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Prioritizing Effective Advertising Methods Used by Iranian Influencers on Instagram and Their Effects on Consumer Behavior Toward Sports Products and Services Using the Fuzzy AHP Approach

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify and prioritize the key components influencing the success of influencer marketing campaigns in Iran's sports products sector. To achieve this objective, the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (Fuzzy AHP) was employed to precisely weight 10 main factors. The results showed that influencer marketing in this field is strongly behavior-oriented, such that purchase intention (Rank 1), referral intention (Rank 2), and brand loyalty (Rank 3) received the highest overall weights. This finding emphasizes that sports audiences seek sources that directly lead to purchase actions and word-of-mouth promotion. Among the intermediate-ranked factors, competence/expertise (Rank 5) demonstrated considerable importance as a critical prerequisite for building trust and guiding behavior, whereas visual attractiveness (Rank 10) had the least influence on final decision-making. These findings imply that, in this market, an influencer should function as more than merely a model and should instead act as a coach and a trusted source of technical information. Accordingly, it is recommended that strategies focus on direct conversion, the provision of in-depth technical content, and transparency in communications in order to maximize performance, expertise, and the stimulation of direct purchase behavior.

Keywords: influencer marketing, sports products, brand loyalty, social influence, purchase decision.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the ways in which firms communicate with consumers, create brand meaning, and influence purchasing decisions. Social media, in particular, has shifted marketing communication from a predominantly one-way, organization-controlled process toward an interactive environment in which consumers, brands, influencers, and online communities jointly shape perceptions and behavioral responses. Within this environment, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most important forms of digital promotional communication because influencers are able to combine commercial messages with personal narratives, lifestyle representations, specialized knowledge, and direct interaction with followers. The effectiveness of contemporary digital marketing is therefore increasingly determined not only by the visibility of advertising messages but also by their relevance, credibility, attractiveness, social embeddedness, and ability to stimulate measurable consumer responses. Recent evidence suggests that advertising appeal, influencer marketing, and online consumer-generated evaluations jointly contribute to shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors in digital environments, highlighting the increasingly multidimensional nature of online

persuasion [1]. At the same time, evolving retail and consumption patterns demonstrate that contemporary consumers move fluidly across online and offline decision environments, making the understanding of digital stimuli increasingly important for integrated marketing and consumer management [2].

Instagram represents one of the most influential platforms in this transformation because of its visual orientation, interactive affordances, and capacity to integrate personal communication with commercial content. The platform allows influencers to combine photographs, videos, stories, Reels, captions, live interactions, polls, and comment-based exchanges in ways that can blur the traditional distinction between advertising and ordinary social content. This characteristic is particularly important for influencer marketing because the persuasive power of influencers is often rooted in perceptions of authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and interpersonal closeness rather than merely in formal celebrity status. Research on digital identity has shown that individuals strategically construct and manage their online selves through digital footprints, self-presentation practices, and recurring communication patterns, all of which influence how audiences interpret credibility and identity in online environments [3]. Moreover, influencers may progressively accumulate what has been described as celebrity capital through continuous visibility, audience engagement, and the commercialization of their personal identities, thereby acquiring persuasive capacities that increasingly resemble or even differ from those of traditional celebrities [4].

The convergence between influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement is particularly salient in the sports industry. Athletes, fitness professionals, sports bloggers, coaches, and other sports-related personalities often possess a combination of symbolic status, specialized knowledge, aspirational appeal, and perceived lifestyle relevance that makes them commercially valuable endorsers. Sports consumers may evaluate such figures not only on the basis of attractiveness or fame but also according to athletic performance, technical expertise, credibility, lifestyle congruence, and perceived similarity. Evidence indicates that both athletic performance and a marketable lifestyle can shape consumer engagement with sports celebrities' social media accounts and influence responses to their endorsements [5]. Similarly, research on athlete human brands suggests that consumers' attitudes toward athlete-related brand extensions are affected by the meanings and associations attached to the athlete as a human brand, emphasizing that the persuasive value of sports figures extends beyond conventional advertising exposure [6]. These findings underline the need to conceptualize sports influencers as complex marketing agents whose effectiveness arises from the interaction of personal, professional, social, and communication-related characteristics.

Instagram is especially relevant to sports marketing because athletic performance, fitness routines, competition, product use, and lifestyle consumption are inherently visual and can be readily represented through platform-specific formats. Longitudinal analyses of Olympic champions' Instagram activity have demonstrated that sports figures develop distinctive patterns of online communication and audience engagement over time, illustrating the strategic importance of social media in the construction and maintenance of athlete visibility [7]. In addition, studies of sports celebrities' Instagram advertising have shown that brand sponsorship is deeply embedded in athletes' social media presence and that sponsored content constitutes an important component of the relationship between sports celebrities, brands, and audiences [8]. The commercial presentation of sports personalities therefore involves not only formal endorsements but also the incorporation of products into everyday posts, training routines, personal experiences, and lifestyle narratives.

An important element in this process is the presentation of influencers' private and personal lives. Social media enables followers to observe aspects of celebrities' routines, relationships, consumption practices, training experiences, and everyday

activities that were historically less accessible through traditional mass media. Such content can increase familiarity and perceived intimacy, potentially strengthening parasocial relationships and making promotional messages appear more naturally integrated into the influencer's life. Research has shown that the visual presentation of celebrities' private lives on social media constitutes an important dimension of consumer perception and celebrity communication [9]. From an advertising perspective, this personal visibility may increase the persuasive effectiveness of endorsements when products are presented as genuinely used, experienced, or preferred by the influencer rather than as isolated commercial messages.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of influencer advertising cannot be explained solely by visibility or celebrity status. Source credibility remains one of the central mechanisms through which influencer messages affect consumers. Credibility commonly encompasses perceptions of expertise, trustworthiness, and the appropriateness of the endorser for the promoted product. Within sports marketing, expertise is particularly consequential because many sports products and services possess technical characteristics that consumers may find difficult to evaluate independently. Equipment quality, performance functionality, training applications, sportswear technologies, supplements, fitness services, and specialized sporting products may require evaluative knowledge that consumers expect credible sports influencers to possess. Research on sports influencer marketing has indicated that influencer credibility can moderate the effects of advertising content value on consumer purchase intention, demonstrating that the same promotional message may produce different behavioral consequences depending on how credible the influencer is perceived to be [10]. Accordingly, expertise and trustworthiness may operate as foundational conditions for converting exposure into behavioral intention.

The persuasive process is also strongly affected by advertising content itself. Social media advertising is more likely to generate favorable consumer responses when it provides useful information, enhances social image, and demonstrates creativity. In the context of sports products, evidence from Iranian consumers has shown that informativeness, social image, and creativity in social media advertising are associated with purchase intention, suggesting that successful promotional communication must offer functional and symbolic value simultaneously [11]. Visual characteristics are also important because social media platforms such as Instagram rely heavily on imagery and audiovisual formats. Research on organization-generated content has demonstrated that visual elements can improve public engagement on Facebook and Instagram, indicating that visual presentation can influence the likelihood that users attend to, interact with, and respond to promotional communication [12]. Thus, image quality, video production, aesthetic composition, platform-specific formats, and message readability may contribute to advertising effectiveness, even though their relative importance compared with credibility or behavioral factors may vary across contexts.

Content relevance and authenticity are similarly central to influencer marketing. Unlike conventional advertisements, influencer promotions are often embedded within ongoing streams of personal content. When promotional material is congruent with the influencer's usual communication, professional identity, lifestyle, and followers' interests, it may be perceived as more natural and persuasive. By contrast, content that appears excessively commercial or inconsistent with the influencer's established identity may undermine credibility. Empirical research on testimonials, endorsements, and celebrities in advertising illustrates the continuing strategic importance of endorsement formats and the ways in which advertisers adapt persuasive strategies to different celebrity and testimonial contexts [13]. Within influencer marketing, these principles become especially complex because the endorser is also the content creator, media channel, and interpersonal communicator.

Engagement represents another defining feature of social media influencer marketing. Consumers are not passive recipients of advertising messages; they can comment, like, share, respond to polls, ask questions, create their own content, and communicate directly or indirectly with influencers and other followers. These interactions can strengthen perceptions of community and social presence while simultaneously generating social proof regarding the promoted product. Influencers who respond to questions, encourage audience participation, repost user-generated content, or invite followers to share experiences may therefore create stronger relational involvement than advertisers relying on conventional one-way messages. Such engagement can also make brand-related communication more visible and socially validated within follower networks. The psychological effects of social media influencers extend beyond simple exposure and include mechanisms through which consumers interpret social cues, perceived similarity, identification, and relational influence [14].

Social influence is especially relevant when evaluating consumer responses to sports influencers. Sports consumption frequently occurs within communities defined by shared interests, identities, teams, disciplines, fitness goals, and lifestyle practices. Consumers may be influenced by seeing similar individuals adopt a product, observing favorable collective responses in comments, or perceiving that a particular brand has become normative within a sports-related community. Social media can intensify these processes by making others' reactions immediately visible and quantifiable through likes, comments, shares, and follower activity. In such settings, the influencer may function as both an opinion leader and a symbolic representative of a desired reference group. This can generate normative and informational influence, reinforce social identity, and stimulate fear of missing out when products are framed as popular, limited, fashionable, or necessary for participation in a valued community.

The relationship between influencer advertising and purchase behavior has been examined through several theoretical frameworks. The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, for example, conceptualizes sponsored advertising characteristics as environmental stimuli that affect internal psychological states and subsequently shape behavioral responses such as purchase intention. Research applying the SOR model to Instagram sponsored advertising has demonstrated that the characteristics of sponsored content can meaningfully influence consumers' internal evaluations and purchase intentions [15]. This perspective is useful because it recognizes that advertising effects are not direct or uniform; rather, they operate through consumers' perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and cognitive evaluations. In sports influencer marketing, stimuli may include influencer credibility, visual appeal, content relevance, interaction, and social endorsement, while organism-level responses may include brand attitudes, trust, perceived value, and identification, eventually leading to purchase, referral, or loyalty-related behaviors.

Purchase intention has received particular attention because it provides a proximal indicator of whether advertising communication is likely to translate into market behavior. In the Iranian context, research has shown that attitudes toward social media advertising are related to consumers' purchase intention, highlighting the importance of consumers' evaluative responses to digital promotional messages [16]. Studies focusing specifically on Instagram advertising have likewise shown that advertising indices can produce both immediate and latent behavioral responses among sporting goods consumers, demonstrating that promotional effects may occur at multiple stages of the consumer response process [17]. Moreover, research on Instagram bloggers in sports markets has indicated that bloggers can influence intentions to purchase sports products and that brand attitude plays a mediating role in this relationship [18]. These findings suggest that influencer

effectiveness should not be evaluated solely through communication metrics such as views or likes but also through more substantive consumer outcomes.

Brand attitude represents one of these important intermediate outcomes. Influencer endorsement can shape how consumers perceive the quality, desirability, distinctiveness, and value congruence of a sports brand. A favorable brand attitude may emerge when consumers transfer positive evaluations of the influencer to the endorsed brand or interpret the endorsement as evidence of product quality and appropriateness. Such attitudinal change is particularly important in competitive sports markets where many brands offer functionally similar products and consumers rely on symbolic cues, expert recommendations, and social signals to differentiate alternatives. Favorable brand attitudes may subsequently increase information-search behavior, purchase consideration, advocacy, and longer-term loyalty.

Referral intention and electronic word-of-mouth also constitute critical behavioral outcomes because influencer campaigns can produce effects that extend beyond the directly exposed consumer. Individuals who perceive an influencer's recommendation as credible may transmit that information to friends, teammates, family members, or online communities. This process can amplify the original advertising message and transform consumers into secondary communicators of brand-related information. In sports communities, where product recommendations are frequently exchanged among individuals sharing similar activities or performance goals, such referral behavior may be particularly consequential. Positive referral intention can therefore increase campaign reach, strengthen perceived social validation, and contribute to the diffusion of sports products through peer networks.

Brand loyalty represents a more durable outcome of influencer marketing. Whereas purchase intention reflects a consumer's likelihood of engaging in a specific future transaction, loyalty involves repeated preference, resistance to switching, emotional attachment, and willingness to continue purchasing from a brand over time. Recent research concerning customer orientation has emphasized the importance of brand loyalty in shaping customers' purchase decisions and sustaining favorable consumer-brand relationships [19]. In influencer marketing, repeated credible endorsements may reinforce familiarity and trust, contribute to a stable brand relationship, and establish the endorsed brand as a default choice for future purchases. Consequently, campaign effectiveness should be understood not merely as short-term conversion but as a potential contributor to long-term consumer-brand relationships.

The Iranian sports market provides a particularly important setting for examining these issues. Cultural expectations, local consumption patterns, trust in social media personalities, access to sports brands, economic conditions, and the characteristics of Iranian Instagram communities may influence the relative effectiveness of influencer advertising strategies. Research specifically addressing Iranian sports goods has emphasized the need for systematic models to evaluate influencer marketing and identify the dimensions that determine its effectiveness in social media contexts [20]. At the same time, Iranian studies of sports-related social media advertising have demonstrated meaningful relationships among advertising characteristics, brand perceptions, and consumer behavioral responses [11, 17, 18]. These findings indicate that influencer marketing has become strategically relevant in Iran's sports sector but also reveal the need to distinguish which components deserve the greatest managerial attention.

Despite the growing literature, an important methodological and managerial gap remains. Many previous studies have examined individual relationships between influencer characteristics and purchase intention, brand attitude, engagement, endorsement effectiveness, or consumer response. However, marketing managers must frequently make decisions involving

multiple interrelated criteria simultaneously. An influencer campaign may be visually attractive but weak in credibility, highly engaging but poorly aligned with consumer needs, or technically informative but ineffective in stimulating referral behavior. Therefore, identifying statistically or conceptually relevant factors is not sufficient; decision-makers also need to understand their relative priorities. Multi-criteria decision-making methods can provide an appropriate framework for this purpose because they enable heterogeneous criteria to be evaluated within an integrated hierarchy and weighted according to expert judgment.

The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) is particularly appropriate for prioritizing complex marketing criteria because it decomposes a decision problem into hierarchical levels and uses systematic pairwise comparisons to derive relative weights. Nevertheless, expert evaluations concerning communication effectiveness, credibility, attractiveness, interaction, or consumer responses are inherently subjective and may involve ambiguity. Fuzzy AHP extends conventional AHP by incorporating fuzzy set theory, thereby providing a more flexible representation of uncertain linguistic judgments. Applying this approach to influencer marketing makes it possible to move beyond merely identifying relevant advertising factors and to establish an explicit hierarchy of their relative importance. Such prioritization can support the allocation of advertising budgets, influencer selection, content design, campaign evaluation, and the development of more targeted sports marketing strategies.

Accordingly, integrating behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention, referral intention, and brand loyalty with communication-related factors such as social influence, expertise, engagement, content relevance, trustworthiness, brand attitude, and visual attractiveness offers a more comprehensive framework for evaluating influencer advertising effectiveness. This multidimensional perspective is consistent with the broader literature demonstrating that successful influencer marketing depends on interactions among the influencer's human-brand characteristics, the advertising message, the social-media environment, and consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions [4, 5, 10]. It also reflects the growing recognition that sports celebrities and influencers act not merely as promotional channels but as socially embedded sources of expertise, identity, lifestyle symbolism, and community influence [6, 8]. As influencer-based promotion becomes increasingly integrated into sports marketing strategies, a systematic understanding of the relative weight of these factors is essential for improving both theoretical explanation and managerial decision-making.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to identify and prioritize the effective advertising methods used by Iranian influencers on Instagram in shaping consumer behavior toward sports products and services using the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (Fuzzy AHP).

Methodology

This study was conducted in two phases, and the type of research differed across the phases according to the research objective. In the first phase, because the study sought to identify effective advertising methods used by Iranian influencers on Instagram and their effects on consumer behavior toward sports products and services, it was applied in terms of purpose, descriptive in nature, and qualitative in terms of data collection. Grounded theory using the Glaserian approach was employed to identify effective advertising methods used by Iranian influencers on Instagram and their effects on consumer behavior toward sports products and services. In the second phase, the factors were prioritized using the Fuzzy AHP method. The target population in the qualitative and multi-criteria sections consisted of experts specializing in sports marketing, social

media, consumer behavior, and branding. Accordingly, the participants included sport management faculty members with expertise in the aforementioned areas, marketing and advertising researchers with at least 5 years of professional experience, managers and experts from advertising companies, and sports influencers. In the qualitative section, purposive sampling was used and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, with theoretical saturation being achieved from the fourteenth interview onward. In the multi-criteria section, snowball sampling was used, and given the matrix-based structure of the research questionnaire, the sample size was 15 participants. The inclusion criteria consisted of three factors: the interviewees had more than 10 years of experience; in selecting individuals for the interviews, preference was given to participants with higher academic qualifications and academic specializations related to the research topic; and for prioritization using the Fuzzy AHP method, individuals who had not participated in the interview phase were selected. In this study, the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (Fuzzy AHP) was used to prioritize the advertising methods employed by Iranian sports influencers on Instagram. This method is an extension of the traditional AHP that incorporates fuzzy set theory, thereby allowing ambiguity, subjective judgments, and uncertainty in expert opinions to be taken into account. First, a three-level hierarchical decision-making structure was designed, comprising the goal (prioritization of advertising methods), criteria (indicators influencing consumer behavior, such as trust, source credibility, message attractiveness, and content authenticity), and alternatives (types of advertising methods used by influencers). Subsequently, data were collected from sports marketing experts using a pairwise-comparison questionnaire based on fuzzy linguistic scales, such as “low importance,” “high importance,” and similar expressions. In the next stage, fuzzy pairwise-comparison matrices were constructed, and methods such as the fuzzy geometric mean and weight-vector normalization were used to calculate the final weights of the criteria and alternatives. Finally, the advertising methods used by sports influencers were prioritized based on the extracted weights to determine which advertising approaches exerted the greatest influence on consumer behavior toward sports products and services.

Findings and Results

First, Table 1 presents information on the interviewees.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Study Participants

Interview Code	Position and Specialization	Education	Work Experience	Interview Duration
P1	Faculty member (consumer behavior)	PhD	12 years	25 minutes
P2	Faculty member (branding and sports marketing)	PhD	15 years	35 minutes
P3	Researcher in the field of sports influencers	PhD student	8 years	40 minutes
P4	Advertising company expert	Master's degree	25 years	30 minutes
P5	Sports influencer	Master's degree	28 years	25 minutes
P6	Faculty member (sports media)	PhD	20 years	20 minutes
P7	Faculty member (sports media)	PhD	14 years	35 minutes
P8	Faculty member (consumer behavior)	PhD	18 years	40 minutes
P9	Sports journalist	PhD	12 years	30 minutes
P10	Media content production expert	Master's degree	10 years	15 minutes
P11	Advertising company expert	PhD	15 years	25 minutes
P12	Faculty member (branding and sports marketing)	PhD	20 years	10 minutes
P13	Faculty member (advertising)	PhD	12 years	25 minutes
P14	Sports influencer	Master's degree	15 years	30 minutes
P15	Sports journalist	PhD student	16 years	20 minutes
P16	Faculty member (consumer behavior)	PhD	13 years	15 minutes
P17	Advertising company expert	Master's degree	8 years	20 minutes
P18	Sports influencer	PhD	12 years	25 minutes

P19	Researcher in online advertising	PhD student in Sport Sciences	8 years	20 minutes
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The qualitative findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Open and Axial Coding Findings

Component	Item
Competence and Expertise	Possessing specialized and in-depth knowledge of the advertised sports product/service.
	Credibility derived from the influencer's sports background or professional performance in the field of sports advertising.
	Acceptance of the sports influencer's recommendations regarding sports equipment based on their expertise.
	The sports influencer's ability to explain the technical differences between high-quality and ordinary sports products.
	The influence of the influencer's personal achievements in their sport on perceptions of their competence.
Trustworthiness and Honesty	Provision of accurate and technical information by the sports influencer on Instagram regarding sports products.
	Maintaining fairness when presenting advertising content.
	Refraining from promoting low-quality products solely for financial gain.
	Audience confidence in the sports influencer's honesty when discussing potential weaknesses of advertised products.
	Trustworthiness of the sports influencer based on their previous record.
Engagement	Reflection of the sports influencer's genuine personal recommendations in Instagram advertising.
	Distrust of a product rejected by the sports influencer.
	The sports influencer's responsiveness to audience questions about the advertised product in the comments section.
	The sports influencer asking audiences to share their experiences with the advertised product.
	Strong influence of the number of likes and comments beneath an advertising post on engagement within the follower community.
Attitude Toward the Brand	The influencer's use of story polls to obtain audience opinions regarding the advertised product.
	Reposting consumer-generated content (UGC) related to the advertised product.
	Increased audience willingness to engage with the advertisement after observing the influencer's active responses.
	Development of a more positive audience attitude toward the advertised brand due to the influence of the sports influencer's advertising.
	Alignment of the advertised sports brand with the audience's personal values as a result of influencer endorsement.
Content Relevance	Perception of the advertised brand as being differentiated from competitors because of influencer advertising.
	Increased audience optimism regarding the quality of the sports brand after viewing the influencer's advertisement.
	Creation of a sense of "positive familiarity" with the advertised brand through exposure to the influencer's content.
	Increased audience willingness to obtain further information about the advertised sports brand.
	Relevance of the sports influencer's advertising content to the audience's type of exercise or sports activity.
Social Influence	Presentation of the advertised product by the influencer within a story or personal experience.
	Demonstration of product use in real sports situations by the influencer.
	Consideration of the specific needs of the Iranian sports community in advertising content.
	Creation of an immediate sense of "need" to purchase the product through the manner in which it is presented.
	Integration of the advertisement with the influencer's primary content without creating a sense of forced promotion.
Purchase Intention	Increased motivation to purchase after observing the product being used by "similar" individuals in terms of athletic level or interests.
	The use of the advertised product becoming a common norm among people around the audience as a result of influencer endorsement.
	Strengthening the audience's sense of belonging to a community that uses the advertised product because of influencer promotion.
	Increased purchase likelihood because of the influencer's high level of fame and popularity (celebrity effect).
	Creation of a "fear of missing out" (FOMO) if the audience does not purchase the advertised product.
Visual Attractiveness and Format	Influence of followers' positive collective opinions regarding the advertised product on the audience's final decision.
	High likelihood of purchasing the product advertised by the sports influencer in the near future.
	Active searching by the audience for stores offering the advertised product.
	Prioritization of the product advertised by the sports influencer when intending to purchase a particular sports product.
	Acceleration of the audience's purchase timing for this category of sports products as a result of exposure to the advertisement.
Referral Intention	Reduction of the audience's hesitation regarding the purchase of a particular sports product due to influencer endorsement.
	Audience willingness to pay a higher price for the product because of influencer endorsement.
	High quality of filming and photographs used in the sports influencer's advertisements.
	Attractiveness of the advertisement resulting from the influencer's use of Instagram interactive tools, such as stickers and Reels.
	Appropriate structure and readability of captions accompanying advertising content.
	Professional and visually appealing graphic design of the sports influencer's advertising posts.
	Pleasant music and sound design used in advertising videos.
	Seamless integration of advertising with other content published by the influencer.
	Audience willingness to recommend the advertised sports product to athlete friends.
	Willingness to share positive information received from the influencer in online discussions about the brand.
	Likelihood of the audience posting a positive experience with the advertised product on social media.
	Defending the advertised brand in online communities because of the influencer's support for it.

	Increased willingness to verbally defend the product when it is publicly endorsed by the influencer.
	Feeling a need to inform others about the benefits of the product introduced by the influencer.
Brand Loyalty	Continued selection of this sports brand by the audience even in the absence of influencer advertising.
	Audience resistance to switching from this brand to a competing brand as a result of the initial advertising influence.
	Development of a sense of a long-term "relationship" with the advertised sports brand.
	Willingness to purchase new products introduced by the brand in the future.
	Audience sense of attachment to the brand ("my brand"), partly as a result of influencer endorsement.
	Considering the sports brand as the default option in future purchases.

This section provides information regarding questionnaire distribution and collection and also introduces the variables and data-analysis procedures. The sample size in the quantitative section was 15 participants. The AHP method, or Analytic Hierarchy Process, was used to conduct pairwise comparisons among multiple variables. First, the main indices and then their sub-indices were analyzed and ranked. Finally, the AHP inconsistency ratio was determined for them using Expert Choice 11 software.

To rank the main indices of social beliefs as well as the sub-indices, a questionnaire was distributed among experts. They were asked to evaluate each criterion relative to the others through pairwise comparisons using options ranging from equal preference (1) to extreme preference (9). Ultimately, 15 experts completed the questionnaire for the pairwise comparison of the main indices. In the present study, the 10 main indices were compared pairwise with one another, the sub-indices within each index were compared with one another, and the sub-indices of facilitating beliefs were also compared with one another using Expert Choice 11 software.

The inconsistency ratio indicates the extent to which the data collected from each expert's judgments can be considered reliable. Calculations in the Analytic Hierarchy Process are based on the initial evaluations made by decision-makers in the form of a pairwise-comparison matrix. Therefore, any error or inconsistency in comparing the elements affects the final calculation results. The following steps are used to calculate this ratio.

Step 1: Calculation of the Weighted Sum Vector. At this stage, the pairwise-comparison matrix is multiplied by the eigenvector. This operation produces a new vector referred to as the "weighted sum vector."

The concept underlying this step is that the pairwise-comparison matrix is used to compare the relative importance of different criteria. By multiplying this matrix by the eigenvector, the relative weight of each criterion is determined. Accordingly, the criteria can subsequently be used in decision-making according to their relative importance.

Step 2: Calculation of the Consistency Vector. Each element of the weighted sum vector is divided by the corresponding element of the eigenvector. The resulting vector is referred to as the consistency vector.

Step 3: Estimation of $\lambda_{\max}$. The mean of the elements of the consistency vector yields $\lambda_{\max}$. In many cases, instead of directly calculating $\lambda_{\max}$, the approximate geometric mean method is used. The parameter L represents an approximation of $\lambda_{\max}$.

Step 4: Calculation of the Consistency Index. If the number of elements in the pairwise-comparison matrix is n , the inconsistency ratio is defined as follows:

$$I.R. = \frac{I.I.}{I.I.R.}$$

In this equation, $I.R.$ represents the inconsistency ratio and $I.I.$ represents the inconsistency index, which is calculated as follows:

$$I.I. = \frac{\lambda_{\max} - n}{n - 1}$$

In this relationship, n represents the number of indices and $\lambda_{\max}$ represents the maximum eigenvalue obtained from the index-weight matrix.

Step 5: Calculation of the Random Index. Finally, the random index is extracted from the corresponding reference table.

In this study, all of the aforementioned steps were performed using Expert Choice 11 software, and the results are presented below.

Table 3

Inconsistency Coefficients of Pairwise Comparisons

Comparison	AHP Inconsistency Coefficient	Status
Main indices	0.08	Acceptable
Purchase intention	0.06	Acceptable
Referral intention	0.07	Acceptable
Brand loyalty	0.09	Acceptable
Social influence	0.07	Acceptable
Competence/Expertise	0.05	Acceptable
Engagement	0.09	Acceptable
Content relevance	0.07	Acceptable
Trustworthiness	0.06	Acceptable
Attitude toward the brand	0.07	Acceptable
Visual attractiveness	0.08	Acceptable

The calculation results are considered acceptable when the AHP inconsistency ratio is less than 0.10. As shown in the table above, the inconsistency ratio for all comparisons was below 0.10; therefore, the obtained results are considered valid.

At the end of this section, the weights of the main indices and their sub-indices are presented in tabular form.

Table 4

Overall Weights of the Indices and Sub-Indices of the Contexts Contributing to Discrimination in Iranian Sport

Index	Weight	Priority	Sub-index	Weight Within Index	Priority Within Index	Overall Weight	Overall Priority
Purchase intention	0.1950	1	Prioritization of the product advertised by the sports influencer when intending to purchase a particular sports product	0.308	1	0.060	1
			High likelihood of purchasing the product advertised by the sports influencer in the near future	0.208	2	0.028	10
			Acceleration of the audience's purchase timing for this category of sports products as a result of viewing the advertisement	0.199	3	0.0160	17
			Elimination of the audience's hesitation regarding the purchase of a particular sports product due to influencer endorsement	0.167	4	0.0090	25
			Audience willingness to pay a higher price for the product because of influencer endorsement	0.118	5	0.0040	33
Total				1	–	–	–
Referral intention	0.1230	2	Audience willingness to recommend the advertised sports product to athlete friends	0.275	1	0.055	2
			Feeling a need to inform others about the benefits of the product introduced by the influencer	0.261	2	0.0030	37
			Willingness to share positive information received from the influencer in online discussions about the brand	0.205	3	0.0020	49
			Defending the advertised brand in online communities because of the influencer's support	0.145	4	0.0020	50
			Likelihood of posting a positive experience with the advertised product on social media	0.114	5	0.0015	53
Total				1	–	–	–
Brand loyalty	0.1150	3	Continued selection of this sports brand even in the absence of influencer advertising	0.239	1	0.050	3

			Resistance to switching from this brand to a competing brand as a result of initial advertising endorsement	0.222	2	0.0200	15
			Development of a sense of a long-term “relationship” with the advertised sports brand	0.194	3	0.014	20
			Willingness to purchase new products offered by this brand in the future	0.180	4	0.0050	30
			Audience sense of attachment to the brand (“my brand”), partly because of influencer endorsement	0.087	5	0.0030	40
			Considering this sports brand as the default option in future purchases	0.078	6	0.0015	54
Total				1	–	–	–
Social influence	0.1100	4	Increased willingness to purchase after observing “similar” individuals, in terms of athletic level or interests, using the product	0.238	1	0.045	4
			The use of the advertised product becoming a common norm among people around the audience as a result of influencer endorsement	0.220	2	0.0150	19
			Strengthening the audience’s sense of belonging to a community that uses the advertised product because of influencer advertising	0.179	3	0.0080	26
			Creation of a “fear of missing out” (FOMO) if the audience does not purchase the advertised product	0.162	4	0.0040	35
			Influence of followers’ positive collective opinions about the advertised product on the audience’s final decision	0.128	5	0.0025	43
			Increased motivation to purchase after observing “similar” individuals, in terms of athletic level or interests, using the product	0.073	6	0.0010	56
Total				1	–	–	–
Content relevance	0.0870	7	Demonstration of product use in real sports situations by the influencer	0.215	1	0.040	5
			Presentation of the advertised product by the influencer in the form of a story or personal experience	0.190	2	0.0220	14
			Relevance of the sports influencer’s advertising content to the audience’s type of exercise or sports activity	0.175	3	0.0130	21
			Consideration of the specific needs of the Iranian sports community in advertising content	0.145	4	0.0040	36
			Creation of an immediate sense of “need” to purchase the product through the manner in which it is presented	0.122	5	0.0020	47
			Integration of the advertisement with the influencer’s primary content without creating a sense of forced promotion	0.100	6	0.0015	52
			Presentation of the advertised product by the influencer in the form of a story or personal experience	0.036	7	0.0008	58
			Presentation of the advertised product by the influencer in the form of a story or personal experience	0.017	8	0.0005	59
Total				1	–	–	–
Trustworthiness	0.0800	8	Audience confidence in the sports influencer’s honesty when describing potential weaknesses of advertised products	0.243	1	0.038	6
			Maintaining fairness when presenting advertising content	0.202	2	0.0110	23
			Refraining from promoting low-quality products solely for financial gain	0.173	3	0.0040	34
			Trustworthiness of the sports influencer based on their previous record	0.155	4	0.0025	41
			Reflection of the sports influencer’s genuine personal recommendations in Instagram advertising	0.130	5	0.0020	46
			Distrust of a product rejected by the sports influencer	0.097	6	0.0015	51
Total				1	–	–	–
Attitude toward the brand	0.0750	9	Development of a more positive attitude toward the advertised brand because of the influence of the sports influencer’s advertising	0.248	1	0.035	7
			Alignment of the advertised sports brand with the audience’s personal values as a result of influencer endorsement	0.221	2	0.010	24
			Perception of the advertised brand as differentiated from competitors because of influencer advertising	0.160	3	0.0050	29
			Increased audience optimism regarding the quality of the sports brand after viewing the influencer’s advertisement	0.148	4	0.0040	32
			Creation of a sense of “positive familiarity” with the advertised brand as a result of exposure to influencer content	0.131	5	0.0030	38
			Increased audience willingness to obtain further information about the advertised sports brand	0.092	6	0.0025	42

Total				1	–	–	0.299
Competence	0.1060	5	Possessing specialized and in-depth knowledge of the advertised sports product/service	0.254	1	0.033	8
			Ability to explain the technical differences between high-quality and ordinary sports products	0.200	2	0.030	9
			Credibility derived from the influencer's sports background or professional performance in sports advertising	0.145	3	0.025	13
			Acceptance of the sports influencer's recommendations regarding sports equipment based on their expertise	0.064	4	0.018	16
			Influence of the influencer's personal achievements in their sport on perceptions of their competence	0.038	5	0.012	22
			Provision of accurate and technical information by the sports influencer on Instagram regarding sports products		6	0.007	27
Total				1	–	–	–
Engagement	0.0950	6	The sports influencer's responsiveness to audience questions about the advertised product in the comments section	0.279	1	0.025	11
			Reposting consumer-generated content (UGC) related to the advertised product	0.260	2	0.025	12
			Increased audience willingness to engage with the advertisement after observing the influencer's active responses	0.186	3	0.015	18
			The sports influencer asking audiences to share their experiences with the advertised product	0.142	4	0.0050	31
			The influencer's use of story polls to obtain audience opinions about the advertised product	0.088	5	0.0030	39
			Strong influence of the number of likes and comments beneath the advertising post on engagement within the follower community	0.045	6	0.0025	45
Total				1	–	–	–
Visual attractiveness		10	High quality of filming and photographs used in the sports influencer's advertisements	0.251	1	0.0060	28
			Attractiveness of the advertisement resulting from the influencer's use of Instagram interactive tools, such as stickers and Reels	0.215	2	0.0025	44
			Increased motivation to purchase after observing "similar" individuals, in terms of athletic level or interests, using the product	0.190	3	0.0020	48
			Professional and visually appealing graphic design of the sports influencer's advertising posts	0.167	4	0.0010	55
			Pleasant music and sound design used in advertising videos	0.120	5	0.0010	57
			Seamless integration of advertising with other content published by the influencer	0.057	6	0.0002	60
Total				1	–	–	–

The results of the pairwise comparisons showed that the effective advertising methods used by Iranian influencers on Instagram in relation to consumer behavior toward sports products and services were ranked, in descending order of priority, as follows: purchase intention, referral intention, brand loyalty, social influence, competence/expertise, engagement, content relevance, trustworthiness, attitude toward the brand, and visual attractiveness. Table 5 presents the results of the component rankings.

Table 5

Ranking of Components Based on the AHP Model

Total Item Weight (Final Normalized Weight)	Component	Final Rank
0.1950	Purchase intention	1
0.1230	Referral intention	2
0.1150	Brand loyalty	3
0.1100	Social influence	4
0.1060	Competence/Expertise	5
0.0950	Engagement	6
0.0870	Content relevance	7
0.0800	Trustworthiness	8
0.0750	Attitude toward the brand	9
0.0515	Visual attractiveness	10
1.0000	—	Total

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to identify and prioritize the most effective advertising-related factors used by Iranian influencers on Instagram in shaping consumers' behavior toward sports products and services. The findings showed that purchase intention had the highest priority among all components, followed by referral intention, brand loyalty, social influence, competence/expertise, engagement, content relevance, trustworthiness, attitude toward the brand, and visual attractiveness. This ranking indicates that the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the Iranian sports market is primarily reflected in behavioral and behavioral-intention outcomes rather than merely in aesthetic or attitudinal responses. In other words, consumers appear to evaluate influencer advertising most strongly in terms of whether it motivates them to purchase, recommend, repeatedly select, and socially support the promoted sports product or service. The results therefore suggest that the ultimate effectiveness of sports influencer marketing depends on its capacity to convert communication exposure into concrete behavioral tendencies.

Purchase intention emerged as the highest-ranked component, with a normalized weight of 0.1950. Among its subcomponents, prioritizing an influencer-endorsed product when intending to purchase a specific sports product received the highest overall priority, followed by a high likelihood of purchasing the promoted product in the near future. This result indicates that influencer advertising may become particularly effective when it affects the consumer's consideration set and moves the endorsed product toward the top of available alternatives. Rather than simply generating awareness, the influencer appears to play a role in reducing uncertainty, accelerating purchase timing, and strengthening consumers' readiness to select a promoted product. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that social media advertising and influencer-related variables are significantly associated with purchase intention. Kiani reported that attitudes toward social media advertisements influence purchase intention, suggesting that favorable evaluations of digital advertising can facilitate consumer movement toward purchasing behavior [16]. Similarly, Hussain et al., using the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, demonstrated that characteristics of Instagram sponsored advertising can stimulate psychological reactions that ultimately increase purchase intention [15].

The high priority assigned to purchase intention is also consistent with research conducted specifically in sports marketing contexts. Daryaei et al. showed that Instagram bloggers influence consumers' intention to purchase sports products and that brand attitude plays an important mediating role in this relationship [18]. Lee likewise found that sports influencer marketing can affect consumer purchase intention, while the credibility of the sports influencer and the value of advertising content shape the strength of this effect [10]. In the Iranian context, Maleki Minbashrazgah et al. showed that informativeness, social image, and creativity in social media advertising can enhance purchase intention among consumers of sports products [11]. Mansouri et al. also demonstrated that Instagram advertising indices can influence both immediate and latent behavioral responses among sporting goods consumers [17]. Collectively, these findings support the present result that the most important function of sports influencer advertising is not merely to generate attention but to translate digital persuasion into purchase-oriented behavioral intention.

Referral intention was ranked second, with a weight of 0.1230. The highest-ranked subcomponent within this dimension was the willingness of consumers to recommend the advertised sports product to athlete friends. This finding suggests that sports influencer campaigns have a strong interpersonal and network-based dimension. Consumers do not merely respond privately to influencer messages; they may also reproduce and extend those messages within their own social networks. This

mechanism is especially relevant in sports environments because consumers often participate in communities organized around shared sports, fitness goals, teams, clubs, or training practices. Recommendations from peers may therefore reinforce the credibility of the original influencer message and broaden its reach beyond the influencer's immediate audience.

This result can be interpreted in light of research emphasizing engagement, social communication, and the diffusion of influencer-generated meanings. Movaghar et al. showed that influencers exert psychological effects on consumers through processes that extend beyond direct advertising exposure, including relational and social mechanisms [14]. Dhanesh et al. demonstrated that visually engaging social media content can strengthen public engagement on Instagram and Facebook, thereby increasing the likelihood of interaction and further dissemination [12]. Referral intention can consequently be understood as an advanced form of engagement in which consumers become active transmitters of persuasive brand information. The finding also accords with Salehi's review, which identified influencer marketing and online customer reviews as important determinants of contemporary consumer behavior [1]. When an influencer is perceived as credible and the endorsed product is evaluated positively, consumers may carry the endorsement into interpersonal and online discussions, effectively functioning as secondary brand advocates.

Brand loyalty ranked third, with a weight of 0.1150. The most important subcomponent was consumers' continued choice of the sports brand even in the absence of influencer advertising. This result is notable because it indicates that the effectiveness of influencer marketing may extend beyond immediate conversion. A successful influencer campaign can potentially contribute to the formation of stable brand preferences that persist after direct promotional exposure has ended. The finding implies that influencers may serve as an entry point into a longer-term consumer-brand relationship. Once trust, product experience, and favorable brand associations are established, consumers may continue selecting the brand independently of subsequent influencer involvement.

The importance of brand loyalty is consistent with the broader relationship between consumer orientation, brand preference, and purchase decisions. Vareth et al. emphasized the role of brand loyalty in shaping customer purchase decisions and sustaining favorable relationships with brands [19]. In influencer marketing, this process may be strengthened by the transfer of positive perceptions from the influencer to the endorsed brand. Human-brand research also suggests that consumers can develop durable associations around prominent sports figures and their related brand extensions. Koo showed that attitudes toward athlete celebrities' human-brand extensions are shaped by antecedent evaluations of the athlete, illustrating the potential for athlete-related meanings to become attached to commercial offerings [6]. Brooks et al. similarly described how influencers acquire celebrity capital and transform their personal visibility into commercially meaningful influence [4]. These processes may explain why influencer endorsement can contribute not only to initial trial but also to repeated brand preference and resistance to switching.

Social influence ranked fourth, confirming the importance of collective norms, perceived similarity, and follower-community responses in sports influencer marketing. The highest-ranked subcomponent concerned increased willingness to purchase when consumers observe similar individuals using the product. This finding illustrates the importance of social proof. Consumers may be more likely to accept a product when its use is visible among individuals whom they perceive as similar in athletic level, interests, or lifestyle. In sports contexts, perceived similarity is particularly influential because consumers often compare themselves with peers or aspirational reference groups when evaluating equipment, clothing, training products, or fitness services.

The role of social influence is supported by research showing that sports celebrities' social media presence can shape consumer engagement and endorsement responses. Ferreira et al. found that athletic performance and a marketable lifestyle influence consumers' engagement with sports celebrities and their endorsements [5]. Gordillo-Rodriguez et al. likewise demonstrated that sports celebrities use Instagram as a significant venue for brand sponsorship, embedding commercial messages within a social and identity-based environment [8]. The present findings suggest that these effects may be strengthened when consumers see endorsement-supported consumption as socially normative or consistent with the practices of valued communities. Furthermore, the observed relevance of fear of missing out within the social-influence dimension indicates that influencer advertising may create urgency when products are presented as popular, desirable, or socially expected.

Competence/expertise ranked fifth and was therefore the most important source-related characteristic in the model. The highest-ranked subcomponent was the influencer's specialized and in-depth knowledge of the advertised sports product or service, followed by the ability to explain technical differences between high-quality and ordinary sports products. This result is theoretically important because it suggests that sports audiences do not evaluate influencers solely on celebrity, popularity, or visual appeal. Instead, they appear to value influencers who can function as knowledgeable evaluators and provide technically credible guidance. In markets where product performance can affect training quality, comfort, safety, or athletic outcomes, expertise may reduce perceived purchase risk and help consumers interpret complex product characteristics.

This finding strongly aligns with Lee's study, in which sports influencer credibility played an important role in the relationship between advertising content value and purchase intention [10]. It is also compatible with Ferreira et al., who showed that athletic performance contributes to the effectiveness of sports celebrity engagement and endorsements [5]. Athletic performance can act as a signal of competence because successful sports figures are presumed to possess relevant product knowledge and experience. Bodaghi and Oliveira's longitudinal analysis of Olympic champions' Instagram characteristics further illustrates how professional sports status and social media presence can become integrated over time [7]. Therefore, the present result supports the view that influencer selection in sports marketing should be based on domain-specific competence rather than follower count alone.

Engagement ranked sixth. The most important engagement-related elements were responsiveness to audience questions in the comments section and the reposting of user-generated content. These findings indicate that bidirectional communication strengthens the perceived effectiveness of influencer marketing. When influencers respond actively, audiences may perceive greater accessibility, involvement, and authenticity. Such interaction can also reduce uncertainty regarding the promoted product by allowing consumers to obtain additional information and observe how others respond to the endorsement.

The importance of engagement is consistent with Dhanesh et al., who showed that characteristics of social media content, particularly visual elements, can enhance public engagement with organization-generated content [12]. It is also supported by the broader notion that influencers gain persuasive power through repeated interaction and audience visibility. Brooks et al. described influencer celebrification as a process through which social media personalities accumulate celebrity capital partly through continuous engagement with audiences [4]. Feher's work on digital identity similarly highlights the strategic construction of online identity through ongoing digital footprints and self-presentation [3]. Thus, engagement may contribute

both to immediate campaign performance and to the long-term maintenance of influencer credibility and audience relationships.

Content relevance was ranked seventh. Within this component, demonstrating product use in actual sports situations received the highest weight. This suggests that consumers value advertising content that is functionally embedded in realistic sporting contexts. Sports products may be more persuasive when consumers can see how they perform during training, competition, or ordinary physical activity rather than in abstract or purely promotional settings. Presenting products through personal stories and experiences was also highly ranked, reinforcing the importance of contextualized and experiential communication.

This finding can be explained through the nature of influencer advertising itself. Klostermann et al. demonstrated that the presentation of celebrities' private lives through visual social media affects how audiences experience celebrity communication [9]. When sports influencers incorporate products into their everyday training or lifestyle, the advertising may appear more authentic and relevant. Fernández Gómez et al. likewise highlighted the continuing strategic importance of testimonials, endorsements, and celebrities within contemporary advertising practices [13]. In influencer contexts, product demonstration and personal storytelling effectively combine testimonial and endorsement functions. Such content can reduce the psychological distance between advertisement and consumer experience.

Trustworthiness ranked eighth. Although it was not among the highest overall components, the most important item within this dimension concerned honesty in acknowledging the possible weaknesses of promoted products. Fairness in presenting advertising content and refusal to promote low-quality products solely for financial benefit were also important. These findings indicate that audiences interpret transparency as a key signal of trustworthiness. Influencers who acknowledge limitations may paradoxically become more persuasive because audiences perceive them as less commercially opportunistic.

The importance of trustworthiness is compatible with the literature on influencer credibility and digital identity. Lee demonstrated that credibility is a critical variable in sports influencer marketing [10]. Feher showed that online identities are constructed through persistent and strategically managed digital traces [3]; consequently, past promotional behavior can influence current perceptions of honesty. Brooks et al. also emphasized that influencer celebrity capital is accumulated through repeated audience-facing activity [4]. Trustworthiness should therefore be understood as cumulative: influencers who repeatedly promote questionable products may weaken their long-term persuasive capital, whereas those who demonstrate selectivity and transparency may strengthen it.

Attitude toward the brand ranked ninth. The highest-ranked item involved the development of a more positive attitude toward the advertised brand due to influencer advertising. Although this dimension was lower than purchase intention, referral intention, and loyalty, it still represents an important cognitive-affective mechanism connecting promotional communication with consumer behavior. Daryaei et al. specifically showed that brand attitude mediates the relationship between Instagram bloggers and purchase intention for sports products [18]. Thus, its lower ranking should not be interpreted as indicating that brand attitude is unimportant. Rather, the present findings suggest that decision-makers may perceive behavioral outcomes as more immediately consequential than the attitudinal mechanisms that help generate them.

Visual attractiveness ranked tenth and therefore had the lowest overall priority. This finding is particularly noteworthy because Instagram is fundamentally a visual platform. High-quality photography, interactive formats, professional graphic design, and appealing audio were recognized as relevant but were less important than behavioral, social, and credibility-

related variables. This result suggests that visual quality may operate as a facilitating or threshold condition rather than the primary determinant of influencer effectiveness. Attractive content may capture attention, but it does not necessarily produce purchase, referral, or loyalty unless it is supported by relevance, expertise, trust, and persuasive value.

Previous research helps explain this apparent distinction. Dhanesh et al. found that visuals can enhance engagement with organizational social media content [12], while Gordillo-Rodriguez et al. showed that Instagram provides sports celebrities with a highly visual environment for brand sponsorship [8]. However, the current findings indicate that visual presentation alone is insufficient for achieving the highest-order consumer outcomes. Maleki Minbashrazgah et al. similarly identified multiple advertising qualities—including informativeness, social image, and creativity—as relevant to purchase intention, implying that visual creativity must be integrated with informational and social value [11]. The low ranking of visual attractiveness therefore does not contradict previous research; instead, it suggests that aesthetics are most effective when they support substantive credibility and behavioral persuasion.

Overall, the findings reveal a hierarchical pattern in which direct behavioral outcomes occupy the highest positions, followed by social and source-related factors, while attitudinal and aesthetic factors occupy relatively lower positions. This pattern supports the broader understanding that contemporary influencer marketing is an integrated process in which consumer behavior results from interactions among message characteristics, influencer attributes, social context, and brand-related evaluations. The psychological effects identified by Movaghar et al. [14], the behavioral effects of Instagram advertising reported by Mansouri et al. [17], and the influencer evaluation framework developed for Iranian sports goods by Shoja et al. [20] all reinforce the multidimensional nature of this process. Moreover, the growing integration of online and offline consumer decision pathways means that digital persuasion can influence subsequent retail behavior beyond the platform itself [2]. Accordingly, the present study extends prior research by not merely identifying relevant factors but also establishing their relative priorities through the Fuzzy AHP framework.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative and multi-criteria samples consisted of experts selected through purposive and snowball sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the results to all sports consumers, influencers, and marketing professionals in Iran. Second, the Fuzzy AHP results reflect expert judgments and therefore remain partly dependent on subjective evaluations despite the use of fuzzy logic to manage uncertainty. Third, the study focused specifically on Iranian influencers operating on Instagram, and the relative priorities identified may differ across other social media platforms with different content formats, algorithms, and audience structures. Fourth, the study considered sports products and services as a broad category, although consumer decision processes may differ considerably across sportswear, equipment, supplements, fitness services, digital training programs, and other product categories. Fifth, the cross-sectional nature of expert assessments does not allow examination of how the relative importance of the identified factors may change over time as social media trends, consumer expectations, platform features, or influencer practices evolve.

Future studies should test the proposed hierarchy using larger samples of actual sports consumers and compare expert-derived priorities with consumer-level evaluations. Researchers could also employ structural equation modeling to examine causal relationships among expertise, trustworthiness, engagement, content relevance, brand attitude, purchase intention, referral intention, and brand loyalty. Comparative studies across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms would help determine whether the identified priorities are platform-specific or generalizable across digital

environments. Future research could also compare micro-, macro-, and celebrity influencers to determine whether follower size and influencer category alter the relative importance of credibility, social influence, and visual attractiveness. Experimental designs could manipulate influencer expertise, disclosure transparency, visual quality, message format, and endorsement congruence to assess their causal effects on behavioral outcomes. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining whether influencer campaigns generate enduring brand loyalty or mainly short-term purchase responses. Finally, future studies could separately investigate different categories of sports products and services and assess demographic differences based on age, gender, level of sports participation, and consumer experience.

Sports brands and marketing managers should prioritize influencers who can directly affect purchase behavior rather than selecting endorsers primarily on the basis of follower count or visual attractiveness. Influencers should be evaluated for their ability to generate purchase consideration, recommendations, repeat preference, and social advocacy. Brands should select individuals with demonstrable expertise in the relevant sport and ensure that they can explain product features accurately and credibly. Campaigns should incorporate real-life product demonstrations, technical comparisons, personal experiences, and transparent discussion of product strengths and limitations. Influencers should also be encouraged to respond to audience questions, use interactive Instagram features, repost user-generated content, and stimulate peer-to-peer discussion. Marketers should design campaigns that leverage social proof without making endorsements appear artificial or excessively promotional. Finally, campaign evaluation should extend beyond impressions, likes, and visual engagement and include indicators such as purchase intention, referral intention, conversion behavior, repeat purchase, and brand loyalty.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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