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Constructing Authenticity in Digital Landscapes: Deion Sanders's Social Media Presence and Its Impact on Fan Perceptions

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Abstract: This qualitative research explores the intersection of social media, personal branding, and perceived authenticity in sports figures, focusing on Deion Sanders's digital presence as head football coach at the University of Colorado. Two interrelated studies examine how Sanders manages his authenticity on social media and how audiences perceive his authenticity. Study 1 employs a six-factor framework applied to eight focus groups to understand what factors social media audiences consider most important in developing Sanders's perceived authenticity as a digital content creator. Study 2 utilizes a two-factor model of authenticity management to examine Sanders's personal social media content during his inaugural season as CU's head coach. The research incorporates a spatial perspective from sport sociology. This approach examines how Sanders's social media activity creates and shapes virtual spaces where interaction and identity formation occur. Findings reveal that while Sanders is generally perceived as authentic, digital charisma emerged as the most significant factor in constructing his perceived authenticity. The study contributes to understanding the evolving nature of authenticity in digital spaces and the role of digital charisma in personal branding for public figures balancing multiple roles.

Keywords: social media; authenticity; digital charisma; sports figures; personal branding; qualitative

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1. Introduction

The intersection of social media and perceived authenticity has become increasingly significant in the world of sports, particularly for high-profile coaches and athletes. This study explores this intersection through the lens of Deion 'Coach Prime' Sanders, whose appointment as head football coach at the University of Colorado in December 2022 generated unprecedented excitement and media attention [1]. Sanders's prolific use of social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), has positioned him at the forefront of a new era in sports branding and fan engagement, both of which are rooted in perceived authenticity.

The rise of social media has revolutionized how public figures connect with their audiences and build personal brands. This transformation is particularly evident in the sports industry, where athlete sponsorship has evolved to become a booming industry. The industry saw a 20% growth in 2022 [2]. Additionally, data shows that 29% of brands initiated new sponsorships between 2023 and 2024 [3]. The NFL alone experienced a 15% increase in sponsorships, valued at USD 2.35 billion in the 2023/24 season [4].

The NCAA's NIL rules have further expanded opportunities for college athletes to monetize their personal brands. In 2023, top earners like Shedeur Sanders (earning USD 4.7 million) leveraged substantial social media followings to secure endorsement deals [5]. Professional athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi earned even more from endorsements in 2022, with USD 123.9 million and USD 93.6 million, respectively [6].

This exploratory research investigates the intersection of fan perceptions of authenticity in modern sports figures and social media, with a specific focus on Deion Sanders's digital presence. It is structured as two interrelated studies, each guided by distinct research questions to address key aspects of mediated authenticity and its implications.

The first part of the research centers on understanding the factors that influence how social media users perceive Sanders's authenticity through his X social media content. Study 1 is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social media audiences perceive Sanders's authenticity through his X social media content?

RQ2: What factors do social media audiences use in considering Sanders's authenticity through his X social media content?

To explore these questions, a thematic analysis was conducted based on data from eight focus groups, applying a six-factor framework to uncover the key elements shaping audience perceptions of Sanders as a digital content creator.

The second part of this research examines how Sanders uses themes and strategies in his personal social media content to cultivate relationships with audiences and collaborate with brands. This study applies Audrezet et al.'s [7] four authenticity management strategies to analyze Sanders's posts during his inaugural season as CU's head coach. The research questions guiding study 2 are as follows:

RQ3: How does Deion Sanders's social media balance personal branding with authentic self-presentation?

RQ4: What specific elements of Sanders's social media posts (e.g., language use, visual content, interaction with followers) most strongly influence users' perceptions of his authenticity?

Through this analysis, the study identifies "charisma" and "digital charisma" as emerging facets of perceived authenticity within virtual spaces. By adopting a spatial perspective from sport sociology, it further highlights how Sanders's social media activities create digital spaces that transcend physical boundaries, fostering interaction and connection between athletes, coaches, and fans across geographical locations.

2. Literature Review

Four elements are critical for the comprehension of this research. The first element is authenticity, which is explained below. The remaining critical elements are charisma, technological listening, and Deion Sanders as the central figure in this research. To explain our analysis and the relevancy of our work, the literature review will be broken into three pieces. The first portion will cover authenticity as well as three sub-categories and further explanations of authenticity for additional nuance and depth: (1) authenticity and social media use, (2) authenticity maintenance, and (3) perceived authenticity. Once we have established a baseline of authenticity, we will move on to the second half of the literature review, which covers charisma. Charisma is broken into two key pieces: (1) digital charisma and (2) the intersection of charisma and authenticity. Then, we explain technological listening as a guiding concept that helps explain the bidirectionality of the content creators and their audience, which informs the influencer's perceived authenticity and charisma. It is also important to have some baseline understanding of Deion Sanders and why he has become popular in sports cultures.

3. Deion 'Coach Prime' Sanders

Before continuing into the article, it is important to provide a brief background on Deion 'Coach Prime' Sanders. Sanders was appointed as the head football coach at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) in December 2022, following a trailblazing career as one of the most dynamic athletes in American sports history. Over fourteen NFL seasons with five teams, Sanders won two Super Bowls, was named to the first-team All-Pro six times, earned eight Pro Bowl selections, and was the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year in 1994. He is uniquely distinguished as the only athlete to play in both the NFL Super Bowl and MLB World Series, further cementing his legacy as a two-sport star.

After retiring from professional play, Sanders transitioned into coaching, first making a significant impact at Jackson State University, where he elevated the football program's national profile and brought unprecedented attention to HBCU athletics. Throughout his career, Sanders has been open about his strong Christian faith, often attributing his successes and resilience to his relationship with God, and making faith a central part of his leadership and mentorship.

Sanders's move to CU created a media phenomenon, projecting him and the Buffaloes onto the national stage in a way rarely seen in recent years. His arrival sparked an explosion of coverage across television, social media, and national news, with Colorado football becoming one of the most talked-about stories in college sport [1]. The program's games drew record viewership, merchandise sales soared, and the university experienced dramatic increases in applications and donations, all attributed to the "Prime Effect" [1,8]. Sanders's charisma, leadership, and outspoken convictions have made him one of the most influential figures in sports culture today, with an impact that extends well beyond the football field and resonates across the country.

4. Authenticity

Authenticity is considered a cornerstone of contemporary marketing [9] and is crucial for establishing trust and credibility across various domains, including marketing and online engagement. Although it can vary by context [10], consumer authenticity is conceptualized as the comprehensive and holistic evaluation made by an audience or consumer determined by six component judgements—accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency—where the role of each component can shift depending on the consumption context [11]. Authenticity involves assessing the congruence between internal values and external expressions, conformity to social norms, and the ability to foster a meaningful connection through shared experiences [9]. This conceptualization distinguishes authenticity as a highly valued, binary, intangible, and positive characteristic [9].

As a composite, formative concept rather than reflective, authenticity is shaped by audiences over time [12,13] through the summation of distinct factors like consistency and originality [11,14,15]. These factors cannot substitute for one another but combine to create a holistic perception of authenticity. For sports figures, fan-perceived authenticity is essential to their financial success, particularly for endorsement deals which comprise one of three typical revenue streams alongside team contracts and competition prize money [7,16,17]. Unlike the latter two, which depend primarily on athletic performance, endorsements rely on the authentic connections between fans and athletes that build attitudinal and behavioral loyalty [16,18,19].

Since public figures' inner thoughts and genuine motivations are not directly observable, audiences must rely on available external cues and information to form inferences about what drives a public figure's actions and communication [20]. In today's digital market, social media platforms are the channel through which people follow or observe the actions and communication of public figures to create perceptions of authenticity from

various content, from personal stories to brand advertisements. The relationship between sports figures' mediated images, fans' perceptions, and financial success is complex; nevertheless, management and perceptions of authenticity remain essential for all stakeholders, especially the sports figures.

5. Authenticity and Social Media

The advent of social media has amplified the importance of perceived authenticity within a variety of domains, from politics to sports, including both personal and product branding [21–23]. The concept of authenticity in social media content is multifaceted and operates on two levels: internal evaluations of authenticity by the content creator and external perspectives of authenticity by the audience. On the one hand, constructed digital authenticity refers to the deliberate efforts of content creators to create an online presence through careful curation of content, interactions, and self-presentation, including strategies employed to stay true to their personal brand, values, and passions while navigating the pursuit of followers and endorsement opportunities. On the other hand, audience perceptions of digital authenticity relate to how audiences interpret and evaluate these efforts, forming judgements about the genuineness and credibility of the online persona. The intersection of these two perspectives creates a dynamic relationship where the efforts to maintain authenticity must align with the audience's perception of what is genuine and accurate to the content creator's identity. This dual nature of authenticity raises important questions about how sports figures can effectively bridge the gap between their internal efforts to remain authentic and the external perception of their authenticity in the eyes of their audience.

Social media has fundamentally renovated fan engagement with sports teams and athletes, fostering connections with actual individuals, not just brands [24–28]. Social media has transformed sports marketing from one-way communication into a dynamic two-way conversation focused on authenticity and engagement [27]. In today's digital market, sports fans have instant access to sports-related news, statistics, and behind-the-scenes content, which fosters a stronger connection with their favorite teams and athletes than traditional marketing ever could [29]. These connections enable athletes to demonstrate substantial followings to brands seeking profitable partnerships for both parties.

Public sports figures, including athletes and coaches, often serve as digital influencers [30,31]. Digital or social media influencers are content creators who establish credibility among followers, regularly engage with audiences, and promote either their own brands or others' via social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram; through digital engagement, influencers can influence audience opinions, behaviors, and decisions [15,32,33]. High-profile athletes like Ronaldo, Messi, and Sanders are recognized as influencers by their followers and often promote brands and products through social media, from shoes to cars. Research indicates that perceived authenticity among social media influencers involves various factors including topic relevance, communication skills [34], sincerity [10,35–38], knowledge and expertise [11,34,37,39], and relatability [11,37]. Brands seek to capitalize on the authentic connections between sports figures and fans, as this authenticity can lead to increased sales of products endorsed by trusted influencers.

Not only has social media created a two-way channel for fans to engage directly with sports figures, but it has also shifted content control from the few to the many, allowing sports figures to manage their messages and content [40]. Many sports figures have embraced social media to directly connect with fans and brands [41–43] and increase followers, which can lead to lucrative endorsement deals [5,25,31,44]. While some sports figures hire content managers to craft their online personas, others prefer to handle most or all of their social media messaging personally. Consequently, there have been numerous research

projects that have examined social media content posted by athletes (e.g., [43,45,46]), as well as online fan engagement (e.g., [47–49]).

Sanderson [50] examined how rookie athletes from the four major American sports (baseball, basketball, football, and hockey) used Twitter as a tool for personal expression and connection. Sanderson [50] found that athletes displayed their roles as dedicated professional athletes by sharing their commitment to training and athletic success, pop culture consumers who are eager to share their thoughts and opinions through endorsements of commercial products and services and acknowledgments of causes they support, fans of other athletes, motivators for their fans, information seekers looking to engage with fans by asking for suggestions, and relatable people whom fans can connect with digitally.

Sports figures use a variety of strategies in self-presentation via social media to demonstrate their roles as professionals in the sports world and as relatable people, often sharing posts about performances, training, teammates, and content from their off-field lives [41,50]. However, many studies have only examined content that includes the athlete [51], which accounts for approximately two-thirds of an athlete's social media content [45]. Additionally, much of the research examining social media's and sports' focus on athletes [31,43,45,46,52] or fans (e.g., [47–49]) neglects other types of sports figures, like coaches. As a result, most research is missing a large portion of valuable data that can help us to better understand the holistic approach different sports figures use to connect with fans and brands.

Prior research has investigated athlete digital branding and management strategies [16,53,54], as well as consumer perceptions. Bredikhina et al. [53] investigated athlete online negotiation of authenticity, identifying strategies used to manage audience responses. Kucharska et al. [16] determined that fan-perceived authenticity is a driving factor in creating identification and loyalty. Ilicic and Webster [54] found that perceived authenticity influences the purchasing intentions of endorsed brands. Fox and Royne Stafford [55] investigated the role authenticity played in the digital communication of Olympic athletes, finding that further research could help link characteristics of fan-perceived authenticity to sports figures' content to cultivate a more successful public image that could lead to additional endorsement deals. However, to our knowledge, there is no research examining this relationship between constructed digital authenticity, fan perceptions of digital authenticity, and coaches.

6. Authenticity Maintenance

Recent scholarship has coalesced around two complementary approaches to authenticity in digital spaces, seeking to refine and expand the concept of authenticity into more comprehensive frameworks encompassing nuanced judgments from creator-side management strategies [7] and audience-side perception frameworks [11]. This dual perspective bridges Goffman's [56] self-presentation theory with modern influencer marketing dynamics through two key theoretical anchors: passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity.

Passionate authenticity is rooted in self-determination theory's integrated regulation [57], connecting Lehman et al.'s [9] "expressive authenticity", which captures emotional investment through unscripted emotional expressions, behind-the-scenes content, and intrinsic motivation signals, like pursuing personal growth, expressing genuine enjoyment or curiosity, striving for mastery, and sharing activities for the inherent satisfaction they bring rather than for external rewards [7].

In parallel, transparent authenticity is derived from organizational communication principles [58], emphasizing explicit and deliberate disclosure to foster trust and credibility. This dimension is operationalized through explicit disclosure of sponsorship, candid performance assessments, and open sharing of strategic decisions, ensuring that audiences perceive the creator as honest and forthcoming.

Building upon these foundational dimensions, recent research has moved beyond baseline factors to propose more comprehensive frameworks that integrate nuanced judgments from both creators and audiences. This shift is exemplified by Audrezet et al. [7], who introduced a dual-strategy model of authenticity management—passionate and transparent authenticity—enabling content creators to balance intrinsic satisfaction with honest representation in their digital personas. The interplay of these strategies results in four possible paths for managing influencer authenticity: absolute, fairytale, disembodied, and fake authenticity (see Figure 1) [7].

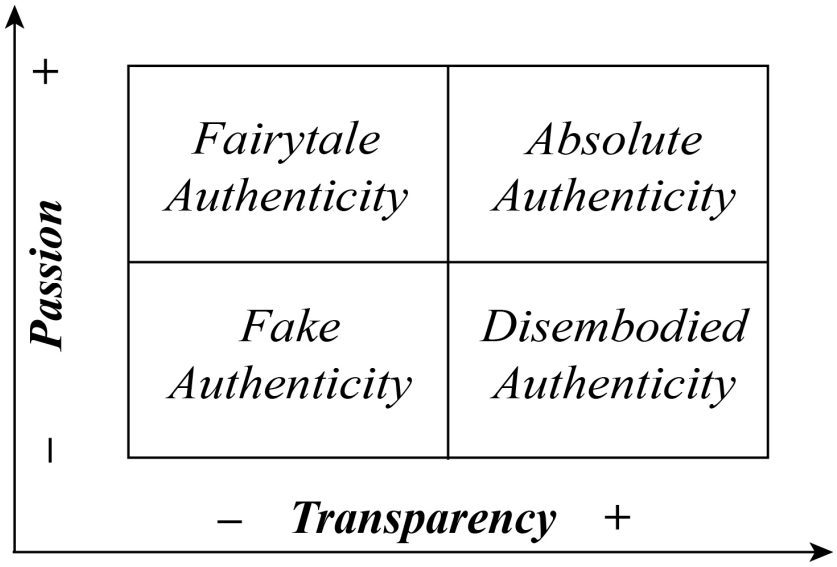

Figure 1. Quadrants of authenticity management framework [7].

As content creators, public sports figures likely face pressures in demonstrating passion and transparency to portray their authenticity on social media. Some may strive for absolute authenticity by only partnering with brands they are genuinely passionate about while being fully transparent about sponsorships and motives. Others may present more fairytale authenticity by focusing on sharing their true passion at the risk of decreased transparency about commercial relationships and motivations.

The concepts of passionate and transparent authenticity offer a robust framework for analyzing social media content, allowing us to interpret the characteristics expressed in Sanders's X posts. To address the question of relevance, we employ a two-step approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods.

First, qualitative analysis is used to identify patterns in Sanders's communication style, tone, and content choices. For instance, posts that emphasize emotional appeals or personal conviction are coded as aligning with passionate authenticity, while posts that focus on factual transparency or openness are coded as transparent authenticity. This qualitative process provides a nuanced understanding of the characteristics that define each type of authenticity in context.

Second, these qualitative insights are systematically coded and quantified to measure the frequency and dominance of each type of authenticity across Sanders's posts. This quantitative evaluation allows us to empirically assess which type of authenticity management is more prevalent in his social media strategy. Combining these approaches ensures the analysis captures both the depth (through qualitative interpretation) and breadth (through quantitative validation) of Sanders's authenticity management.

This dual framework not only addresses the relevance of the characteristics but also demonstrates how they contribute to determining whether Sanders's authenticity is more

passionate or transparent. It also ensures that the conclusions are grounded in both interpretive richness and empirical rigor.

For sports figures like Sanders, passionate authenticity could be demonstrated as sharing genuine excitement and love for their sport, providing behind-the-scenes glimpses into their training and preparation, and expressing their personal motivations and goals. Transparent authenticity for sports figures might involve being open about sponsorships and brand partnerships, disclosing when content is sponsored, and providing honest assessments of their personal and team performances.

7. Perceived Authenticity

Influencers and sports figures employ various strategies to manage their authenticity behind the scenes; however, the audience's perception of authenticity shapes the effectiveness and impact of their social media presence. While Audrezet et al.'s (2020) framework is concerned with the creator's strategies for producing authentic content, Nunes et al. [11] developed a more complex conceptualization of perceived authenticity, incorporating six factors: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency. This framework considers both the qualities of the source of authenticity and the qualities of the outcome [11].

To explore these factors in the context of sports figures, this research created focus groups and analyzed their transcripts to understand perceptions of digital authenticity, revealing how audiences interpret these six dimensions in real-world examples.

Accuracy encompasses the ideas of reliability, truth-telling, and perceived transparency and can be defined as the degree to which an audience views a brand or product as honest and transparent in its self-presentation and description [11]. Focus group participants expressed judgment of Sanders's digital authenticity in comments like "They're just true to themselves, and it's also usually very clear whether what they're saying is something they actually believe or what they're saying is just something they're putting out there for the sake of together people" (FG1: TM).

Connectedness refers to a feeling of emotional or physical closeness as well as a sense of transportation [11]. Connectedness can be defined as the level of connection, familiarity, and personal impact an audience experiences with a brand, product, or service, potentially leading to a sense of transformation [11]. Considering sports figures, a sense of connectedness was demonstrated in focus groups through participant comments like "there is a physical feeling to watching it" (FG2: MR).

Integrity addresses the idea that one is intrinsically motivated, consistent in actions and messaging, and autonomously "not acting out of one's own financial interest" [11] (p. 100). Comments related to integrity from our focus group participants included "…you find an athlete doing something that they are sacrificing their time to do something for somebody else" (FG7: TL) and "…those players that play their whole career with one team and they take a pay cut to stay with that team" (FG 8: JG). In considering brands in the public eye, like public sports figures, integrity can often be seen as consistency over time [11]. This judgment was also presented by focus group participants in comments like "consistently in terms of real life with his children and how he interacts with his children and then seeing the ads on TV" (FG 7: NT). This same concept was demonstrated in reverse when participant comments were made about inconsistencies like "when you see them (public sports figures) on every other commercial, advertising something different, it's like…you wonder, ok, what is their motive to do that?" (FG 8: JG).

Legitimacy refers to the following of expected norms, traditions, and standards within one's market [11]. Legitimacy can be defined as the degree to which a brand, product, or service aligns with established market conventions, including common practices, industry

standards, regulations, and cultural traditions [11]. This judgment was seen in comments from focus group participants like "… they're doing what they're supposed to be doing, which is trying to be the best" (FG 9: RS), "…if you had a bad game, work harder". (FG 5: RP), and "I like an athlete who can roll with the punches and just accept that life isn't always fair and just move one" (FG 5: DW).

Originality is the extent to which an entity is unique or distinct from others in its market without "unnecessary embellishments" [11] (p. 10). This judgment can be defined as the degree to which a brand, product, or service distinguishes itself from alternatives, achieving uniqueness through genuine qualities rather than superficial enhancements [11]. The concept was demonstrated in participant comments like "…there are some public figures that go against the grain" (FG 1: TM) and "It's just such a unique sport in that it's so niche and so small…" (FG 3: TM).

Proficiency means having the expertise, skills, and knowledge expected of one's position [11]. Proficiency can be defined as the degree to which customers view a brand, product, or service as having mastery of their craft, demonstrating high-level skills and professional expertise in their field [11]. This judgment was seen in comments from focus group participants like "enjoyable to kind of hear and watch them explain their thought process going through it" (FG 2: BW), "…really good at a sport" (FG 1: TM), and "he has like over decades of experience and so that's something I value when he's interview for coaching stuff" (FG 6: BH).

When considered together, these six factors can help develop a more accurate construction of perceived authenticity. This multifaceted approach to authenticity allows content creators, including public figures and companies, to understand a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to building genuine connections with their audience. In the realm of sports, these factors take on particular significance as athletes, coaches, and teams strive to cultivate authentic personas and relationships with their fans in digital spaces. Perceived authenticity is not the only element that can contribute to a content creator's digital image, however; charisma can also shape fan perception, and to add nuance to this research, it is worth analyzing.

8. Charisma

Charisma, derived from the Greek word *charis* meaning "gift" or "grace," refers to a compelling personal quality that inspires devotion and loyalty from others. Charisma, often described as alluring, influential, and magnetic [59], is a complex and multifaceted concept that was recognized by Max Weber as a significant force shaping social and political landscapes [60]. Charisma can inspire devotion and obedience from followers, establishing a unique form of authority, distinct from traditional and legal rule [60]. Weber emphasized that charisma is not merely a set of traits but a relational dynamic between leaders and followers, where followers voluntarily attribute exceptional qualities to the leader [60]. Charismatic leadership emerges from a combination of position, time, and audience expectations; however, it is transient and unstable [61].

For the purposes of this paper, the social media content creator context is viewed as a leader since they are the one directing followers where to look, what to engage with, what to follow, and so on. Due to the rapid turnover of social media content [62,63], it is common to see some form of charisma on social media, making it feel almost routine [60]. Weber [60] emphasized that followers' perceptions and a feeling that their lives have been improved by the leader are crucial for maintaining charismatic authority, and, as such, charismatic leaders often emerge during social unrest, challenging existing structures [60,64,65].

The concept has expanded beyond religious and political leaders to include organizational leadership, celebrities, and social media personalities [66–68]. Sanders is one such

personality who has challenged not only the existing social media and digital spaces but also the ways in which sports figures connect with fans [1]. Sanders has even been labeled a "great disrupter" [69].

Charisma and authenticity are closely related, mutually reinforcing concepts [9,70]. Authenticity influences perceptions of charismatic leadership [71,72], while charisma can reinforce or enhance perceptions of authenticity [9,73], which are crucial for long-term charismatic leadership success, especially in digital spaces.

9. Digital Charisma

The concept of charisma has evolved from religious and political contexts to include organizational and social media leadership. Modern media has reshaped charisma, expanding its reach and possibilities, allowing charismatic figures to craft and broadcast their public persona while blurring the line between public and religious figures [74]. This evolution has continued through digital spaces, giving rise to "digital charisma," which can be defined as the crafted and consistent projection of a mediated persona that emotionally influences and engages people through digital channels. Unlike traditional charisma, which relies heavily on physical presence and direct interpersonal interactions [60], digital charisma transcends physical boundaries, leveraging digital platforms and affordances to elicit emotional responses and foster connections through verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language, and text-based elements like emojis or capitalization) adapted for virtual environments. This concept emerged as a key theme during focus group analysis, where participants consistently identified certain individuals' ability to project their personality, energy, and influence effectively through digital content and channels.

Digital charisma emerged as a key theme during the focus group analysis, where participants consistently identified the ability of certain individuals to project their personality, energy, and influence effectively through digital content and digital channels. Participants described digital charisma as the demonstration of "energy" and engaging online persona that inspired them through virtual content.

Those who have digital charisma, like Sanders, can project their personality, energy, and influence, creating a compelling and engaging online presence and persona. Through audio, visual, and varied platform affordances, social media can channel charisma to global audiences to a much greater degree than any previous communication technology [72,75], helping to amplify "the charisma effect" [76] in a space with little to no existing formal authority [67].

These platforms and affordances also allow content creators to connect with a much larger audience on a more intimate level, using unlimited broadcasting of personal thoughts, live videos, and direct messages that create a sense of mutual participation and familiarity [77,78]. As a result, charismatic leaders can craft more attractive and authentic images, enhancing their audience appeal and influence [78–80]. Tur et al. [67] found that charismatic signaling in social media posts increases one's social influence and positively predicts retweets. Interestingly, the level of charisma projected on social media was not as important as the consistency of projected charisma, which could be projected in numerous ways, including through stories, rhetorical questions, and expressions of collected sentiments [67]. Tee [75] examined how digital charisma can help create virtual communities that spill into physical communities. There is a complementary relationship between the charismatic entity, their message, and the specific platform used [81], with the most charismatic social media personalities producing the most engaging content on the most prominent platforms to reap influence and financial rewards.

However, maintaining digital charisma can be challenging, requiring digital communication skills [59,70,81]. Without a physical presence, charismatic individuals must use

nonverbal communication, like facial expressions, body language, and text-based cues, to demonstrate charisma and create an emotional connection with audiences [37,59]. Additionally, digital communication can hinder the spontaneity of face-to-face interactions, limiting one's ability to showcase their personality. Charismatic individuals must adapt to various platform affordances, new communication methods, and digital body language.

To overcome these challenges, content creators must produce attractive content that infuses their personality into image- or text-based content. Strategies include being transparent with audiences, using high-quality visuals, and actively engaging with social media audiences. Sanders's reposting of fan content exemplifies this engagement, fostering a sense of community and strengthening emotional connections. For example, Deion Sanders frequently uses very expressive pictures or videos with a huge smile and physical stance that demonstrates his confidence, passions, or enthusiasm. Within the text, Sanders will often use all caps and emojis to demonstrate excitement and influence, giving his content a feel of a personal text rather than a professional post. One such example is from Sanders's X feed on November 13, 2023. In the post, Sanders writes "Time with the Lord is well spent time! #CoachPrime" and displays a close-up selfie of Sanders in a sauna wearing a white t-shirt, gold chain, and huge smile. Sanders is sharing his spiritual and reflective sentiment, emphasizing the importance he places on his time with God. The text message conveys gratitude and highlights his strong religious beliefs, tying the message to his personal branding and identity through #CoachPrime. The gold chain, symbolizing his style, and his confident smile suggest a calm and private moment he is sharing with his audience. The post resonates with themes of spirituality, self-care, devotion, and his motivational persona.

Sanders also often shared content from others. On 31 October 2023, he shared dozens of images of fans dressing as Coach Prime for Halloween, several of which were four or more images together including a dog wearing sunglasses, CU Buffs jersey, and a cowboy hat, embodying the playful and stylish representation of Coach Prime. Other similar images from October 31, 2023, include Sanders-inspired clothing and CU Buffsmerchandise as well as his connection to advertisers like Kentucky Fried Chicken. These posts demonstrate his digital charisma, emphasizing the fun and enthusiasm of Halloween while showcasing the admiration and engagement from his support, reflecting Sanders's charismatic influence and the pride surrounding his new position at CU.

10. Intersection of Charisma and Authenticity

Perceived authenticity is fundamental for successful marketing and building personal followings [16,18,19,82,83]. It is not something that someone inherently possesses; rather, authenticity is something that is intentionally created. This is especially true for content creators in digital spaces where direct engagement is limited, and they may never receive a second opportunity to establish a digital connection. While perceived authenticity helps build and maintain trust and credibility, a paradox exists between authenticity and curation, as financial success can potentially erode perceived authenticity [83]. This paradox implies that financial compensation for social media content can erode one's perceived authenticity, possibly deteriorating the genuine passion or transparency that initially attracted audience attention and resulted in lucrative deals. If perceived authenticity is damaged, so may an individual's charisma be in the eyes of their followers.

Charisma can be a powerful tool in shaping one's personal brand [84,85], amplifying personal branding by making individuals more memorable and influential [86], helping to foster relatability and credibility, and enhancing connections and engagement [55,84]. Charismatic individuals are often described as magnetic, naturally attracting others to their content [87,88]. This magnetism contributes to brand prominence and can be measured through brand recognition and recall [89]. Much like luxury brands, where effective status

signaling leads to perceived authenticity [90,91], strong personal branding enhances audience perceptions of both authenticity and competence [92], creating a reciprocal process where magnetic appeal drives memorability and strengthens authentic connections and brand influence. Consequently, charisma serves as a powerful stimulus in amplifying personal branding, creating a reciprocal process where magnetic appeal drives memorability, which in turn strengthens authentic connections and brand influence.

11. Technological Listening

Digital charisma and authenticity operate within expanded "listening spaces" that now include technological platforms where audiences interact through likes, shares, and comments [93] (p. 152). Social presence theory suggests that mediated communication can feel similar to face-to-face interactions (telepresence) [93,94], with significant implications for sports fandoms and fan base development [95]. Technological listening integrates modern technologies, communications, and individual perspectives [93]. Unlike automatic hearing, listening requires active engagement [95,96] and manifests through digital interactions that demonstrate audience support [93].

Charismatic signaling enhances digital engagement, with verbal cues and nonverbal communication significantly increasing audience interaction on platforms like X, functioning as informal leadership tools [67,97]. In sports fandoms, this enables fans to co-create brand narratives through collaborative interaction [95,98], exemplifying digital charisma principles [67]. This creates tension between brands seeking message control and audiences wanting participation [49]. Nike's effective use of social listening during product launches demonstrates how real-time responsiveness deepens audience connections [99].

AI-powered listening tools present another tension. Algorithms can reverse-engineer influencer characteristics and identify trends, potentially leading to personalized virtual influencers as alternatives to human creators [100,101]. While cost-effective for brands, these virtual influencers challenge traditional charisma concepts by algorithmically replicating human traits. The intersection of digital charisma and authenticity is thus shaped by technological listening practices, which enable creators to monitor interactions, analyze sentiment, and adapt content to audience expectations, fostering authentic influence.

12. Methods

In an exploration of the audience's perceptions of authenticity and strategies of authenticity management, qualitative methods like focus groups and thematic analysis provide unique advantages in gaining deep insights into the complex and intricate ways in which digital authenticity is constructed, maintained, and perceived [102–105].

This research began with focus groups and a qualitative analysis of transcripts to better understand what factors social media audiences use in constructing perceived digital authenticity of Deion 'Coach Prime' Sanders. Focus groups are "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" [106] (p. 130) and have a long history in helping government, academic, and business researchers understand how and why people think and act the way they do [107,108]. Focus groups are an ideal method for this research as the objectives were to understand the key factors social media users employ to construct the perceived authenticity of Deion Sanders as well as identify the authenticity tactics employed by Deion Sanders in his X content.

The second part of the research used thematic analysis to qualitatively analyze Sanders's X content to consider the strategies employed to create and maintain digitally perceived authenticity. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used qualitative method, well suited for identifying patterns and themes within Sanders's X content that reflect his authenticity management strategies [109–111]. By systematically coding and analyzing the content,

thematic analysis allowed the research to uncover recurring tactics such as transparency, relatability, and motivational messaging, which add to Sanders's digital persona.

Combining focus groups and thematic analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of both audience perceptions and the tactics employed by Sanders to construct and maintain perceptions of authenticity in a digital space. Together, these methods provide a robust framework for exploring the dynamic interaction between audience interpretations and content creation in shaping perceptions of authenticity in social media spaces.

12.1. Study 1: Perceived Authenticity—Focus Groups

Over the past four decades, qualitative methodology has gained popularity and stature in social science, including communication research, sparking research in cultural studies, including all phases of mediated communication from production to reception [112]. In fact, qualitative research has demonstrated its strength in understanding audience perceptions of mediated content from different perspectives [112,113], helping research gain a deeper understanding of phenomena [103,114,115].

After obtaining IRB approval, participants were recruited using convenience sampling and the SONA system at a large Rocky Mountain university, allowing undergraduate students to participate in exchange for course extra credit. After obtaining IRB approval, participants were recruited using convenience sampling and the SONA system at a large Rocky Mountain university, allowing undergraduate students to participate in exchange for course extra credit. SONA participants are collected from classes where the instructor of record opts their class roster in, and students can make a SONA account to access SONA-affiliated research studies at their leisure. Students chose to sign up for this research via SONA, and all participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could end the study at any time, and that their information would be anonymized. Per IRB requirements, data from the focus groups were stored on a password-protected external device; all participant information is anonymized, and no identifying data about the participants is included in the study or saved on the external device.

In addition, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants familiar with social media and influencer culture. Potential participants were provided with a study description and the opportunity to win a USD 25 Visa gift card. Given the exploratory nature of this research, convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for gathering insights rather than producing generalizable results.

Participants completed a brief Qualtrics survey, including a consent form and screening questions. Eligibility criteria included being over 18 years old and using social media. Additional questions about sports fandom and familiarity with Deion Sanders were used for analysis purposes but were not exclusionary. Of the 48 eligible respondents, 34 participated in 8 focus groups ranging from 2 to 8 participants each.

Focus groups were scheduled with a minimum of four participants during the week of 11–17 October 2024. Actual group sizes varied from 2 to 8 members due to no-shows. The composition of smaller groups was influenced by participant availability and scheduling constraints. To ensure inclusivity and representation of diverse perspectives, we opted to proceed with smaller groups rather than exclude participants entirely. Research on focus group methodology highlights that smaller groups can be beneficial in certain contexts, particularly when discussing complex or sensitive topics, as they allow for more in-depth individual contributions and reduce the risk of dominant voices overshadowing quieter participants [106,116–118]. Additionally, to address potential limitations associated with reduced spontaneity and interaction in smaller groups, we employed a skilled moderator trained to facilitate engagement and encourage active participation from all members. This ensured that each participant had an opportunity to share their perspectives fully.

Additionally, data from smaller groups were analyzed alongside those from larger groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding of themes across all discussions. Despite variations in group size, data saturation was achieved across all eight focus groups. As noted in qualitative research literature, saturation is a critical indicator of sufficient data collection and is not solely dependent on group size [119]. The combination of multiple focus groups allowed for the capture of a wide range of insights while ensuring redundancy in key themes.

Focus groups were intentionally designed to include participants with varied levels of familiarity about and affinity for Sanders to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives [102]. The goal of the focus groups was to understand what participant perceptions' about Sanders were, based on the participants' own knowledge and exposure to Sanders's online content. This mix allowed the study to capture a wide range of perceptions regarding Sanders's authenticity and social media presence, rather than focusing solely on a homogenous group that might skew results. Additionally, the semi-structured nature of the focus groups enabled participants to express their thoughts freely while interacting with others who held different opinions, fostering richer discussion and insights in the factors shaping perceptions of Sanders's authenticity, highlighting areas where opinions converged and diverged.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78. Of the 34 participants, 20 (59%) were college students from two major universities in the Rocky Mountain region. The remaining 14 participants (41%) were non-student adults located in Texas and Colorado. Half of the 34 participants were male (n = 17) and the other half were female (n = 17). Of the 34 participants, 47% (n = 16) considered themselves not to be fans of Sanders, 35% (n = 12) considered themselves fans of Sanders, and 18% (n = 6) were unsure.

Focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams to accommodate participants' schedules and allow participation from various geographical locations. The discussions were semi-structured, which allowed for guided yet flexible conversations.

Focus group discussion questions were structured around key questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of authenticity of public sports figures, with a particular focus on Deion Sanders. Participants were asked to look at Sanders's X channel, and the content was also shared by the focus group moderator. These questions were designed to elicit insights into how Sanders's digital persona aligns with audience expectations of authenticity and to identify the factors that contribute to these perceptions. The focus group questions drew from the six-factor model of authenticity (accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency) proposed by Nunes et al. [11]. The discussion guide included questions about accuracy and integrity, exploring how transparent and honest participants believed Sanders was in his X content and how consistent they felt he was over time. Questions centered on legitimacy and proficiency asked participants if Sanders's content was consistent with expectations of a coach or if it demonstrated expertise in football. Questions concerning originality and connectedness explored participant perceptions of how relatable, original, and genuine Sanders was based on his X content. Lastly, participants were asked what they felt was most important in considering Sanders's authenticity on X and why as well as if they did believe Sanders was authentic. These questions encouraged participants to reflect on both personal and societal factors influencing their perceptions, such as consistency in messaging, emotional relatability, and alignment between Sanders's words and actions. Additionally, participants were prompted to consider how Sanders employs specific strategies, such as motivational messaging, showcasing vulnerability, or leveraging cultural symbols, to construct and maintain his digital persona.

To ensure clarity during analysis, participant identification was coded systematically. For example, "FG 4: KD" refers to a participant identified as "KD" from focus group 4. This coding system preserved confidentiality while enabling the research team to track individual contributions across transcripts. It also allowed for a systematic comparison of

responses within and across focus groups, facilitating the identification of recurring themes and contrasting viewpoints. By addressing these topics and employing a detailed coding system, the focus groups provided rich qualitative data that illuminated how audiences construct perceptions of digital authenticity and how Sanders strategically manages his public image.

All focus groups were recorded using the Teams recording and transcribing function so that the transcripts could be used for data analysis. Using MAXQDA 24, a thematic analysis (TA) [109–111] was employed to analyze the transcripts based on Nunes et al.'s [11] six-factor model of authenticity.

12.2. Study 2: Authenticity Maintenance—X Content

Sanders uses multiple social media platforms, including Instagram (handled by his son, Deion Sanders Jr., primarily targeting Gen Z college football recruits), and X (handled by Deion Sanders) reaching a broader audience of recruits, parents, and the public. The study focused on Sanders's X account, as it contains content that Sanders personally creates and controls [120].

Sanders's X posts during the 2023 NCAA football season, spanning 237 days from 4 April 2023 (first day of team practice) to 26 November 2023 (day after the last game), encompass 858 posts (including original content and retweets). To ensure representativeness, 50% of Sanders's X posts (n = 429) were selected for analysis. The initial analysis examined every fourth post (n = 215), followed by a second round of coding using every fourth post starting with the second post (n = 214).

To analyze Sanders's X posts, the authenticity management framework developed by Audrezet et al. [7] was employed, which identifies two primary strategies for managing authenticity in digital content: passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity. Passionate authenticity refers to the extent to which a content creator expresses genuine emotional engagement, enthusiasm, and personal investment in their posts. In this study, passion was assessed by systematically coding for indicators such as expressive language, emotive punctuation, visible excitement in images or videos, and the sharing of personal stories or motivations. Transparent authenticity, in contrast, is characterized by the open disclosure of relevant contextual information, including sponsorships, partnerships, or the motivations behind a post. Transparency was evaluated by coding for explicit disclosures, hashtags (such as #ad), and statements clarifying the nature or context of the content.

Each post was coded as high or low on both passion and transparency, following the quadrant model proposed by Audrezet et al. [7]. This process resulted in four distinct authenticity strategies: absolute authenticity Absolute Authenticity (high passion, high transparency); fairytale authenticity (high passion, low transparency); disembodied authenticity (low passion, high transparency); and fake authenticity (low passion, low transparency).

In order to systematically analyze how Sanders constructs authenticity and digital charisma on X, this study identified and operationalized a set of discursive indicators, including textual, visual, and symbolic features, grounded in both prior scholarship and emergent patterns in the data. These indicators were selected to capture the ways in which enthusiasm, passion, transparency, and authenticity are signaled in digital communication, and to ensure analytic alignment between the conceptual framework and the coding of both Sanders's posts and focus group discussions.

A coding scheme was developed to systematically classify salient communicative features in Sanders's X posts. Each post was assessed for the presence of (1) all-caps text, (2) emojis, (3) exclamation points, (4) hashtags, (5) repetition for emphasis, and (6) informal language (e.g., abbreviations such as "u" for "you"). Definitions and representative examples for each element were established to ensure consistency in coding (see Table 1).

This systematic approach enables future researchers to replicate or extend our analysis in comparative studies.

Table 1. Systematic classification of communicative elements in Sanders's X posts.

Element	Definition	Example
All-caps	All letters capitalized for emphasis	"TRUST GOD"
Emojis	Unicode symbols conveying emotion/ texts	👍, 👋, 🔥, 🙏, 🦬
Exclamation points	One or more exclamation points for emphasis	"Let's go!", "Win!"
Hashtags	Words or phrases following the "#" symbol that function as organization and rhetorical devices in social media posts	#TRUTH, #CoachPrime
Repetition	Repeated words or phrases for emphasis	"I BELIEVE! I BELIEVE!"
Informal Language	Use of abbreviations or casual phrasing	"u" for "you"; "gon" for "going"

Consistent with recent research on digital self-presentation and authenticity [7,11], discursive features such as capitalization (e.g., ALL CAPS), repeated exclamation points, expressive punctuation, hashtags, and the use of emojis were coded as markers of high passion and enthusiasm. For example, posts containing multiple exclamation points or all-caps phrases (e.g., "LET'S GO!!") were interpreted as explicit signals of excitement and intrinsic motivation, reflecting the "passionate authenticity" dimension described by Audrezet et al. [7]. Similarly, the inclusion of emojis, particularly those conveying positive affect (e.g., 😁, 🔥, 🙏, 👍, 💯), was treated as an indicator of digital expressiveness and emotional engagement, in line with findings that emojis serve as pragmatic markers of tone and intent in online environments [121,122].

In addition to these features, the use of hashtags, particularly branded and thematic tags such as #CoachPrime and #TRUTH, was coded as a discursive indicator. Hashtags serve not only to increase the visibility and discoverability of posts but also function as rhetorical devices that signal self-presentation, brand identity, and claims to authenticity [123–125]. For instance, #CoachPrime references Sanders's established brand persona, while #TRUTH explicitly signals transparency and motivational intent. These hashtags were coded for their frequency, context, and alignment with other discursive elements, and were analyzed to assess their contribution to the construction and audience perception of authenticity in both X posts and focus group discussions.

Informal language choices, such as abbreviations ("u" for "you") and conversational syntax, were coded as cues of relatability and directness, supporting the "connectedness" and "originality" factors in the Nunes et al. [11] model. Posts that paired visual elements (e.g., images or videos of Sanders smiling, gesturing energetically, or adopting an open physical stance) with enthusiastic textual markers were interpreted as multimodal expressions of digital charisma, reinforcing the authenticity signaled in the accompanying text.

Fairytale Authenticity: Posts classified as fairytale authenticity exhibit high levels of passion but low transparency. These posts are characterized by enthusiastic, emotionally charged content, such as motivational messages or expressions of excitement, without pro-

viding specific contextual details or disclosing relevant information, such as partnerships, sponsorships, or the circumstances behind the message. For example, a tweet filled with motivational language and personal conviction, yet lacking any mention of the underlying situation or relationships influencing the content, would be coded as fairytale authenticity. *Disembodied Authenticity*: Disembodied authenticity refers to posts that are highly transparent but display low passion. In this category, the content openly discloses factual information, partnerships, or sponsorships, but lacks any indication of personal enthusiasm, emotional engagement, or intrinsic motivation. Typical examples include retweets or original posts that provide clear information or acknowledgments (such as tagging a sponsor or sharing game results) without additional commentary, personal reflection, or expressive language from Sanders himself.

Absolute Authenticity: Absolute authenticity is demonstrated in posts that combine both high passion and high transparency. These posts feature expressive, emotionally invested content—such as heartfelt reflections, personal stories, or visible excitement—paired with explicit disclosure of relevant details, such as the context of the message, sponsorships, or specific experiences. For instance, a tweet where Sanders shares a personal anecdote about his coaching journey, includes emotional language, and clearly identifies any partnerships or motivations behind the post would be classified as absolute authenticity.

Fake Authenticity: Posts with low passion and low transparency typically consisted of promotional content or staged messages that lacked emotional depth or disclosure.

All X posts from Sanders's channel (@DeionSanders) were captured using a snipping tool and saved with engagement statistics. The content was loaded into MAXQDA 24 for thematic analysis (TA), which helped identify patterns of meaning related to authenticity management across the season. Additionally, an Excel spreadsheet was created to record post names, applied codes, and coding rationales for each authenticity category. Representative examples from each category are provided in the Results Section to illustrate how posts were assigned to specific categories based on Audrezet et al.'s framework.

13. Results and Findings

13.1. Study 1: Perceived Authenticity—Focus Groups

The thematic analysis of Sanders's X content and focus group discussions, centered on the six-factor model of authenticity [11], revealed complex perceptions of his authenticity. When analyzing the transcripts, it was important to consider that of the 34 focus group participants, 47% (n = 16) did not consider themselves fans of Sanders, 35% (n = 12) were fans, and 18% (n = 6) were unsure. Interestingly, this distinction made no difference in relation to authenticity. Focus group participants, no matter the affinity for or familiarity with Sanders, unanimously agreed that Sanders was broadly authentic, even though his approach did not conform to traditional coaching norms in digital spaces. His social media presence, characterized by motivational posts, religious messages, and confident self-expression, positioned him more as a celebrity or influencer than a conventional coach. Despite this deviation, participants felt his charisma and consistent projection of his personality compensated for any perceived lack of adherence to coaching expectations. Sanders's ability to blend his unique persona with motivational content resonated with audiences, reinforcing perceptions of authenticity regardless of his unconventional methods. Interestingly, the TA revealed that charisma was the most discussed theme in all eight focus groups (see Figure 2).

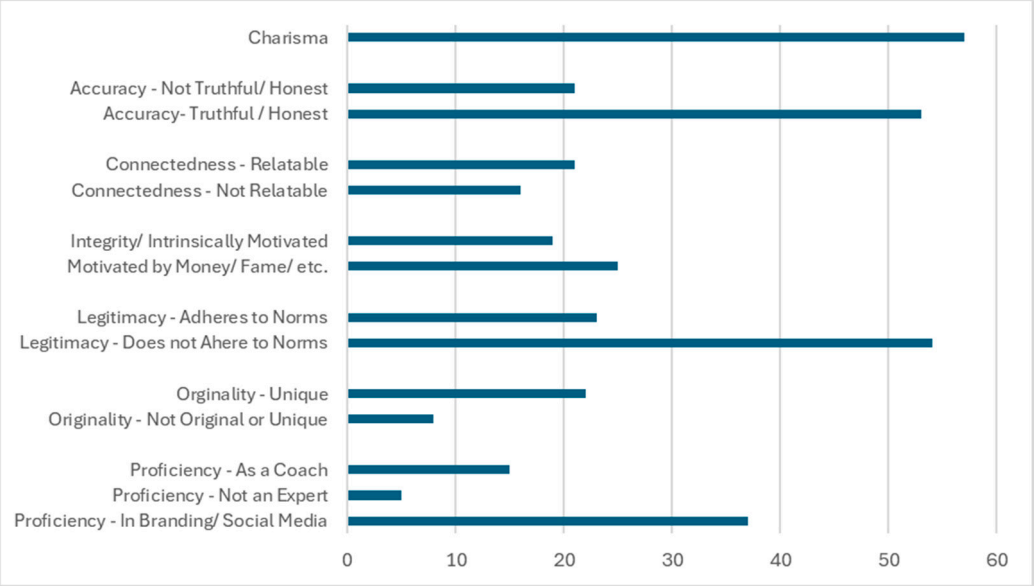

Figure 2. Number of comments concerning factors of perceived authenticity and charisma [11].

13.1.1. Charisma

Although charisma was not one of the original factors in the perceived authenticity framework, the thematic analysis revealed that participants frequently labeled Sanders as charismatic, describing him as "larger than life" with "natural charisma" (FG 7: MR). Charisma emerged as the most significant theme, mentioned 57 times (14.58% of the coded responses) across the eight focus groups. This perception stemmed from Sanders's bold self-presentation in both text and images, which participants described as "loud in how he presents himself" (FG 5: AG), often to "be the center of attention" (FG 8: DC).

Participants identified specific elements of Sanders's social media content that shaped these perceptions. For example, his frequent use of all-caps text, emojis, and exclamation points conveyed enthusiasm and energy, which some interpreted as confidence while others saw it as ostentation. One participant remarked that his posts "seem a lot more casual…almost like a text where you are talking to your buddy" (FG 3: SC), which added a personal touch to his online persona. Additionally, Sanders's motivational messages, such as posts encouraging resilience after losses or celebrating victories with phrases like "TRUST GOD" in all caps, were described as inspirational by some yet theatrical by others. In the analysis of focus group transcripts, participants' references to the discursive elements found within the examination of Sanders's X posts, such as noting the use of emojis, informal tone, or expressive punctuation, were also coded to assess how audiences interpret and attribute authenticity and enthusiasm based on discursive cues. This approach enabled a direct comparison between Sanders's self-presentation strategies and audience perceptions and allowed for the mapping of specific indicators to the six-factor framework of perceived authenticity [11].

In this research, emojis and hashtags were not individually coded or analyzed by type or frequency. Sanders uses hashtags more often than emojis; however, the presence of hashtags and emojis was noted as part of Sanders's broader communication style. Focus group participants consistently observed that his use of both elements contributed to a sense of enthusiasm, passion, and energy in his posts. Participants described hashtags and emojis as familiar features of social media communication, indicating Sanders's fluency with digital norms and helping to create a more engaging and relatable online persona. Rather than focusing on specific emojis or hashtags, our analysis emphasizes how their general use reinforced perceptions of excitement and connection within the social media environment.

Many participants found Sanders's charisma motivating and resonating. His motivational posts were likened to "a daily calendar that you tear away each day to be inspired by a new motivational saying" (FG 6: VTM). Others noted that his content displays his "flamboyant personality" (FG 7: RJ) and has an "energy" (FG 7: GN) that radiates positivity. One participant equated him with former Navy SEAL and motivational speaker David Goggins for his ability to inspire through his bold personality and messages (FG 2: EJS).

Visual content also played a role in shaping perceptions. Sanders frequently shared high-quality images and videos that highlighted his flamboyant personality, such as smiling confidently while dressed in bold outfits or engaging with fans and players. These posts were described by participants as reflective of his "flashy" and "showy" nature (FG 1: MD). One participant likened Sanders's self-presentation to that of a "peacock," emphasizing his deliberate effort to stand out through vibrant visuals and dynamic rhetoric (FG 1: MD).

Despite these positive impressions, Sanders's charismatic presence was also viewed critically by some participants, with the idea that he was cocky or a showboat mentioned 33 times (6.06% of coded responses). For example, one participant felt Sanders was "creating a character, which is probably partially himself but also played up" (FG 4: KD), while another noted that "his celebrity aspects are taking over" (FG 4: LD). These critiques were echoed throughout the focus groups by participants who described him as "flashy" (FG 3: SC; FG 3: TR), "a peacock" (FG 1: MD), "showy" (FG 1: MD), "cocky" (FG 8: GN), and "ostentatious" (FG 1: MD). Specific elements of Sanders's X content influenced these perceptions, like the use of all-caps text that conveyed enthusiasm but could also come across as excessive and performative. The all-caps and repetition of words within sentences such as "I BELIEVE!" amplified his larger-than-life persona that some perceived as theatrical. Sanders's flamboyant persona is rooted in his long-standing "Prime Time" brand, which he crafted in his early career in football. Additionally, his use of poetic quotes like "I'm not a moment; I'm a monument" project confidence and magnetism, which some perceive as arrogant or cocky [126]. While Sanders's approach has helped him stand out in a crowded sports landscape, it has also led some to view him as overly focused on self-promotion.

Nevertheless, participants overwhelmingly felt Sanders displays "a very rare personality" (FG 7: RJ) that is "larger than life" with "natural charisma" (FG 7: MR). Many felt this was essential for generating his perceived authenticity, with one participant stating, "Without these aspects of his personality, nothing he said would matter at all" (FG 8: HI). While some suspected this social media persona could be for recruiting purposes or to build his brand, most agreed that Sanders consistently demonstrated charisma through his content, engaging a broad audience effectively. Even participants hesitant to support Sanders acknowledged the strength of his social media presence; one remarked that his "social media really brings a great presence" (FG 6: VTM), while another admitted what many others felt, acknowledging that despite their hesitation to support Sanders, "his social media makes that hard to do" (FG 6: LA).

The focus group findings provided a foundation for understanding how audiences perceive digital charisma and its connection with perceived authenticity, which allowed for the validation of these observations through Sanders's social media content. By integrating these qualitative insights into the analysis, the findings were able to demonstrate how digital charisma operates both as a theoretical concept and as a practical tool for online engagement.

13.1.2. Accuracy and Transparency

Of the six codes used to analyze perceived authenticity [11], accuracy was the second most prominent, mentioned 53 times (13.55% of coded responses), almost equal to the idea that Sanders did not adhere to the norms of a coach (coded as legitimacy). Most participants believed that Sanders's blunt communication style and frequent posts about

his religious beliefs reflected his truthfulness. One comment exemplified the overarching thought that "he doesn't really hold back too much with his thoughts or opinions" (FG 4: KD), meaning "what he is saying is gonna be what he actually thinks" (FG 1: MD). Sanders frequently posts about his Christian faith, which he frequently shares offline as well as through his clothing and accessories. The consistency with sharing his faith through his social media content led many to view his content as accurate. Additionally, some felt his daily "motivational boosts" are Sanders's way of "trying to coach everybody" (FG 4: LD) to "gain followers…and popularity" (FG 4: MA), adding to his truthfulness and consistency in carrying his offline personality through to his online persona.

Although most participants believed Sanders's content demonstrated truthfulness and transparency, several commented that his content felt at least partially fake, as if he was 'creating a character' (FG 4: KD) to shape a public image and 'get clicks' (FG 5: EY) or to demonstrate his 'straight commitment to his brand' (FG 5: MJ). His communication style, including abbreviated words like 'u' rather than 'you,' enthusiastic punctuation, and distinctive sentence structure, made the content feel 'more genuine, as if it is him writing (the tweets) and not someone else,' which allows Sanders to 'actually interact with people' (FG 8: HI). Interestingly, many who felt his content was not entirely accurate pointed to the fact that the tweets are for social media, where they believed crafted and at least partially fake messages were the norm in social media content.

Intriguingly, not one participant felt Sanders was entirely fake but instead felt he may have "a team working specifically for his social media presence" (FG 4: KD), which they felt would significantly detract from his accuracy as it presents a curated "character" (FG 3: WB) to present "what you want people to see" (FG 7: MR). The reason many felt Sanders used a team was because "nobody's ever got that much energy all the time" (FG 3: WB), pointing to the continuous posting that included motivation and highly positive content. Additionally, several participants noted Sanders "reposting of his own tweets" (FG 4: LD), believing this erodes his perceived accuracy. This dichotomy reflects participants' tension concerning Sanders's perceived truthfulness and transparency. While, on the one hand, many suspected a content manager created Sanders's X posts, others believed the consistent posting of his often unpopular opinions and religious views demonstrated his perceived accuracy.

13.1.3. Legitimacy and Adherence to Norms

Interestingly, while perceived legitimacy was often brought up (23 times for 5.88% of coded responses), there were more than twice as many instances in which participants noted Sanders did not adhere to the norms or expectations of a coach (54 times for 13.81% of coded responses). One participant noted that Sanders's X content demonstrated that "he's not a coach or celebrity. He's kind of a blend of both that really works" (FG 2: GJ). Another noted Sanders "broke the mold" (FG 1: CS) since "he's got too much of a presence" and is not "just an extension of the team" (FG 1: MD). These beliefs stemmed from the lack of football-related content on Sanders's X channel, which participants expected from a high-level football coach.

Many felt coaches are expected to be "more conservative" (FG 1: SM) and that Sanders's content felt more like a "celebrity" (FG 3: TR) or "influencer" (FG 4: LD), using his channel to "boost himself" (FG 4: MA) rather than his team. Numerous participants expressed that Sanders's X content is full of opinions and motivational messages that help shape his personality and project his brand rather than his team or college football, which would be considered the norm for his role. In fact, they observed a trend supported by a related TA of the general themes presented in Sanders's posts, which revealed that only 22% of his posts during the 2023 NCAA football season were related to football [15].

Most participants felt Sanders was "an influencer…but also a football coach" (FG 4: MA), creating tension because "all his posts are about himself…random things that he wants to share rather than focusing on his actual job" (FG 4: MA). This divide in perceived legitimacy suggests that while Sanders may be generally considered a legitimate figure, his approach to social media breaks from traditional coaching norms. Interestingly, this idea of splitting from role norms bled into the construction of originality.

13.1.4. Originality

While many participants felt Sanders's content was not original, they identified specific elements that made his communication unique within the context of coaching. Participants characterized his content as "cookie cutter" (FG 2: EJS), suggesting that the ideas he conveyed were familiar or conventional, akin to motivational themes often seen in sports. However, they emphasized that the way Sanders delivered these messages was atypical for a head coach. One participant summarized this sentiment, stating, "I don't think (his content) is unique at all. For a coach, it's entirely unique" (FG 3: SC). This distinction highlights how Sanders's communication style, marked by charisma, authenticity, and his ability to leverage modern platforms like social media, transformed otherwise standard influencer-like content into something impactful.

Another participant reinforced this idea by noting, "I think he's a pioneer when it comes to a head coach" (FG 1: MD). This pioneering quality comes from his merging traditional motivational rhetoric with innovative delivery methods, such as his dynamic use of poetic language within digital content. One strong example is a post from 25 September 2023, where Sanders posted "Why are u concerned about what they gon say? Do the things u said u would do. Go to the places u said u would go & Experience the life u feel u deserve. We get 1 shot at this thang called life & u deserve the absolute best so what are u waiting on? Let's go baby. #CoachPrime". While this type of content can be viewed as familiar to many social media audiences, Sanders's delivery transforms them into something uniquely impactful for a high-profile coach. His ability to combine universal motivational principles with his signature style exemplifies why participants in focus groups described his communication as atypical for a coach. In doing so, participants felt that Sanders reshaped the boundaries of how coaches engage with social media audiences. While his messages may not have been original in substance or presentation, his approach to conveying them was seen as unique within the realm of sports leadership.

13.1.5. Connectedness and Relatability

Because Sanders's X content was not heavily focused on CU or college football, many participants felt it was more accessible and relatable to a wider audience. The idea that Sanders's content makes him relatable was mentioned 21 times (5.37% of coded responses), and the idea that his content led participants to believe he is not relatable was mentioned 15 times (3.84% of coded responses). However, these numbers are somewhat misleading.

While most participants felt Sanders's celebrity status and flamboyant personality made him less relatable to them, many understood how others may feel differently. One contributor stated that although Sanders is a celebrity and "not necessarily relatable, I don't think he's so far out there that no one could feel like they could have a connection to him", adding that the fact that he is "still talking about stuff that you could potentially relate to…makes himself more relatable than other celebrities" (FG 2: WS).

The fact that most of Sanders's content is not focused on football added to his relatability. One contributor stated that "people who aren't into football could enjoy that aspect" of his content (FG 2: EJS). Similarly, most of the participants shared that they were not religious but could "still appreciate the content he's (creating) because it's not like

there's some religious content where it forces (beliefs) at you and say, 'if you don't have this opinion, your wrong'" (FG 2: GJ). Paradoxically, Sanders's willingness to share his motivational and religious beliefs was what many believed made him relatable because, as one participant observed, "in other (content), he's not really trying to be relatable" (FG 2: EJS). Many agreed that Sanders's motivational and religiously focused messages helped make his content more relatable, especially to other Christians.

Interestingly, one participant pointed out that because Sanders often wears a sweatshirt in his X images, "he is more like a normal guy" (FG 2: EJS). However, several felt Sanders's content was not personal enough to be relatable, lacking content about his family or his "backstage" life [56] (p. 112).

One participant quickly pointed out that whatever Sanders does to connect with social media users works because he has almost 2 million followers. As many pointed out, his larger following could be because of the motivational and religious content or because his content "seems a lot more casual…almost like a text where you are talking to your buddy. It's more personal" (FG 3: SC). In fact, Sanders uses casual tones in his content, as noted in the legitimacy analysis. For example, he often replaces "you" with "u" or uses emojis as one might do in a text for a friend or family member.

13.1.6. Proficiency as a Coach

The focus group analysis presented a complex picture of Sanders's perceived proficiency. While many participants were familiar with Sanders as an athlete and coach offline, they felt his social media content did not reflect this expertise. One contributor mentioned, "He has multiple posts per day, which doesn't seem very authentic" (FG 4: KD), questioning how he balances frequent posting with coaching responsibilities. Despite these concerns, several participants noted Sanders's content demonstrated significant proficiency in personal branding and social media management (37 comments, for 6.79% of coded responses). As one contributor summarized, "The jury may be still out on him as a coach, but as a marketer…he's pulled that one off" (FG 7: SR). The data supports these observations, as Sanders averaged 3.6 posts per day during the 2023 NCAA football season, with only 22% related to football [15].

Many participants viewed Sanders as the embodiment of CU football, with one fan suggesting Sanders's celebrity status was a key "part of the contract" (FG 2: GJ). While some saw this as beneficial for recruiting, others did not equate it with coaching proficiency. However, another participant felt that "he stays relevant" with football-related content and posts videos or images of himself in the coaching role, which adds to his coaching proficiency (FG 2: EJS). The team-related posts with players listening to Sanders speak added to the idea that "the team definitely has respect for him" (FG 2: GJ). However, one contributor admitted, "I've never seen this many posts (from a sports figure). The only time I think I've seen this much (content) is brand advertising; it's literally like a company" (FG 3: SB).

13.1.7. Integrity and Behavioral Consistency

The analysis of integrity as a factor was divided into two distinct subgroups based on its dual nature: (1) consistency of behavior over time and (2) intrinsic motivation. The idea of reliable behavior was often noted (17 mentioned for 4.35% of coded content), suggesting participants placed a high value on Sanders's consistent posting patterns and content themes, demonstrating that "he's really passionate" (FG 4: MA) about what he is saying online.

Additionally, the consistency in content themes demonstrated Sanders's intrinsic motivation (19 mentioned, for 4.86% of coded content). For most participants, the amount of religious and motivational content pointed to Sanders's intrinsic motivation and integrity

as a content creator. Contributors expressed that the amount of religious content served no benefit other than sharing personal beliefs, making it "more authentic" (FG 2: WS) as it was not meant to persuade his audience but rather was "powered" by his religious beliefs (FG 3: TR) and "important in what he wants to transmit" (FG 1: VG). Additionally, the fact that Sanders would acknowledge opponents or others from whom he did not stand to gain anything added to the perception that his content was intrinsically motivated.

However, many comments (25 mentions for 6.39% of coded content) suggested Sanders often posted to gain money or fame. Although many felt Sanders was "very much himself" (FG 4: MA) in his X content, they also believed he acted more like an influencer.

One participant summarized what others expressed in saying that Sanders was "less authentic" when presenting content related to CU football as they felt he was doing so to "get as much attention" (FG 4: LD) or "boost himself" (FG 4: MA).

13.2. Study 2: Authenticity Maintenance—X Content

The thematic analysis of 427 posts (49.7% of the overall content) generated insights revealing a diverse range of authenticity strategies employed by Sanders, each to varying degrees of prevalence and impact. Although fairytale authenticity was the dominant strategy (45.2%), Sanders did employ all four tactics. Table 2 shows the statistical results of the authenticity management coding of Sanders's X posts, including the raw numbers and percentage of all coded posts.

Table 2. Authenticity management code analysis of Sanders's X posts.

Code	Coded Posts	% (All Documents)
Fairytale Authenticity	193	45.20
Disembodied Authenticity	106	24.82
Absolute Authenticity	93	21.78
Fake Authenticity	35	8.20
TOTAL	**427**	**100**

13.2.1. Fairytale Authenticity

The most prominent authenticity management theme that emerged from the analysis was the use of fairytale authenticity (high passion, low transparency), found in 193 posts (45.2% of coded content). This category suggests that most of Sanders's content is emotionally charged and enthusiastic but lacks full disclosure or complete motivational honesty. For example, an 5 April 2023 post about trust ("You can TRUST GOD wholeheartedly & pray for a man. #CoachPrime") exemplifies this approach through its capitalized text and faith-centered messaging, while providing no specific context about what prompted these reflections. While such content demonstrated Sanders's dedication to his beliefs and values, it often did not provide a complete picture or the reasoning behind the posts. This approach could be viewed as a strategic choice to maintain an inspirational public image while protecting aspects of his private life or less favorable experiences from public examination.

At the same time, the post demonstrates low transparency as it lacks specific examples or personal anecdotes that would provide the audience with deeper insight into the context or inspiration behind the message. While the message is motivational and has broad appeal, it is still general and does not share Sanders's personal experiences that might have influenced this perspective. This combination of high passion and low transparency creates a balance of inspiration with a degree of ambiguity which clearly demonstrates fairytale authenticity.

13.2.2. Disembodied Authenticity

Disembodied authenticity (low passion, high transparency) was the second most frequently employed tactic (24.82%) and was typically seen in reposted content with no additional comments from Sanders. These reposts were generally related to others promoting Sanders or the CU football program in a positive light. This nuanced approach to self-promotion allows Sanders to maintain a strong presence while leveraging seemingly objective support to establish credibility [127].

An example of disembodied authenticity can be seen in Sanders's 6 April 2023 repost of Barstool Colorado's repost of Deion Sanders Jr. 's content. The original content was a video of a CU player with the text "Don't Black a Coach, Don't Blame a Teammate, Don't Blame Anyone…" Through the retweet, Sanders demonstrates low passion as the focus is on Barstool Colorado's agreement with his son's content with no additional comments from himself. The transparency was clear because the tagline "reposted" is prominently displayed at the top of the post, followed by the name of the original content creator. However, the post did not have any comment from Sanders and, therefore, presented no clear enthusiasm or intrinsic motivation.

13.2.3. Absolute Authenticity

Absolute authenticity (high passion, high transparency) was recorded for 93 posts (21.78% of coded content). The content coded as absolute authenticity demonstrated high enthusiasm and passion, often through expressing true thoughts, feelings, and experiences without reservations, including moments of joy, excitement, frustration, or possibly vulnerability. This content could present exclusive or unfiltered glimpses into Sanders's personal or professional life, including challenges and raw emotions. The use of emotional content with high transparency could help build the strongest emotional connections with his audience, creating trust as the audience may feel more closely connected through the content. This type of content may also align closely with Sanders's personal brand as being outspoken, charismatic, and honest, reinforcing his persona as someone who 'tells it like it is.' This content's blunt and transparent nature may also be more memorable for the audience. Although it is only about one-fifth of Sanders's content, these posts may help create an anchor for his overall digital presence, adding depth and credibility to his persona.

One of Sanders's X posts from 10 April 2023 shares a video of Sanders meeting the CU mascot, Ralphie the buffalo. The post is a retweet, originally posted by Folsom Frenzy Podcast on the same day with the text "COACH PRIME MEETS RALPHIE! "She doesn't have top teeth, she just has bottom teeth" Coach Prime: "I had an uncle like that".". The 19-second behind-the-scenes video shares Sanders in a personal experience filled with raw emotions, including using humor to demonstrate his personality and share personal thoughts on the experience, displaying transparency through his genuine reaction and candid moments to be himself and connect authentically with others. The use of capitalized text and exclamation points as well as his enthusiasm in video content demonstrate his high passion for connecting with the team and its history. Additionally, the use of humor adds a personal touch, showcasing his energy and excitement as he engages in the experience.

13.2.4. Fake Authenticity

Only 35 of Sanders's X posts (8.20% of coded content) were coded as fake authenticity, characterized by low passion and low transparency. The low occurrence of this category could suggest that Sanders tries to avoid posting content that could be considered insincere or forced to maintain credibility and trust with his audience. Because fake authenticity did have such low occurrence, the posts may represent instances when the content did not match Sanders's usual tone or style. Many of these posts were reposts or advertisements

that were pre-planned or staged, which are typically perceived as having less genuine emotion and are created by someone other than Sanders. Additionally, the low number of posts coded as fake authenticity demonstrates Sanders's typical use of other forms of communication, suggesting that Sanders is quick to recognize and avoid content that does not demonstrate his straightforward and energetic personal brand. Whatever the reason, the low occurrence indicates a deliberate and strategic approach to Sanders's social media presence, most likely to preserve the integrity of his personal brand and strengthen his connection with the audience and increase social media engagement.

Several of Sanders's posts demonstrate fake authenticity, with little to no enthusiasm or passion and little to no demonstration of the motivation for including this content posted on Sanders's X channel. One example is a repost on 5 May 2023, from the CU President, announcing that several members of the school's faculty will be given awards for excellence. Sanders does not include any comments, and there is no clear connection to him in the post outside of his relationship with the university. Another example of fake authenticity is also an original post for Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) posted on 14 June 2023, with an image of a KFC meal and the #ad in red on the image. The text reads "These new @kfc Original Recipe Chicken are HITTIN like @ShiloSanders #CoachPrime". The content, most likely created by the restaurant or a related agency, is generic and lacks personal enthusiasm or storytelling, coming across more like a promotion with little emotional connection to the product. The content does not include any unique insights or reasons why Sanders enjoys the product. Additionally, the #ad indicates it is a paid promotion in a way that feels obligatory rather than forthcoming. The lack of clarity concerning Sanders's relationship with KFC or his opinion of their food makes the content feel more transactional rather than authentic, demonstrating fake authenticity.

14. Discussion

14.1. Digital Charisma and Perceived Authenticity

The analysis of focus group transcripts using the [11] six-factor model of perceived authenticity revealed that Sanders's social media presence was widely considered authentic, though with significant nuances. A key finding was the emergence of digital charisma as the most prominent factor influencing perceptions of authenticity. This concept, defined as the consistent projection of a crafted persona that emotionally engages audiences through digital platforms, extends beyond traditional frameworks of authenticity. This aligns with Marwick and boyd's [128] argument that authenticity on social media is often tied to the performance of a consistent and engaging persona. Sanders's confident, motivational posts and charismatic tone exemplify this concept, allowing him to connect emotionally with his audience while maintaining a distinct persona.

This connection between digital charisma and audience perceptions directly addresses RQ1 (How do social media audiences perceive Sanders's authenticity through his X social media content?) by illustrating how Sanders's ability to project a consistent and emotionally resonant persona shapes his perceived authenticity. Furthermore, his use of visual storytelling—combining text with images or videos—enhances this perception by creating content that feels both engaging and genuine. These elements work together to foster trust and relatability among audiences, reinforcing their belief in Sanders's authenticity.

14.2. Accuracy, Transparency, and Skepticism

Accuracy emerged as a highly valued factor in Sanders's perceived authenticity. Participants appreciated his straightforward communication style and frequent references to personal beliefs, particularly his religious posts. However, some participants expressed skepticism about the curated nature of his content, questioning whether the high frequency

of posts reflected team-managed strategies rather than genuine self-expression. These concerns highlight the challenges public figures face in balancing transparency with the demands of maintaining an active digital presence.

Immediacy also plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Posts that appear spontaneous or emotionally charged signal sincerity and transparency, which enhance audiences' belief in Sanders's genuineness. However, skepticism arises when audiences perceive calculated efforts behind such posts, underscoring the tension between strategic self-presentation and authentic communication.

14.3. Legitimacy and Role Expectations

Interestingly, Sanders was perceived more as a social media influencer than a traditional coach. While this challenged audience expectations of legitimacy for a coach, it did not negatively affect his perceived authenticity. Instead, his influencer-like approach made his content relatable to a broader audience. This finding suggests that digital authenticity may rely more on digital charisma than on adherence to traditional role expectations [128]. For instance, while only 22% of Sanders's posts directly referenced football or coaching activities [15], his motivational and personal branding content resonated strongly with audiences.

Consistency emerged as another critical factor influencing perceptions of legitimacy and authenticity. Audiences are more likely to perceive Sanders as authentic when his posts reflect a stable commitment to his principles and policies across different contexts, including repeated themes, such as leadership, personal growth, and community engagement, which reinforces the perception that he stands by his convictions.

14.4. Proficiency and Relatability

The findings concerning proficiency revealed mixed perceptions. While some participants questioned whether Sanders's frequent posting detracted from his coaching responsibilities, others pointed to videos of him interacting with players as evidence of his respect and leadership within the team. This duality underscores the complexity of balancing professional roles while maintaining a personal brand in digital spaces.

Relatability also emerged as an important factor in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Moments where Sanders appears ordinary—such as sharing personal anecdotes or connecting with everyday people—counteract perceptions of calculated behavior or celebrity status, contributing positively to how audiences perceive Sanders as genuine.

14.5. Originality, Connectedness, and Integrity

Originality and connectedness were less significant factors in Sanders's perceived authenticity. While participants viewed his content as common within social media contexts, they acknowledged its uniqueness for a coach. Connectedness varied depending on individual preferences; for example, religious content resonated deeply with some but alienated others.

Integrity and intrinsic motivation were rated lowest among the factors, with discussions focusing on Sanders's possible goal of building his social media following for financial opportunities and celebrity status. However, participants noted that his consistency in tone and messaging contributed positively to perceptions of authenticity.

14.6. Factors Influencing Perceptions of Authenticity (RQ2)

The focus group findings from Study 1 connect directly to the six factors of authenticity as well as charisma, addressing RQ 2 (What factors do social media audiences use in considering Sanders's authenticity through his X social media content?). Among these factors, charisma emerged as the most dominant, with participants consistently highlighting Sanders's confident personality, expressive communication style, and engaging use of

humor and emojis. His natural charisma was perceived as central to his ability to emotionally connect with audiences, compensating for potential gaps in transparency or conventional authenticity norms.

Sanders's authenticity stems from a careful interplay of charisma with six factors of authenticity, with charisma and integrity standing out as key drivers. His use of motivational messaging, consistent themes, and selective transparency allows Sanders to balance relatability with professionalism, maintaining a digital persona that resonates with many audiences. These findings highlight how Sanders's strategic social media practices activate multiple dimensions of authenticity, enabling him to navigate the complexities of the digital space as a highly authentic public figure.

14.7. Fairytale Authenticity and Strategic Impression Management

The analysis of Sanders's X posts using Audrezet et al.'s [7] two-factor model of authenticity management revealed a deliberate strategy centered on fairytale authenticity—content high in passion but low in transparency (45.20%). This tactic, whether intentional or unintentional, allowed Sanders to project an enthusiastic and motivational persona while maintaining privacy about certain aspects of his life. These findings align with Goffman's [56] research on impression management, where public figures strategically balance "frontstage" performances with limited "backstage" access to maintain control over their image. Disembodied authenticity (24.82%), seen in reposted content promoting Sanders or CU football positively, further reinforced this strategy by leveraging external validation to bolster credibility.

While content demonstrating absolute authenticity was less frequent, it served as a critical touchpoint for emotional connection with audiences. These instances provided glimpses into Sanders's personal life or vulnerabilities—essential elements for fostering long-term fan loyalty [18,53].

Deion Sanders's social media strategy demonstrates a deliberate balance between personal branding and authentic self-presentation by employing fairytale authenticity—content high in passion but low in transparency (45.20%). This approach allows Sanders to project an enthusiastic and motivational persona that aligns with his public image as a charismatic leader while maintaining privacy about personal aspects of his life. In addressing RQ3 (How does Deion Sanders's social media balance personal branding with authentic self-presentation?), it becomes evident that Sanders uses motivational posts and celebratory content to craft a "frontstage" performance [56] that highlights his passion for coaching and his team's success, reinforcing his brand identity as a transformational figure. At the same time, he limits "backstage" access, ensuring control over how much of his personal life is revealed.

Additionally, disembodied authenticity (24.82%), seen in reposted content promoting Sanders or CU football, supports this balance by leveraging external validation to enhance credibility without requiring additional transparency. These posts serve as strategic tools for maintaining audience trust while aligning with Sanders's broader branding goals. By combining these elements, Sanders effectively addresses the tension between personal branding and authentic self-presentation, creating a persona that resonates with audiences while safeguarding aspects of his private life.

In addressing RQ4 (What specific elements of Sanders's social media posts most strongly influence users' perceptions of his authenticity?), the analysis reveals that specific elements of Sanders's social media, including language use, visual content, and interaction with followers, strongly shape users' perceptions of his authenticity. His motivational language plays a central role in projecting fairytale authenticity. Phrases such as "I believe" or "We're building something special" convey passion and relatability, fostering emotional

connections even when transparency is limited. This strategic use of language positions Sanders as an inspirational figure whose charisma compensates for the absence of deeper personal disclosures.

Visual content further reinforces this perception by showcasing high-energy moments, such as locker room celebrations or game-day highlights, which align with audience expectations for enthusiasm and leadership. These visuals create an engaging narrative that emphasizes Sanders's dynamic personality while allowing him to maintain control over how much personal information is shared. Occasionally, posts offer glimpses into Sanders's family life or moments of vulnerability, which serve as instances of absolute authenticity that may deepen emotional connections with followers.

Interactions with followers also emerge as critical elements influencing perceptions of authenticity. By replying to comments, reposting fan content, or directly acknowledging supporters, Sanders creates meaningful touchpoints that may help audiences feel valued and seen, strengthening perceptions of genuineness and fostering loyalty, even within the context of a highly curated social media presence.

14.8. Implications for Digital Authenticity

These findings highlight the evolving nature of digital authenticity in public figures' online personas. For Sanders, digital charisma plays a central role in shaping perceptions of authenticity, allowing him to maintain audience trust despite fewer notations of traditional markers of authenticity, like transparency or integrity. Sanders's ability to balance motivational content with selective glimpses into his personal life may reflect shifting constructions of authenticity influenced by platform dynamics and audience expectations. In this context, strategic impression management emerges as a vital skill for social media content creators navigating the complex demands of digital spaces where engagement and privacy ideally coexist seamlessly.

15. Conclusions

This research provides a comprehensive exploration of digital authenticity by integrating audience perceptions with a content analysis. The first phase revealed key factors—such as charisma, transparency, and connectedness—that audiences associate with authenticity in digital spaces. The second phase demonstrated how these factors manifest in Deion Sanders's social media strategy, highlighting his use of storytelling, direct engagement with followers, and consistent messaging to build an authentic digital persona. The thematic analysis of Deion Sanders's X posts and focus group discussions revealed a complex connection between audience expectations and content strategies. The findings show that authenticity is not merely a static tactic but a co-constructed phenomenon shaped by both the creator's actions and the audience's interpretations.

Sanders was largely considered authentic, influenced by perceived transparency and consistency. Interestingly, he was perceived as authentic despite departing from expected coaching norms. Surprisingly, the central theme in constructing perceived authenticity was Sanders's digital charisma, which appeared to compensate for any lack of other factors, suggesting that personality and personal brand are more significant in shaping perceptions of authenticity in digital spaces than any other single factor. Sanders primarily posted content demonstrating fairytale authenticity (high passion, low transparency), exemplifying his enthusiastic and motivational persona that created his digital charisma while maintaining some privacy.

The application of digital charisma in digital spaces creates a new avenue to explore how public figures, in this case coaches, gain and maintain attention, garner branding opportunities, and maintain relationships with digital audiences. Sanders's ability to enable

fans to technologically listen [93] to him, therefore creating a particular authentic and motivating impression to the public [56], may be a good foundation that other sports figures could seek to emulate.

This research is important in the context of the evolving nature of authenticity in digital spaces and crucial for public figures balancing multiple roles as athletes or coaches, influencers, advertisers, and relatable people. Sanders's ability to maintain perceived authenticity while breaking expected norms points to shifting constructions of authenticity based on platform and the essential role of digital charisma. The integration of these two studies offers valuable insights for practitioners managing digital personas, particularly in sports and entertainment. It suggests that aligning content strategies with audience perceptions can enhance authenticity and deepen connections with followers. Future research could further explore how these strategies evolve over time or across different platforms, broadening our understanding of authenticity in digital communication.

Sanders's social media content exemplifies the complex relationship in constructing and perceiving digital authenticity, where public figures must balance personal expression, professionalism, and audience expectations. As social media reshapes boundaries between public and private lives, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly important for content creators and researchers.

Deion Sanders once told a reporter, "I'm not a moment; I'm a monument", which encapsulates the findings of this research [126]. His dominant use of fairytale authenticity projects his Coach Prime persona, reflecting a strategy to leave a lasting impact as both coach and influencer. Sanders's approach serves as a landmark study in digital authenticity, challenging previous ideas and expectations of online presentation and providing valuable exploration of the negotiation of authenticity in mediated spaces.

16. Limitations and Future Research

While these findings are insightful, it is important to note the limitations inherent in this study's methodology. The use of convenience sampling, with an overrepresentation of college students (59% of participants), may have influenced the results, particularly given younger participants' familiarity with social media and influencer culture. Additionally, participants' prior identification as fans or non-fans of Sanders likely shaped their perceptions of his authenticity. Future research should employ probability sampling methods to validate these findings across more diverse populations and disentangle demographic influences on perceptions of digital authenticity.

This exploratory study focuses on Sanders as a single case study, limiting generalizability. The study examines content solely from Sanders's X channel, missing potential cross-platform differences, as it is the only platform where he creates content [120]. The research timeframe is restricted to his first year as CU head coach, lacking longitudinal perspective. Focus group participants may not fully represent all demographics or fan groups. The qualitative approach, while rich, lacks quantitative metrics. The research focuses on American college football, which may limit global applicability. Additionally, social media's rapid evolution could make findings less relevant over time, and self-reported data from focus groups may be subject to biases.

These limitations offer opportunities for future research. The unpredictable nature of college football (wins, losses, injuries, player changes) was not addressed but could influence perceived authenticity. Future studies might consider these factors in Sanders's authenticity strategies.

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