

Authenticity Negotiation: How Elite Athletes (Re)Present Themselves as Personal Brands

How do elite athletes navigate tensions between personal authenticity and external branding pressures in their personal branding strategies, and what tactics do they use to balance self-expression with commercial and social expectations?

Elite athletes increasingly rely on personal branding to engage audiences, attract sponsorships, and shape public personas. However, projecting authenticity, essential for building trust, requires balancing self-expression with external demands. In this study, Bredikhina, Kunkel and Kudesia explore how athletes manage authenticity negotiation, analyzing interviews with 30 elite athletes across 18 sports.

The authors highlight three main pressures that shape authenticity in athlete branding: institutional norms (such as league or sponsor expectations), commercial incentives (the need for engagement and sponsorship value), and platform risks (the potential for backlash or privacy concerns). These pressures create tensions between feeling authentic and appearing authentic to audiences.

To navigate these challenges, athletes employ three key strategies. Self-authentication involves sharing unfiltered personal moments, emotions, and vulnerabilities to reinforce their true self, allowing them to connect with their audience on a deeper level. Authenticity refinement refers to selectively framing content to maintain an authentic yet audience-friendly image, ensuring that self-presentation aligns with both personal values and external expectations. Finally, authenticity orchestration involves staging or outsourcing content to create the illusion of spontaneity and realness, strategically crafting an image that appears natural while still meeting branding and sponsorship demands.

The study underscores that authenticity is not simply about “being real” but is actively constructed and managed. The findings provide insights for athletes, marketers, and organizations on how to balance personal identity with the demands of digital branding and sponsorship.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Athletes balance personal expression with external branding pressures through conscious self-presentation tactics.
- Institutional, commercial, and platform-related pressures force athletes to negotiate how they present their identity.
- Self-authentication, refinement, and orchestration help athletes align their image with audience and sponsor expectations.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Athletes
- Brand Consultants
- Academics

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