

## Digital Transformation in Sport Marketing: How Innovative Technologies Shape Generation Z and Alpha Consumer Expectations and Behavior?

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### Abstract

The sports industry is a significant global market. Generation Z and Alpha are key emerging consumers with unique digital expectations. Rapid technological advancements are reshaping consumer behavior, including in sports. This research aims to explore and conceptualize how innovative technologies and digital interactions are shaping the expectations and behavior of Generation Z and Alpha sports consumers through a qualitative, grounded theory approach. This qualitative research, based on Glaser's grounded theory, was conducted. Data were collected through 17 semi-structured interviews with sports marketing experts, sports brand managers, and researchers in this field. Data analysis was performed in three stages of open, axial, and selective coding, and ultimately 56 final codes were extracted into 8 subcategories and 2 main categories. Research credibility was ensured using triangulation strategies and in-depth engagement with participants. "Transformation in the Expectations" includes a desire for interactive and personalized experiences, social and cultural values as decision-making criteria, the impact of the digital space on the perception of sports brands, and new expectations from sports event sponsorship brands. "Changes in the Behavior" includes a preference for interactive content over direct advertising, the importance of digital identity in consumer behavior, changes in methods of interaction with sports brands, and the place of sports in the digital lifestyle. Sports brands should prioritize interactive digital content. Loyalty is higher for brands valuing social and environmental responsibility. Sports entities should strategically integrate innovative technologies and digital interactions into their strategies and emphasize their commitment to these values to effectively engage these consumers.

**Keywords:** Brand Loyalty, Digital Marketing, Online Engagement, Social Responsibility.

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## Introduction

In today's world, the sports industry is recognized not only as a competitive and recreational field but also as a powerful economic and commercial platform (Salimi et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2024). Within this sports economy, innovative technologies and digital interactions have become strategic tools for reshaping consumer expectations and behaviors, enabling brands to connect more closely with audiences through engagement with events, teams, and athletes (Varea-Calero et al., 2025). However, this digital transformation has also exposed sports brands to new strategic challenges. The emergence of Generation Z (born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s) and Generation Alpha (born from the early 2010s onwards) has disrupted traditional marketing approaches and consumer relationships (Ochis, 2024).

These generations, who have grown up immersed in digital ecosystems, demonstrate distinct consumption patterns, values, and expectations toward brands. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z and Alpha are heavily influenced by social networks, digital content, and interactive experiences (Mai, 2023). They question traditional advertising models, demand transparency and social responsibility, and value authenticity and personalized engagement (Tirendi & Gargiulo, 2024). This shift creates both opportunities and tensions for sports brands: while innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Augmented Reality (AR), and Virtual Reality (VR) can strengthen fan experiences and brand loyalty (Labbař & Vahdani, 2024; Puteri, 2023), they also require organizations to rethink their strategic and ethical approaches to digital engagement. In this context, understanding how technological innovation reshapes the expectations and behaviors of these new generations is not merely descriptive but essential for developing sustainable and adaptive marketing strategies.

Despite the new opportunities that digital technologies and social values have provided for brands, many still face difficulties in adapting to these rapid transformations (Cosa, 2023). One major challenge is the transition from traditional advertising models to technology-driven marketing strategies, which often require substantial financial and organizational investments (Pascucci et al., 2023). Furthermore, brands struggle to maintain authenticity while responding to the expectations of younger generations, finding it difficult to balance tradition with innovation. The lower brand loyalty of Generations Z and Alpha compared to earlier cohorts has also forced sports organizations to design marketing strategies that emphasize continuous flexibility and creativity (Mann, 2023).

Another important transformation concerns consumption patterns. Generations Z and Alpha are less interested in physical ownership of sports products and are more attracted to digital experiences, access, and personalization. Consequently, new business models—such as digital subscriptions, sports Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), and streaming platforms—are replacing traditional sales-oriented methods (Schlimm et al., 2024). In parallel, their heightened awareness of sustainability and social responsibility compels brands to align their marketing activities with environmental and ethical values, including sponsorship of athletes and events promoting social causes (Salimi & Labbař, 2025).

Finally, new generations perceive sports brands not merely as product providers but as cultural partners that reflect their personal and social identities. This shift requires brands to go beyond transactional engagement and establish authentic, two-way relationships with their audiences. Participatory sports events, co-creation initiatives, and interactive digital platforms have become effective means of achieving this deeper level of engagement (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2025).

An important factor that brands must consider in their strategies is the role of influencers in the sports industry (Gordillo-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Generation Z and Alpha tend to make their decisions based on the recommendations of trusted individuals in digital environments. Therefore, collaborations with influential athletes and sports figures can significantly enhance the effectiveness of sports brands (Popek, 2024). In parallel, the use of data-driven marketing and advanced analytics helps brands understand audience behavior more accurately and personalize advertising messages to build stronger engagement with these generations.

In this context, sports brands and sponsoring organizations must adopt innovative approaches to maintain effective interaction with these generations. For instance, investing in esports—which has gained significant popularity among Generation Z and Alpha—has proven to be one successful strategy (Kalou, 2025). In addition, leveraging big data analytics and artificial intelligence enables brands to better identify audience preferences and design personalized campaigns with greater impact.

Another notable aspect concerns the social values of new generations. Generations Z and Alpha increasingly support brands that adhere to principles such as gender equality, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and environmental protection (Velasco-Balmaseda et al., 2024). Accordingly, sports brands need to integrate concepts such as social justice, sustainable development, and corporate social responsibility into their strategies. These actions not only enhance brand image but also strengthen emotional connections and engagement levels with younger audiences.

Numerous studies have explored the behavioral patterns of these generations. Yu (2025) investigated the factors influencing Generation Z's adoption of wearable technology products, showing that perceived quality positively

affects perceived value and purchase intention. Wang et al. (2025) examined Generation Z users' satisfaction with online fitness platforms and found that social interaction is the most critical driver of engagement. Hiral et al. (2024) studied the satisfaction and loyalty of Generation Z customers toward Skechers sports shoes, highlighting the influence of design, comfort, and economic value. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2024), in a study of Nike loyalty program members in South Korea, demonstrated that experiential events and rewards significantly influence brand attractiveness and purchase intention. Kozłowski (2024) examined the altruistic behavior of Polish Generation Z consumers and showed that cause-related marketing positively affects purchase intentions when brands demonstrate transparency and social commitment. Emirođlu (2023) analyzed Generation Alpha's characteristics, emphasizing its technological literacy and its influence on family consumption decisions. Le and Chau (2023) explored brand relationship quality in social networks and its impact on Generation Z's motivation to co-create brand value, confirming the role of online engagement in strengthening loyalty. Dimitrieska et al. (2023) found that Generation Z exhibits unique digital purchasing and payment behaviors, with high consumption expenditures despite relatively low income. Guo and Luo (2023) highlighted that personalization and conversational features of smart assistants enhance informational and emotional support, influencing Generation Z's purchasing decisions. Lastly, Humairoh et al. (2023) found that green brand trust and electronic word-of-mouth significantly affect Generation Z's purchasing decisions regarding McDonald's green products.

Despite these valuable studies, a comprehensive understanding of the evolving expectations and behaviors of Generation Z and Alpha sports consumers remains limited, particularly within the Iranian context. This

study addresses this gap by examining the transformative role of innovative technologies and digital interactions on these generations. It also aims to contribute to theoretical development by integrating the interplay of technology, social values, and cultural shifts, offering practical insights and a conceptual model for sports brands seeking stronger engagement with Generations Z and Alpha.

### Materials and Methods

To analyze the role of innovative technologies and digital interactions in changing the expectations and behavior of Generation Z and Alpha sports consumers, a qualitative research method based on grounded theory with a classical approach (Glaser, 1992) and modeling was used. Modeling is one of the theoretical coding methods presented by Glaser and is, in fact, a visual representation of the theory in the form of linear and nonlinear models. Due to the importance of in-depth understanding of the attitudes and consumption patterns of these generations and the limited research background in this field, this research was conducted based on grounded theory.

The participants in the research included 17 experts in sports marketing, managers of sports brands, and researchers in the field of sports management (Table 1). The main approach for selecting participants in this research was theoretical sampling. During this process, the researcher simultaneously collects, codes, and analyzes the required data and, based on the results, decides what data to collect from what sources in the next stage to guide the emerging theory. The sampling process continued until

theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation is achieved when additional data does not add anything new to the dimensions of the emerging theory. In addition, the criteria recommended by Malterud et al. (2016) in sample selection for qualitative research were also considered as follows: 1- Given the purpose of the study, the content domain of the research is not very broad, and this does not emphasize the need to use a higher number. 2- The sample individuals were selected from individuals with high knowledge, and they were also from different strata (consultant, researcher, manager, etc.), which can explore different dimensions of the research phenomenon in more depth. 3- In all interviews, an attempt was made to interact and establish a deep and strong relationship with the participants to obtain more complete information. Therefore, many of the criteria considered by Malterud et al. (2016) in sample selection were considered (Malterud et al., 2016).

The research tool was semi-structured in-depth interviews related to the research objectives. The average interview time was about 35 minutes. To analyze the data, all interviews were transcribed, and the data analysis process was performed line by line. During the analysis, ideas that came to the researchers' minds in relation to the construction of concepts and the production of theory were noted. In the analysis process, another analyst with high analytical and conceptualization power was used. Data coding was performed in three stages of open, axial, and selective coding.

**Table 1. Participant Information**

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Work Experience
P1	Male	55	PhD	University Professor	20 years
P2	Female	48	PhD	University Professor	13 years
P3	Female	45	PhD	University Professor	12 years
P4	Female	48	PhD	Sports Marketing Researcher	12 years

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Work Experience
P5	Male	56	PhD	Sports Brand Manager	25 years
P6	Male	56	PhD	Sports Brand Manager	19 years
P7	Male	39	Master's	Sports Brand Manager	11 years
P8	Female	39	Master's	Sports Advertising Specialist	10 years
P9	Male	45	PhD	Sports Marketing Manager	15 years
P10	Male	47	PhD	Sports Branding Consultant	18 years
P11	Female	36	Master's	Advertising Expert	9 years
P12	Female	33	Master's	Marketing Expert	8 years
P13	Male	44	PhD	Company Marketing Manager	16 years
P14	Male	41	Master's	Marketing Consultant	14 years
P15	Female	32	Master's	Marketing Researcher	7 years
P16	Female	34	Master's	Marketing Specialist	9 years
P17	Male	48	PhD	Sports Marketing Consultant	20 years

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings, a rigorous multi-stage process was employed to evaluate the emergent theory. In the member checking phase, a summary of the initial findings and interpretations was provided to several participants to confirm the accurate representation of their experiences and the alignment of the findings with their perspectives. The feedback received from participants at this stage was carefully considered and incorporated to refine and enrich the theory. Furthermore, the developed theory was shared with subject matter experts in the fields of sports marketing and consumer behavior for expert review. Their insights and suggestions regarding the theoretical coherence, the logical relationships between categories, and the consistency with existing knowledge in the field were utilized to adjust and improve the

theory.

To further ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative analysis, an inter-coder agreement test was conducted. For this purpose, one research collaborator participated as a second coder, and Three interviews were coded independently by both researchers. The percentage of agreement between the two coders was calculated using the intra-subject agreement formula shown below.

$$\text{Number of agreements} \times 2 / \text{Total number of data} \times 100 = \text{Inter-Coder Agreement (\%)}$$

The obtained agreement rate was 83%, which exceeds the minimum acceptable threshold of 70% for qualitative reliability. Therefore, the reliability of the interview analysis was confirmed. The detailed results of the inter-coder reliability analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Results of Inter-Coder Reliability Analysis**

Row	Interview Number	Total Number of Data	Number of Agreements	Total Percentage
1	3	18	8	88
2	6	21	9	86

Row	Interview Number	Total Number of Data	Number of Agreements	Total Percentage
3	10	16	6	75
Total	19	55	23	83

Regarding triangulation, two approaches were utilized. In terms of participant triangulation, data were collected from diverse groups of participants (sports marketing experts, sports brand managers, and researchers) to ensure a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the research phenomenon. This variety in data sources helped to examine the phenomenon from different angles. In terms of analyst triangulation, the data analysis was conducted by two independent coders and analysts. These analysts independently coded the data and identified categories and the relationships between them. Subsequently, the coding results and analyses of both analysts were compared, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus meetings. During these sessions, both analysts

jointly reviewed the divergent codes, examined the supporting quotations, and discussed the conceptual rationale behind each code until full agreement was reached. When minor interpretive differences persisted, the research team collectively reviewed the cases and made final decisions based on theoretical consistency and the principles of grounded theory. This process ensured the accuracy, transparency, and objectivity of the analysis and minimized potential researcher bias.

**Results**

Using the Glaser method, after step-by-step coding, 76 final codes (concepts) were obtained in 8 subcategories and 2 main categories. Table 3 shows the concepts, subcategories, main categories, and Frequency of Occurrence.

**Table 3.** Main Categories, Subcategories, Initial Codes, and Frequency of Occurrence

Main Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Number of Interviews
<b>Transformation in the Expectations of Generation Z and Alpha Sports Consumers</b>	Desire for Interactive and Personalized Experiences	1. Customization of advertising content	14
		2. Use of augmented and virtual reality technology	13
		3. Providing an interactive experience at sports events	11
		4. The role of gamification in attracting attention	9
		5. Providing personalized offers based on behavioral data	13
		6. Ability to interact directly with brands through social networks	15
		7. Sports services based on individual preferences	10
		8. Ability to design personalized avatars for fans	7
		9. Personalized product sales offers or discounts	9

Main Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Number of Interviews
		10. Possibility of personal participation in the design of sports products	6
	Social and Cultural Values as Decision-Making Criteria	11. Brand support for environmental issues	12
		12. Commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	13
		13. Emphasis on conducting sports advertising tailored to different social cultures	7
		14. Support for women's teams and lesser-known sports	8
		15. Brands' connection to the identity and culture of fans	10
		16. The role of supporting local and young athletes	8
		17. Expectation from brands to take a stand on sensitive social issues	9
		18. Demand for transparency and reporting of brands' social responsibility	14
		19. Participation in designing the organization's social and cultural campaigns and policies	6
		20. Valuing social interactions and networking in cyberspace	10
		21. Expectation to combine sports with music, art and technology	8
	22. Demand for fair and inclusive access to products and services provided	7	
	Impact of the Digital Space on the Perception of Sports Brands	23. Increasing the impact of sports influencers on consumer decisions	15
		24. Using short and viral content on platforms like Instagram	13
		25. Indirect advertising in the form of user-generated content	12
		26. Decreasing the impact of traditional advertising such as television advertising	10
		27. Expansion of brands in the world of esports	11
		28. Changing media consumption patterns of the new generation	12
		29. Desire for direct and immediate communication with brands through social media	15

Main Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Number of Interviews
		30. Brand engagement through virtual reality experiences	9
		31. Brand engagement through gamifications	10
		32. Predicting consumer preferences through big data	8
		33. Blockchain technologies and digital tunnels for customers	5
	New Expectations from Sports Event Sponsorship Brands	34. Active brand participation in event design	9
		35. Providing added value to audiences through brands	10
		36. Creating online and offline interactive opportunities	11
		37. Flexibility in how financial support is provided	7
		38. Combining traditional advertising with innovative technologies	9
		39. Support for youth sports skills development programs	6
		40. The need for brand alignment with consumers' personal and cultural values	11
		41. Increasing the importance of brands based on common goals	8
		42. Supporting diversity and inclusion at events	9
		43. Paying attention to green marketing and environmental initiatives of supporting brands	10
<b>Changes in the Behavior of Generation Z and Alpha Sports Consumers</b>	Preference for Interactive Content over Direct Advertising	44. Decreased attention to traditional advertising	13
		45. Increased interaction with native and interactive advertising	12
		46. Preference for user experience-based advertising	10
		47. Desire for brand storytelling	13
		48. The impact of storytelling in sports advertising	12
		49. Creating an emotional connection through the brand	13
		50. The impact of the behavior of athletes, celebrities, and influencers on shaping consumer identity	15

Main Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Number of Interviews
		51. Shifting consumption patterns from physical ownership to digital access in sports products	11
	Importance of Digital Identity in Consumer Behavior	52. The role of avatars and virtual identity in the consumption of sports products	9
		53. Purchasing digital items related to sports brands	10
		54. Brand impact in the metaverse and NFTs	11
		55. Changing customer loyalty models towards digital loyalty	12
		56. The impact of digital interactions on consumer decision-making	13
		57. Expansion of in-app purchase culture on sports platforms	8
		58. Creating a shared digital identity between the brand and fans	9
		59. The importance of personalized digital assets in interacting with sports brands	8
		Changes in the Methods of Interaction with Sports Brands	60. Increased interaction through chatbots and artificial intelligence
	61. Using social networks for direct communication with brands		14
	62. Increased willingness to buy through collaborative platforms		7
	63. The role of social campaigns in shaping purchasing decisions		9
	64. The impact of communication with athletes on consumer interaction with brands		12
	65. Changes in advertising content consumption patterns		13
	66. Using game-like elements (points, prizes, challenges) in interacting with brands		11
	67. Willingness to use rental or subscription services instead of permanent ownership		10
	The Place of Sports in the Digital Lifestyle of Generation Z and Alpha	68. The role of wearable technologies in changing sports lifestyles	9
		69. Combining sports with digital space and gaming	10
		70. The impact of virtual sports on attitudes	8

Main Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Number of Interviews
		towards physical activity	
		71. Using smart apps to improve sports performance	7
		72. Changing the concept of health and fitness in the new generation	9
		73. The impact of digital lifestyles on the type of sports of interest	8
		74. Combining sports with metaverse elements for new sports experiences	6
		75. Expanding the role of social networks in motivating physical activity	11
		76. A tendency towards short-term, micro-moment-based exercise	9

The analysis of the 17 interviews led to the identification of 76 codes grouped into eight subcategories and two main categories. The findings reveal two central dimensions: (1) Transformation in the Expectations of Generation Z and Alpha Sports Consumers, and (2) Changes in the Behavior of Generation Z and Alpha Sports Consumers. These two dimensions are closely interconnected and illustrate how digital transformation simultaneously reshapes both what these generations expect from sports brands and how they act and engage with them.

Across all interviews, three overarching trends emerged: (a) a shift from passive consumption to active co-creation and interaction; (b) a strong preference for personalization and technological integration in sports experiences; and (c) the growing importance of social and ethical values in shaping brand perception. These findings indicate that for Generations Z and Alpha, technology is not merely a tool but part of their identity and social expression.

Among the most frequently repeated codes were personalization of advertising content, interactive brand experiences, integration of AR/VR technologies, social responsibility,

environmental awareness, and brand transparency. These codes appeared in nearly all interviews and were strongly associated with respondents' descriptions of what makes a sports brand "trustworthy" and "relevant" to younger audiences. The concept of "digital identity" also appeared repeatedly, highlighting how young consumers use sports brands to express individuality in online environments.

The relationship between the two main categories indicates that changes in expectations directly drive changes in behavior. For instance, the expectation for authenticity and transparency (Category 1) leads to more selective purchasing and loyalty behaviors (Category 2). Likewise, the demand for interactive experiences encourages behavioral patterns centered around co-creation, digital participation, and sharing experiences online. Thus, the behavioral transformation of these generations can be seen as a direct response to the evolving technological and cultural environment that shapes their expectations.

The subcategory Desire for Interactive and Personalized Experiences forms the foundation of both categories, linking expectations to behaviors. Similarly, Social and Cultural

Values as Decision-Making Criteria acts as a mediating factor, influencing whether technological engagement results in loyalty or disconnection. The findings suggest that when brands combine technological innovation with social value orientation, the result is a stronger emotional bond and higher engagement.

Figure 1 presents the Paradigm model developed through the classical grounded theory approach. The central phenomenon identified in the study is the transformation of Generation Z and Alpha sports consumers under the influence of innovative technologies and digital interactions. Two main categories are connected to this central concept: Transformation in Expectations and Changes in Behavior.

Each of these main categories includes several interrelated subcategories that describe different dimensions of this transformation. The subcategories under Transformation in Expectations such as the desire for interactive

and personalized experiences, social and cultural values, and the impact of the digital space on brand perception explain what new generations expect from sports brands. The subcategories under Changes in Behavior including digital identity, new methods of interaction, and the integration of sports into the digital lifestyle illustrate how these expectations are reflected in actual consumer behaviors.

The model visually demonstrates that changes in expectations act as drivers of behavioral transformation. In other words, as innovative technologies and social values shape what Generation Z and Alpha expect from brands, they simultaneously influence how these generations interact with, evaluate, and remain loyal to sports organizations. This simple, connected structure highlights the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between technological change, evolving expectations, and consumer behavior.

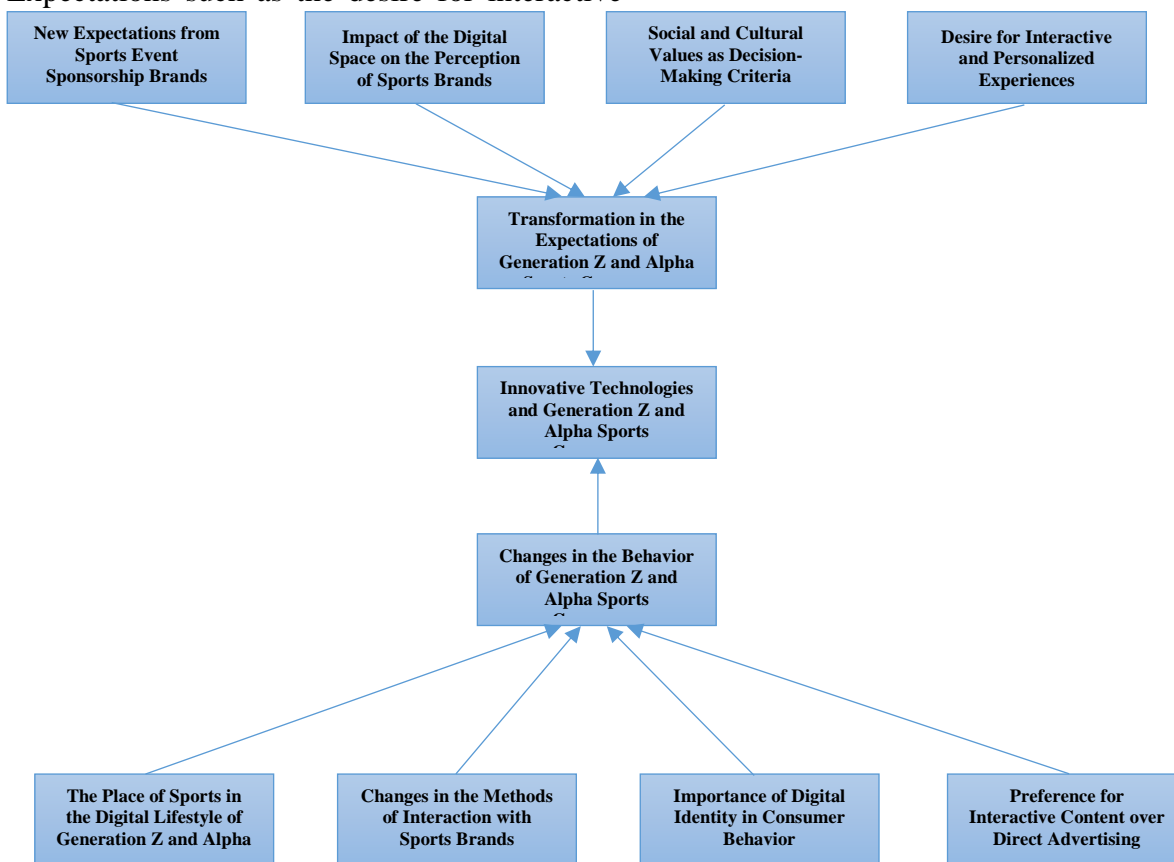


Figure 1. Research Paradigm Model

## Discussion

The landscape of sports consumption is experiencing a fundamental transformation driven by the emergence of Generation Z and Generation Alpha as influential consumer cohorts. These generations, shaped by constant connectivity and technological immersion, demonstrate consumption patterns that blend identity expression, social consciousness, and technological interaction. Their expectations from sports brands are no longer limited to product quality or price but extend to participation, personalization, and purpose. This transformation aligns with broader shifts toward consumer empowerment and value co-creation, suggesting that technology is not merely a communication tool but a platform through which younger consumers construct meaning and identity.

The present study reveals that personalization and interactivity are central expectations of Generations Z and Alpha. They actively seek customized and experiential engagements with brands that align with their preferences and digital habits. These findings extend the work of Kim and Kim (2024), who demonstrated that direct interaction and experiential elements enhance brand attractiveness and purchase intention. Our results add that personalization operates not only as a cognitive mechanism influencing purchase behavior but also as an emotional mechanism that strengthens attachment and trust. Technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) and gamification provide immersive environments that enable consumers to co-create value and develop stronger brand identification. In this regard, interactive marketing no longer functions as a persuasive tool but as a participatory experience that reinforces digital loyalty and engagement.

A second key theme concerns the growing importance of social and cultural values in sports brand perception. Generations Z and Alpha exhibit a pronounced sensitivity toward

social justice, sustainability, and inclusivity. They expect brands to take explicit positions on issues such as climate change, gender equality, and community development. These expectations reflect a deeper psychological orientation toward value alignment, where consumption becomes an act of moral expression. As our findings confirm, transparency, support for women's and local sports, and active corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are decisive factors for brand preference. These results are consistent with Kozlowski (2024), who found that cause-related marketing and transparency significantly enhance purchase intentions among Generation Z. Our analysis further indicates that the authenticity of social engagement not mere symbolic participation is what sustains long-term trust.

The digital space has become a dominant arena where these social and technological expectations converge. Sports influencers and digital creators have replaced traditional media as the primary sources of credibility and inspiration. This shift reflects a new trust hierarchy built around peer endorsement and interactive storytelling rather than institutional authority. As shown in Guo and Luo (2023), personalization and conversational interaction through digital technologies increase emotional engagement and perceived credibility a finding echoed in our participants' emphasis on authentic communication through social media and esports environments. Moreover, the preference for short-form and viral content, along with indirect advertising such as user-generated content, demonstrates that younger audiences no longer respond to one-way brand messaging. Instead, they value participation, co-creation, and the opportunity to be part of the narrative.

In the context of sports sponsorship, Generations Z and Alpha demonstrate expectations that transcend financial support. They expect sponsoring brands to co-design

and participate in event experiences, creating added value for participants and spectators alike. This active involvement turns sponsorship into a collaborative relationship rather than a transactional one. The integration of innovative technologies such as hybrid online/offline experiences and real-time interactive campaigns reinforces these values. These findings align with Le and Chau (2023), who showed that brand relationship quality within online sports communities directly affects satisfaction and loyalty. Our results extend this understanding by showing that sponsorship effectiveness depends on whether brands can embody shared values and provide interactive experiences rather than rely solely on visibility or exposure.

Generations Z and Alpha's aversion to traditional advertising and preference for experiential, interactive, and story-based content illustrate their desire for emotional connection. They engage with brands that allow self-expression and participation, rather than passive consumption. This shift explains the reduced effectiveness of traditional advertising and the rise of immersive brand experiences. The research by Dimitrieska et al. (2023) supports this transformation by highlighting the distinctive purchase behaviors of digital-native consumers. Our findings complement this by showing that interactivity not only shapes purchase intention but also redefines the meaning of brand loyalty from repetitive purchasing to continuous digital engagement and advocacy.

A particularly notable aspect emerging from this study is the importance of digital identity in consumer behavior. Generations Z and Alpha construct hybrid identities that exist simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces. The consumption of digital assets such as NFTs or metaverse experiences represents not only economic transactions but also expressions of identity and belonging. As emphasized by Guo and Luo (2023) and Dimitrieska et al. (2023),

personalization and digital embodiment affect emotional and informational support in purchasing decisions. Our data reinforce this by illustrating how sports brands act as digital identity anchors, allowing consumers to perform individuality and social connection within virtual communities.

The methods of interaction with sports brands have also evolved in response to these shifts. The use of chatbots, artificial intelligence, and social media platforms enables two-way communication that fulfills the expectation for immediacy and personalization. Social campaigns and direct communication with athletes enhance emotional proximity and authenticity values particularly appreciated by Generations Z and Alpha. These findings are consistent with Kim and Kim (2024), who noted that digital interactivity enhances purchase intention, and with Kozlowski (2024), who emphasized that socially responsible branding fosters emotional attachment and purchase decisions.

Finally, the integration of sports into the digital lifestyle illustrates how technology redefines the boundaries of physical activity. Wearable technologies, gamified fitness applications, and metaverse-based sports experiences allow users to merge recreation, health, and entertainment. This phenomenon aligns with Dimitrieska et al. (2023) and Le and Chau (2023), who highlighted the merging of online and offline spheres in consumer engagement. Our findings extend this by showing that for younger generations, digital sport participation is not a substitute for physical activity but an evolution of it one that reflects their demand for flexibility, social connectivity, and self-tracking.

In summary, the behavioral transformation of Generations Z and Alpha stems from a deep restructuring of expectations. The desire for personalization, technological integration, and social value alignment drives behavioral outcomes such as co-creation, selective loyalty,

and continuous digital engagement. The relationship between expectation and behavior is therefore reciprocal: new expectations create new behaviors, and new behaviors reinforce evolving expectations. For sports marketers and brand strategists, these insights suggest a paradigm shift from persuasion to participation, from communication to co-creation, and from visibility to authenticity.

## Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how innovative technologies and digital interactions transform the expectations and behaviors of Generation Z and Alpha sports consumers. Grounded in qualitative analysis, the research revealed two central dimensions of this transformation: the reconstruction of consumer expectations and the evolution of consumer behaviors.

At the expectation level, these generations show a distinct preference for personalized, interactive, and socially conscious brand experiences. They expect authenticity, transparency, and alignment with social and cultural values from the sports brands they engage with. At the behavioral level, these expectations translate into new forms of participation, co-creation, and digital loyalty, where consumption becomes both a social and identity-driven activity. The findings emphasize that technology is not only a medium of engagement but also a key component of self-expression and brand relationship building among younger consumers.

From a managerial perspective, several strategic implications emerge. Sports brands must move beyond traditional one-way communication and embrace interactive, immersive, and technology-driven engagement models. The integration of Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into brand experiences can foster deeper and more personalized connections with audiences. Equally important

is a genuine commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) including sustainability, gender equality, and cultural inclusion which directly influences brand trust and emotional resonance.

Brands should also support local and young athletes, invest in esports ecosystems, and leverage the power of influencers and user-generated content to maintain authenticity in digital interactions. Transparent and continuous reporting on CSR activities remains essential for building long-term credibility and loyalty among Generations Z and Alpha.

Despite these insights, the study has limitations that provide avenues for future research. The findings were derived from an Iranian context and may not fully generalize to markets with different cultural, technological, or economic conditions. Future studies could therefore apply this framework across diverse regions to examine cross-cultural variations in digital consumer behavior. Moreover, while this research employed a grounded theory approach to conceptualize the phenomenon, future investigations could adopt mixed methods or phenomenological designs to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and emotional dynamics of Generations Z and Alpha in greater depth. Longitudinal research could also illuminate how these behavioral patterns evolve as new technologies and digital ecosystems emerge.

In essence, this study highlights that for sports brands, success in the digital era depends on understanding expectations as dynamic, co-created constructs and translating them into participatory experiences that blend technological innovation with authentic social engagement.

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