are increasingly exposed to manipulated visuals (Andonopoulos et al., 2023), contributing to the spread of misinformation about nutrition and health (Shine et al., 2022), which can be misleading at best and harmful at worst. While many fitness influencers on social media promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles, not all possess formal qualifications or professional experience in health or exercise science. Some unqualified influencers may unintentionally share misleading or harmful advice, putting followers at risk of physical injuries and health complications (Buchanan et al., 2023). Despite their lack of expertise, these influencers often referred to as micro celebrities can build large, loyal audiences by leveraging their appearance, charisma, or online popularity (Khamis et al., 2017).

In brief, despite the widespread adoption of mobile phones and social media in daily life, and the emergence of fitness influencers as popular information sources, research into why young people follow unqualified fitness influencers is remarkably limited. Most studies have focused on the overall impact of influencers and their positive or negative consequences. However, the reason young people gravitate towards individuals who lack scientific qualifications or sufficient experience in fitness and offer potentially dangerous advice constitutes a serious gap in the scientific literature. This research gap is even more critical because a failure to identify the underlying factors of this phenomenon can lead to irreversible physical and psychological harm for young people. Given that unqualified fitness influencers can pose health risks and physical harm to their followers, understanding audience motivations for engaging with their content is a research imperative. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap through a comprehensive phenomenological study of the factors that lead young people to follow unqualified fitness influencers on social media.

Materials and methods

Based on the research objective, this study is both basic and applied in nature and employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a methodology that enables us to better understand the meaning and nature of individuals' lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Specifically, this research utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology is not merely descriptive but involves an interpretive process in which researchers actively interpret the meaning of particular phenomena while reflecting on individual experiences or characteristics (Crowther et al., 2017). In essence, hermeneutic phenomenology allows phenomena to reveal themselves through interpretation (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). This research adopts a social constructionist perspective, emphasizing epistemic beliefs. Social constructionism suggests that individuals' subjective meanings of experiences and social phenomena are shaped by their personal backgrounds and contexts. This interpretive framework is well-suited to this study, as it enables the exploration of subjective meanings and perspectives within the contexts of individuals' lived experiences. (Day & Higgins, 2016).

The participants of this research included internet users who followed unqualified fitness influencers, as well as experts in sports management, marketing, and sociology with relevant expertiseThe sampling process began with purposive selection of individuals who followed unqualified fitness influencers and was subsequently expanded through snowball sampling to obtain additional insights. Each interviewee was asked to introduce others who also followed these fitness figures and had substantial knowledge in this area. Unstructured qualitative interviews were conducted to collect data. During these interviews, experts were asked to share their views on the research topic and explain why they or others follow unreliable or uncredentialed fitness influencers on social media. After conducting 17 interviews, the data reached theoretical saturation. Ethical considerations such as informed consent,

confidentiality, anonymity, and the role of the researcher were taken into account and observed throughout the study. Interviews were audio-recorded where permitted by the participants, while in other cases, the researcher took detailed notes. Some experts also provided written notes based on the research material. After each interview, the collected data was entered into Nvivo 12 Plus software for coding and analysis. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, qualitative validation strategies were explicitly applied. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, where three interviewees reviewed and confirmed the findings. Dependability was enhanced using an audit trail and by involving an external expert in the process of co-coding to ensure consistency in data interpretation. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling and documenting all analytical decisions. Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participants. Additionally, the findings were reviewed and confirmed by three interviewees for further validation.

Table 1. Inter-Coder Reliability Assessment Using Cohen's Kappa Coefficient

Evaluated Item	Percentage of Coded Text	Number of Coders	Initial Agreement Rate	Cohen's Kappa	Additional Note
Interview transcripts (30% sample)	30%	3 coders (2 researchers + 1 external expert)	90%	0.85	Discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings.

*Table 2.*Details of the interview participants

Row	Interview code	Gender	Education	Participant Type	Academic Background
1	D01	Female	Bachelor's degree	✓	
2	D02	Female	Master's degree	✓	
3	D03	Female	Bachelor's degree	✓	
4	D04	Female	Ph.D	✓	✓
5	D05	Female	Bachelor's degree	✓	
6	D06	Female	Master's degree	✓	
7	D07	Male	Master's degree		✓
8	D08	Female	Master's degree	✓	✓
9	D09	Male	PhD in sports management	✓	✓
10	D10	Male	PhD in sports management		✓
11	D11	Male	PhD in sports management		✓
12	D12	Male	PhD in sports management		✓
13	D13	Male	PhD in sports management		✓
14	D14	Male	PhD in sports management		✓
15	D15	Female	Sociology		✓
16	D16	Female	PhD in sports management	✓	✓
17	D17	Male	PhD in sports management	✓	✓

*Some interviewees provided the researchers with written notes on the topic in addition to their interview responses.

 **All interviews were conducted with participants who gave informed consent for audio recording. However, some interviewees did not permit the full recording of their sessions.

 ***All participants were informed of the study's focus and purpose and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous.

This study adhered to established qualitative research protocols and ethical principles—including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, mitigation of potential consequences, and reflexive consideration of the researcher's role—in accordance with the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (1998, p. 3).

Results

The participants initially discussed the phenomenology of factors influencing athlete social media followership by providing various definitions and explanations. Table 3 presents the most significant definitions.

Table 3. Definitions of Inauthentic Sports Influencers from the Perspective of Selected Participants

Row	Interview code	Definitions
1	D17	Inauthentic Sports Influencers refers to an individual who lacks a legitimate ranking or standing in the real world of sports and competitions. These individuals, who present themselves as athletes on social media platforms like Instagram, do not hold any significant position, title, or medal in the actual sports world. While they may have been involved in a sport at some point and achieved limited success, they differ from professional athletes who have followed a structured path from early training to adulthood, progressing through various levels of competition to achieve peak performance, whether as a champion or a coach. Instead, inauthentic sports influencer merely portray or document aspects of this journey on social media, often emphasizing that they have taken sports lessons, for example. Their content generally revolves around sharing personal aspects of their life, projecting themselves as sources of motivation or inspiration to their audience, and encouraging followers to adopt their lifestyle.
2	D12	An Inauthentic Sports Influencers refers to individuals who lack the necessary skills and athletic performance required for a professional career in sports. These individuals may use Instagram filters, promotional videos, and personal pages to present themselves as professional athletes in an attempt to attract more followers. Often, they seek to profit by portraying themselves as professionals, even though they lack the qualifications. Eventually, their inability to perform at a professional level may be exposed, leading to a significant loss of credibility and trust among their followers.
3	D15	Inauthentic Sports Influencers refers to someone who presents themselves as a professional athlete on social networks but lacks significant knowledge about sports. These individuals often post about themselves engaging in sports, comment on sports topics, and offer sports advice. Moreover, they may seek attention and attempt to create a different self-image. To enhance their reputation, they might employ various techniques, including using inappropriate methods to gain or lose weight and artificially alter their body size. Sports shows may contribute to this problem by creating false and misleading advertisements in the field of sports and health. By promoting such behavior, they can endanger people's health. Additionally, these individuals often try to gain fame through unusual or inappropriate actions and by creating unhealthy competition.

Table 4 presents the primary codes extracted from the interviews, along with the categories and their corresponding secondary codes. The collected data underwent a three-step coding process using various methods. Initially, codes related to the research topic were identified, resulting in 246 total codes. Subsequently, a process of continuous comparison and relationship analysis among these codes led to the extraction of 184 unique concepts. This process was repeated for the remaining codes, ultimately yielding 85 distinct concepts.

Table 4. Factors Influencing the Following of Inauthentic Sports Influencers on Social Media

Component	Final Code (Concept)	Initial Code	Frequency	Reference
Displaying lifestyle	Promoting a healthy and active lifestyle	A healthy and active role model in everyday life	2	2
	Presenting a picture of daily life	Sharing personal daily life	7	11

	Displaying an adventurous and recreational life	Sharing recreational activities and adventurous trips	2	2
	Showcasing a luxurious lifestyle	Luxury lifestyle and showcasing a luxurious life	3	4
	Displaying the use of luxury products and modern technologies	Luxurious products and using the latest technologies like mobile phones, etc.	2	2
	Imitating professional athletes	Modeling after other famous athletes	1	1
	Highlighting entertainment and fun aspects	Streaming live from live music concerts	1	1
	Promoting a modern and attractive lifestyle	Displaying a modern and ideal lifestyle	7	9
Physical attractiveness and appearance factors	Wearing branded sports clothing	Wearing branded and fashionable sportswear	1	1
	Emphasizing ideal body shape and sexual appeal	Being slim and fit, promoting sexual attractiveness	1	1
	Displaying an attractive body and physique	Having an attractive body and physique	2	2
	Focusing on appearance and physical attractiveness	Taking care of one's appearance	4	4
	Promoting fashion and beauty with an emphasis on the female body	Fashion and beauty, representing femininity	1	1
Personality and ethical traits	Selfexpression and freedom of speech	Freedom of speech	3	6
	Charismatic and ethical personality	Charismatic personality and character	4	7
	Demonstrating knowledge and expertise in sports	High knowledge and expertise	3	4
	Empathy with the audience and simplicity in behavior	Simplicity and blending in with the crowd	3	3
	Communication skills and engaging speech	Strong communication skills	1	1
	Effective communication and influence over the audience	Suitable communication skills for a inauthentic sports influencer	1	1
Purposeful and organized content creation	Creating innovative and new content	Posting different and new content	4	5
	Producing broad and diverse content	Offering diverse content in all areas	5	6
	Generating popular and social content	Producing social and popular content	3	6
	Creating engaging and entertaining content	Creating engaging and entertaining content	4	11
	Producing credible scientific content	Producing scientific content using various sources	6	7

Theme	Subtheme	Open code	Concept		
		Providing highquality content with precise topics	Creating highquality content and carefully selecting topics	1	2
		Storytelling in content creation	Storydriven content production	1	1
		Hosting joint live sessions with famous individuals	Frequent live sessions with famous people	2	4
		Offering practical and applicable content	Practical content for daily life	1	1
		Sharing credible scientific resources	Introducing credible scientific resources	1	1
		Engaging with the audience through polls	Polling followers about their content needs	2	2
	Consistent and organized activity on social media	Planning and announcing activities	Announcing future programs and activities	1	1
		Maintaining regular and purposeful activity on social media	Being organized and planned	2	2
		Adhering to a schedule for content release	Punctuality and proper time management	1	1
Psychological and social factors		Creating a sense of closeness and emotional connection with followers	Feeling close and emotionally connected	2	3
		Instilling positive feelings and satisfaction in followers	Positive feelings and self-satisfaction	1	1
		Boosting self-confidence through sports activities	Boosting self-confidence	1	1
		Motivating followers for sports activities	Encouragement and motivation to start exercising	6	8
		Curiosity to follow the life of inauthentic sports influencer	Following out of curiosity to see what the inauthentic sports influencer does	1	1
		Positive impact on personal growth and self-improvement	Helping personal growth	1	1
		Promoting a positive outlook and motivation	Promoting positive thinking and motivation	2	2
Modern advertising and marketing methods		Promoting sports products and services	Promoting sports products and services	1	1
		Creating fun challenges to engage users	Creating various challenges	4	6
		False claims of quick success	False and attractive claims of quick success	1	1
		Scheduling content for peak user hours	Posting during peak user hours	2	3
		Using attractive and impactful visual content	Using appealing images and videos	1	3

	Employing strategic hashtags to attract followers	Using appropriate hashtags	2	2
	Mastery of modern advertising techniques	Familiarity with modern marketing and advertising methods	3	4
	Offering rewards and prizes to engage the audience	Offering prizes	1	1
	Creative advertising through posts and live sessions	Attractive advertising through posts and live sessions	1	1
	Deceptive ads related to fitness and weight loss	Seductive and appealing ads, like losing weight in a few weeks or getting fit in a month, etc.	1	2
	Motivating followers through before and after comparisons	Motivating users with before and after photos of diets	1	1
	Using unreliable methods like buying followers	Buying followers	1	1
	Collaborating with sports brands for advertisements	Collaborating with reputable brands and companies	3	5
Receiving services	Providing exercise routines as a model	A sports model for exercise	5	9
	Responding to questions and interacting with users	Easy access and being responsive	7	10
	Organizing sports courses and workshops	Holding courses and educational classes	3	5
	Offering professional training and nutrition plans	Providing training programs and meal plans	5	5
	Providing practical solutions in the field of sports and health	Offering practical and useful solutions in the field of sports and health	5	5
	Offering free sports related content and information	Free information	3	3
	Teaching healthy diets and nutrition	Teaching diets and preparing healthy and sports related meals	2	2
	Providing specialized sports training	Specialized training in various fields	1	1
	Suggesting useful and practical exercises	Suggesting beneficial and effective exercise movements	2	2
	Offering online workout programs	Online home workout	2	3
	Giving advice on diet and fitness	Fitness and diet	2	2
	Offering diverse workout routines for fitness	A variety of exercises for fitness and weight loss	2	3
	Providing scientific information about the	Scientific explanations about sports and its impact on life	1	1

	impact of sports on life			
	Lack of ability to teach physical education by inauthentic sports influencer	Since athletes don't engage in physical education training	1	1
	Participating in sports and nonsports events	Participation in various sports and nonsports events and introducing them	1	1
	Providing scientific sports consultation	Scientific consultation about sports	1	1
	High effectiveness and quality of sports programs	Effectiveness and good quality of the programs	2	6
	Motivating followers for daily sports activities	Reminding daily exercise	1	1
Commitment and responsibility	Raising awareness about social and environmental issues	Providing content related to social and environmental issues	1	4
	Analyzing and commenting on current events	Commenting on and analyzing important daily events in all areas	2	3
	Participating in charity and social activities	Participation in charitable and social welfare activities	1	1
	Social responsibility and commitment	Social responsibility	2	3
Quality of images and videos	Choosing appropriate music for visual content	Background music and selected tracks	2	2
	Skills in visual performance and acting	Better acting and performance	1	1
	Combining sports and dance with music	Combining sports and dance with music	1	1
	Using professional photography and filming techniques	Photography and filming techniques	1	1
	Employing impactful visual effects	Visual effects	2	2
	Selecting the right angles for filming	Camera angle	1	1
	Expertise in video editing and production	Expertise in video editing and production	1	1
	Professional design of content backgrounds	Designing and decorating the background of photos and videos	2	2
	Professional cover design for videos	Designing the cover of photos and videos	1	1
	Choosing appropriate locations for content production	Location and studio for photo and video production	1	1

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the phenomenology of factors influencing the following of famous athletes on social media. Specifically, the study investigates why people

choose to follow sports influencers or personalities on social networks rather than professional athletes and coaches. Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in a zigzag pattern. Initially, data was gathered until the point of saturation was reached, identifying phenomenological concepts related to factors influencing the following of athletes on social media, as highlighted by interviewees. Subsequently, through partial data analysis, questioning, and comparative methods, the factors impacting the following of athletes were identified and classified into nine main categories: lifestyle, physical characteristics and appearance, content production, consistent and regular activity on social media, psychological and social factors, new advertising and marketing strategies, receiving services, commitment and responsibility, and the quality of images and videos. The discussion then focuses on each of these identified components in detail.

One of the primary reasons participants cited for following sports figures was their lifestyle. In contemporary society, personal websites and social media platforms have become essential channels for self-expression (Javid et al., 2013; Park et al., 2020). The socio-cultural nature of social networks demonstrates that these platforms have evolved into spaces for introducing and promoting alternative lifestyles. Instagram, in particular, is renowned for its focus on sharing images and videos of individuals' personal lives. A significant aspect emphasized by participants was the sharing of personal daily life by these sports figures. Interviewees observed that athletes frequently post selfies and engage in live interactions with their audience, which contributes to attracting followers. As Code Contributor D17 stated, "Sportspersons often share their personal lives to inspire and motivate their audience, encouraging them to live their own lives." Code Contributor D12 echoed this sentiment, observing that "Many people follow influencers for insights into their personal and professional lives. By publishing posts, photos, and videos, influencers share their personal and professional journeys on social networks." In many posts, the focus on body management,

grooming, and seduction is evident. The choice of filming locations often reflects affluent neighborhoods, symbolizing a modern lifestyle. Code D09 remarked, "Almost all influencers portray an idealized, luxurious life on their pages. They engage in storytelling and thematic content, suggesting a scripted approach to their activities. While specialists share educational content when they have something to teach, participants perceived some influencers' content as overly focused on luxury and surface-level portrayals of athletic lifestyles." Indeed, many participants view these athletes as role models for maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle, characterized by regular exercise, balanced diets, and traits like dedication, perseverance, and willpower. However, some participants noted that the strict and demanding nature of a professional athlete's lifestyle can be perceived as too difficult or restrictive for everyday individuals. This study aligns with prior research exploring the influence of social media on lifestyle perceptions. Ahmadi and Asgarzadeh (2020) found that influencers often evoke positive emotions in their audience, particularly by promoting youthfulness, beauty, and luxury through content that showcases designer items, expensive homes, and an affluent lifestyle (Ahmadi & Asgarzadeh, 2020). Similarly, Hashemi and Hashemi (2017) observed a correlation between social media use and changes in lifestyle components like diet, fashion, self-care, and social habits (Hashemi & Hashemi, 2017). Social media platforms like Instagram play a significant role in promoting luxury as an aspirational goal, often through the display of consumer goods, requiring significant financial resources (Naghizadeh-Baghi et al., 2023). Prior studies also emphasize how influencers, particularly in Iran, use symbols of luxury such as mobile phones and designer clothing to project a glamorous lifestyle. The portrayal of luxury in influencer content often shapes followers' desires and interactions, though the excessive pursuit of luxury can be seen as a social or psychological concern.

Participants identified physical attractiveness as a significant factor influencing their decision to

follow sports influencers, particularly among female influencers. Code D10 noted that some individuals may seek inspiration from the appearance of these influencers and strive to emulate their physical attributes. However, it's important to recognize that physical attractiveness is just one factor among many when choosing role models. Achieving an attractive appearance often requires long-term effort, including dedicated exercise and healthy habits. Professional athletes typically prioritize physical fitness through rigorous training and competitive experiences. In contrast, inauthentic sports influencers often focus on enhancing their appearance to attract followers. Code D07 highlighted makeup and appropriate clothing as contributing factors. Code D17 emphasized the importance of physical and sexual attractiveness, especially among female influencers. Participant D13 observed that real athletes may prioritize performance and physical fitness over maintaining a flawless appearance, which can be affected by injuries and the demands of sports. Self-styled sports influencers, on the other hand, often prioritize their appearance to attract attention and generate income. They may employ various strategies such as self-makeup, wearing jewelry, using branded accessories, and showcasing their physical attributes. These elements contribute to the idealized and commercialized lifestyle often portrayed on Instagram. Ahmadi and Asgarzadeh (2020) found that the symbols used in Instagram content can reflect a desire for a luxurious lifestyle. Repeated exposure to these symbols can gradually solidify their value and influence audience perceptions (Ahmadi & Asgarzadeh, 2020)The portrayal of beautiful and young individuals, relationships with others, pleasure-seeking, leisure activities, luxury goods, and physical appearance aligns with consumer culture. These symbols can evoke feelings of calmness, satisfaction, narcissism, stubbornness, attractiveness, and power.

The quality of content produced by inauthentic sports influencers was another primary factor mentioned by participants. Social media influencers operate in various fields, including fashion, beauty, food, travel, sports, culture, and art, and can be influential in any domain (Javid, 2020). They influence their followers' behaviors and attitudes by creating educational, entertaining, informative, and promotional content. For instance, a fashion influencer might inspire followers to purchase the latest trends, while a sports influencer could motivate them to exercise and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Participants generally agreed that the content produced by many such influencers is of high quality, original, and not merely imitative. Regarding the reasons for following specific content or influencers, Participant D04 emphasized the importance of differentiation: "Success in the competitive landscape of social media requires standing out from the crowd. Users are less likely to follow accounts that mimic others. Instead, they appreciate originality and value. Producing unique content can attract and retain followers." Code Contributor D08 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of providing unique and engaging content. They suggested that experienced coaches or athletes can leverage their real-world experiences and strategies in their content, while influencers often rely on a combination of experiences and opinions from various sources. Code Contributor D10 noted that the quality and attractiveness of content are crucial factors in attracting followers on social networks. Professional athletes or coaches who fail to produce engaging content may struggle to gain a significant following. Participants also emphasized that many social media users seek entertainment and fun in addition to sports-related information. Influencers who offer entertaining content are more likely to attract a large following. Code Contributor D11 observed that self-styled sports influencers often attract followers by providing interesting and useful content, including exercise training, nutrition tips, healthcare methods, and personal stories. The interactive nature of social media platforms allows users to create, share, comment on, and like user-generated content. However, not all content is equally influential (Ghasemi et al., 2021). Truelove et al. (2017) found that consumer

bloggers build authenticity by publishing original content. Similarly, studies by Ratwatte & Mattacola (2021) revealed that audiences appreciate YouTubers as a source of entertainment and that social media platforms are widely used for entertainment purposes.

Consistent and regular activity on social media was also a key determinant. Participant D04 explained, "One of the reasons I follow these influencers is their consistent activity on their personal pages. They frequently post stories and live streams about sports, either daily, weekly, or monthly, and this variety and continuity of content keeps me engaged. On the other hand, I've followed the pages of some experienced trainers before, but I had to unfollow them due to their low activity and the few, often boring, posts they shared." Similarly, Participant D07 added, "They are constantly active and present on Instagram. They treat Instagram like a friend—they check it daily, post regularly, and share content about their daily lives and interesting experiences. You won't find them posting for five consecutive days and then disappearing for two weeks. They are committed to maintaining their Instagram presence and producing content consistently." Participant D17 also emphasized the importance of this factor, stating, "Interaction and online presence matter to fans. They usually follow people who are more active on social networks."

Some interviewees also highlighted the psychological and social factors involved in following these influencers. The results of this study suggest that following certain sports influencers on social networks can, in some cases, lead to increased self-confidence and emotional benefits. Participants mentioned factors such as feeling good, gaining self-satisfaction, receiving motivation to start exercising, personal growth, positivity, and encouragement. For example, Participant D10 noted, "In my opinion, the main reason people follow certain sports influencers is the positive psychological and social effects they may experience. These include inspiration to lead a healthy life, increased self-confidence, better self-evaluation, and an overall sense of well-being and satisfaction." However, it's important

to note studies that present opposing viewpoints. For example, Vesal & Rahimi's (2021) research found that although social networks can enhance social communication, they are also associated with increased depression, heightened anxiety, and diminished trust. Influencers aim to build a loyal fan base on social media platforms. They seek to shape their online persona and influence their followers by presenting a specific image of themselves. While they try to appear approachable and friendly to their fans, they also build their reputation through honesty and self-confidence, which helps them establish themselves as trustworthy and authentic sources of content (Johnson & Kaye, 2009).

Regarding the marketing and advertising strategies employed by inauthentic sports influencers, Participant D10 noted that many participate in courses to learn about these techniques. In contrast, professional athletes often lack the time to engage in such training. Code Contributor D08 identified challenges as a factor in attracting followers, stating that influencers often organize challenges on their platforms to encourage audience participation and offer prizes. Participant D09 confirmed the effectiveness of challenges, emphasizing the importance of creating engaging content, including photography, filming techniques, and even staged rivalries or friendships. Additionally, influencers often provide updates and teasers about future content, encouraging followers to stay engaged.

One of the most effective strategies for attracting followers is offering various services. Self-styled sports influencers frequently provide services such as exercise programs, dietary advice, home workouts, and scientific explanations about exercise and its benefits. They also prioritize interacting with their fans, answering questions, and offering guidance. In contrast, professional athletes may prioritize training and competition over engaging with followers, as excessive social media activity could hinder their performance. Influencers often prioritize maintaining an online presence to satisfy their audience. Interaction and engagement are crucial for fans, who appreciate influencers

who are actively involved on social media platforms. This allows for easier communication and a stronger connection between influencers and their followers.

Another reason some people follow sports influencers is their focus on social responsibility. By sharing posts and discussions on topics such as social and environmental issues or participating in charitable and public benefit activities, influencers can raise awareness among their audience. Followers appreciate athletes or influencers who demonstrate sensitivity to these matters, and they expect them to respond to such issues. This approach allows influencers to present themselves as socially responsible individuals, showing that they care about causes beyond their personal interests. As a result, followers look to them to have a positive impact in these areas.

The final influential factor in this area was the quality of images and videos shared by influencers. Participants noted that the photos and clips posted by these individuals are often of higher quality compared to those shared by professional athletes. Elements such as the use of music and soundtracks, advanced photography and filming techniques, visual effects, and the production of high-quality and educational videos, as well as thoughtful background design, have significantly contributed to the appeal of these influencers. In today's society, posting photos particularly selfies—on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube is key strategy influencers use to shape audience behavior and attitudes. Research has shown that athletes utilize sports-themed Twitter profile pictures to enhance public perceptions of their athletic abilities (Li et al., 2017). For certain sports influencers, sharing images remains a core activity. This aligns with Karduni et al. (2023) assertion that selfies and self-photographs play a crucial role in constructing authenticity. Indeed, many influencers encourage their followers to engage with them primarily through the photos they post on Instagram.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that certain social media influencers in the sports domain, particularly those lacking formal expertise or professional backgrounds, may contribute to the spread of misleading or inaccurate information about exercise, nutrition, and fitness practices. Although their content is often visually appealing and professionally produced, its scientific validity is frequently uncertain, potentially leading followers to adopt unhealthy practices or develop unrealistic body image expectations, which could result in psychological distress or physical harm. Moreover, the prominence of influencers who prioritize appearance-based ideals may overshadow the importance of evidence-based knowledge and proper training techniques, underscoring the need to enhance media literacy among audiences and foster a culture that prioritizes comprehensive sports education and health awareness.

To address these concerns, several recommendations are proposed. First, relevant institutions, such as national sports federations, health ministries, and digital media platforms, should establish clearer guidelines and oversight mechanisms for sports-related content on social networks, potentially implementing verification badges or certification systems for influencers with recognized qualifications. Second, non-expert influencers active in the sports field could benefit from structured training programs focusing on basic sports science, injury prevention, and healthy lifestyle promotion, offered through collaborations between universities, sports organizations, or NGOs and digital platforms. Third, public awareness campaigns led by health professionals, certified trainers, or reputable athletes should be launched to help users critically evaluate online fitness content, shifting the focus from aesthetic appeal to scientific accuracy, functional fitness, and mental well-being. Finally, advertising authorities and digital marketing regulators should develop clear frameworks for promoting supplements, exercise programs, and nutrition advice, particularly when endorsed by influencers without professional credentials, to reduce misinformation and protect consumer interests.

Ultimately, while social media influencers wield significant influence in shaping fitness trends and behaviors, ensuring this influence is accompanied by responsibility, transparency, and a commitment to public well-being is crucial.

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