MULTI-COUNTRY

Star power: The role of individual athletes on sports fandom

Exploring the impact of high-profile athletes on team allegiance, consumer purchasing behavior, and brand engagement.

/Research Reality

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Foreword

"In today's dynamic sports and media landscape, individual athletes are not just representatives of their teams, they are influential brands in their own right. Their voices carry weight, especially when they speak out on social issues, and their platforms often rival those of the organizations they play for.

This report examines the growing impact of individual athletes on team fandom, consumer purchasing behavior, and brand engagement – with deep dives based on age and gender. For corporate partners, understanding how athlete influence shapes public perception and drives loyalty is more critical than ever.

As the line between personal brand and team identity continues to blur, this report offers timely insights into how athletes are reshaping expectations – and how forward-thinking partners can align with this shift to build more authentic, resonant connections with audiences."

Nicole Pike
Global Head of YouGov Sport

Read the report

Report methodology

Discover the power of the YouGov panel

The insights in this report are fueled by YouGov's consumer research panel, which has 29 million registered members from 55+ markets.

Every day, our members trust us with their data and opinions – enabling us to gain insights into behaviors and attitudes from people of all ages, backgrounds and beliefs.

Inclusion is essential for our members, our clients, and our mission.
We invest millions each year to ensure we can create truly nationally representative online samples and access hard-to-reach groups.

The Pew Research Center concluded that YouGov "consistently outperformed" other online competitor samples for accuracy.

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Read the US report »

Read the Great Britain report »

Read the Australia report »

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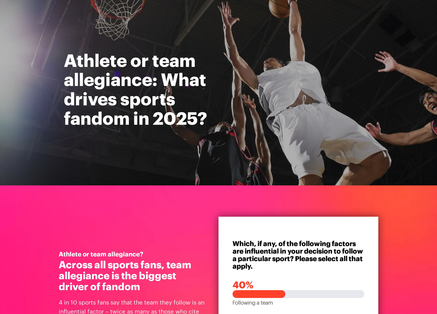


Athlete or team allegiance: What drives sports fandom in 2025?

Athlete or team allegiance?

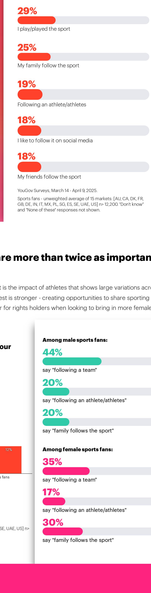
Across all sports fans, team allegiance is the biggest driver of fandom

4 in 10 sports fans say that the team they follow is an influential factor – twice as many as those who cite an athlete as their decision to follow a particular sport (19%).

Ensuring a sport is easily accessible to watch is key for 1 in 3 fans, ranking second as a key reason for following. For sports with a broadcast product behind a paywall, creating other channels where fans can freely consume some level of content is crucial for reaching new audiences.

Get in touch for more data

Which, if any, of the following factors are influential in your decision to follow a particular sport? Please select all that apply.



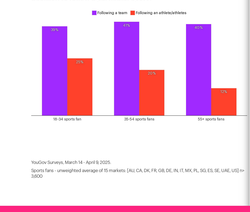
YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.
Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) (= 12,200 'Don't know" and 'None of these' responses not shown.

Athlete or team allegiance?

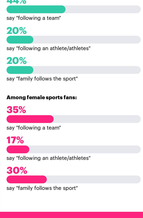
For younger fans, individual athletes are more than twice as important when it comes to following a sport

The importance of teams remains high for all age groups, however it is the impact of athletes that shows large variations across generations. For female sports fans, the role of family in driving interest is stronger - creating opportunities to share sporting moments with parents, partners, children and siblings is something to consider for rights holders when looking to bring in more female fans.

Which, if any, of the following factors are influential in your decision to follow a particular sport?



Among male sports fans:



Among female sports fans:

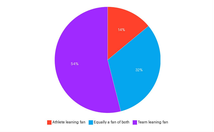
YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) (= 3,600

Athlete or team allegiance?

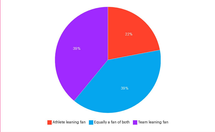
Athletes play a greater role in fan support in basketball compared to football/soccer, where teams are a bigger driver of fandom

Of the primarily individual sports, the team aspect of golf has a stronger appeal than tennis, with team fandom and rivalries developed through events like the Ryder Cup, as well as newer properties with a team-leaning focus such as LIV Golf and TGL. Motorsports, for example F1, with both a team and individual driver element, see the most even split of fandom with a slight preference for the individuals.

Football/soccer



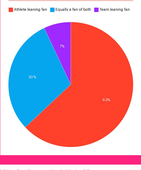
Basketball



Motorsports

Golf

Tennis



Question: For each of the following sports, are you a fan of the individual athletes, teams, or equally a fan of both? YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025. Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets: (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) Football fans n= 4,100, Basketball fans n= 1,900, Motorsports fans n= 1,700, Golf fans n= 650, Tennis fans n= 2,300

Athlete or team allegiance?

1 in 4 sports fans would start supporting a new team as well as their current team if their favorite athlete moved

Leveraging players' personal audiences can be a key route for sports teams to grow their fan bases, particularly internationally where fans may be more open to following an additional team.

1 in 10 sports fans said they would start supporting the new team instead of their current team, illustrating the deep rooted loyalty that fans show towards players they develop an affinity for.

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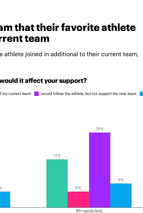
If your favorite athlete joined a different team in the same league, how would it affect your support?



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) (= 12,200 "Don't know" responses not shown.

Athlete or team allegiance?

Half of all young fans will support the new team that their favorite athlete joins - either alongside or in place of their current team

35% of the 18-34 group would start supporting the new team that their favorite athlete joined in additional to their current team, with a further 15% supporting the new team instead of their current team.

If your favorite athlete joined a different team in the same league, how would it affect your support?

Question: If your favorite athlete joined a different team in the same league, how would it affect your support? YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) (= 3,600 "Don't know" responses not shown.

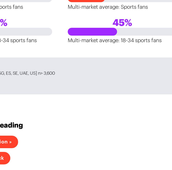
Athlete or team allegiance?

Sports fans from Australia are significantly more likely to start supporting a new team, with those in Germany least likely

The high percentage in Australia (31%) may be due to players in major domestic sports leagues (e.g., AFL, NRL) having fewer alternative leagues they could join and so a greater acceptance of switching to a rival team.

The strong team fan culture in Germany is reflected in the low score (15%), with a widely-held ethos that no individual is bigger than the club coming through in fan attitudes.

If your favorite athlete joined a different team in the same league, how would it affect your support?



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans in AU, GB, DE, IT, ES, and US (n= 700

Athlete or team allegiance?

3 in 10 sports fans have started following a new sport because of a specific athlete, showing the impact a star can have on amplifying a sport to a wider audience

With the growing consumption of sport through social media platforms and the ability to get content in front of those outside of owned channels, the opportunity exists for engaging athlete-led posts to capture new fans and bring them into the sport's ecosystem.

Have you ever started following a new sport, league, or team because of a specific athlete?

"Started following a **new sport** because of a specific athlete"

31%

Multi-market average: Sports fans

41%

Multi-market average: 18-34 sports fans

"Started following a **new league** because a specific athlete"

27%

Multi-market average: Sports fans

38%

Multi-market average: 18-34 sports fans

"Started following a **new team** because of a specific athlete"

34%

Multi-market average: Sports fans

45%

Multi-market average: 18-34 sports fans

YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets (AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US) (= 3,600

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Star power: Which athletes have the greatest appeal in 2025?

Star power

Ronaldo and Messi still dominate global fandom, with national heroes preferred across European and US markets

Australia, Singapore and the UAE are the only markets to not have any homegrown athletes in their top 3. Conversely, Denmark, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the US saw all places occupied by athletes from their own countries. Virat Kohli and Robert Lewandowski are the most dominant athletes in their home markets, both receiving over 50% of the share of favoritism.

Footballers account for 49% of the spots, making it by far the most represented sport – followed by F1 (6%), tennis (4%) and basketball (4%).

Favorite current male athletes by market:

	1st		2nd		3rd	
Australia	Lionel Messi	25%	Cristiano Ronaldo	19%	LeBron James	12%
Canada	Lionel Messi	18%	Cristiano Ronaldo	16%	Connor McDavid	11%
Denmark	Holger Rune	23%	Jonas Vingegaard	21%	Mathias Gidsel	20%
France	Antoine Dupont	29%	Kylian Mbappé	19%	Teddy Riner	12%
Great Britain	Cristiano Ronaldo	14%	Lionel Messi	14%	Lewis Hamilton	10%
Germany	Thomas Müller	14%	Jamal Musiala	10%	Joshua Kimmich	8%
India	Virat Kohli	54%	Lionel Messi	26%	Rohit Sharma	24%
Italy	Jannik Sinner	41%	Lewis Hamilton	12%	Charles Leclerc	9%
Mexico	Cristiano Ronaldo	32%	Lionel Messi	31%	Sergio Pérez	14%
Poland	Robert Lewandowski	52%	Bartosz Kurek	17%	Wojciech Szczęsny	14%
Singapore	Cristiano Ronaldo	27%	Lionel Messi	25%	Lewis Hamilton	11%
Spain	Carlos Alcaraz	26%	Fernando Alonso	21%	Rafael Nadal	21%
Sweden	Armand Duplantis	42%	Alexander Isak	9%	Lionel Messi	9%
United Arab Emirates	Cristiano Ronaldo	42%	Lionel Messi	32%	Virat Kohli	16%
United States	LeBron James	14%	Stephen Curry	10%	Patrick Mahomes	8%

Question: Who are your favorite current male athletes across any sport? Please name up to 3 athletes in the text boxes.
YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025. Sports fans - in AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US n> 200 (Among those who have at least 1 favorite male athlete). "Other" responses not shown. Indicates homegrown athlete.

Star power

Homegrown stars play a greater role in female sports fandom

All markets aside from the UAE have at least one homegrown star in their top 3. The lack of a current global superstar is reflected in Serena Williams being the most named globally despite her retirement in 2022. Iga Świątek is the most dominant athlete in her home market, across both female and male rankings, with a 74% share in Poland.

There is no single sport dominating the rankings, with tennis (27%) highest, followed by football (16%) and gymnastics (11%). Winter sports, such as skiing and biathlon are also well represented, along with athletics. It is not the sport they are playing that is crucial, but the ability of the athlete to create a meaningful connection with audiences – through their sporting prowess coupled with engaging personality.

Favorite current female athletes by market:

	1st		2nd		3rd	
Australia	Sam Kerr	23%	Serena Williams	19%	Simone Biles	10%
Canada	Serena Williams	26%	Marie-Philip Poulin	9%	Caitlin Clark	9%
Denmark	Clara Tauson	34%	Pernille Harder	22%	Caroline Wozniacki	9%
France	Lou Jeanmonnot	16%	Wendie Renard	10%	Clarisse Agbégnénou	9%
Great Britain	Emma Raducanu	14%	Serena Williams	13%	Keely Hodgkinson	11%
Germany	Franziska Preuß	24%	Malaika Mihambo	10%	Giulia Gwinn	8%
India	Smriti Mandhana	29%	PV Sindhu	22%	Sania Mirza	20%
Italy	Jasmine Paolini	29%	Federica Brignone	28%	Sofia Goggia	25%
Mexico	Serena Williams	12%	Simone Biles	10%	Alexa Moreno	8%
Poland	Iga Świątek	74%	Ewa Pajor	14%	Ewa Swoboda	13%
Singapore	Serena Williams	13%	Shanti Pereira	9%	Yeo Jia Min	7%
Spain	Alexia Putellas	31%	Aitana Bonmatí	25%	Carolina Marín	21%
Sweden	Ebba Andersson	21%	Jonna Sundling	20%	Frida Karlsson	20%
United Arab Emirates	Serena Williams	26%	Sania Mirza	11%	Simone Biles	11%
United States	Caitlin Clark	35%	Simone Biles	18%	Angel Reese	7%

Question: Who are your favorite current female athletes across any sport? Please name up to 3 athletes in the text boxes.
YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025. Sports fans in AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US n> 100 (Among those who have at least 1 favorite female athlete). "Other" responses not shown. Indicates homegrown athlete.

Star power

What's driving athlete appeal in 2025?

Almost two-thirds of sports fans have a favorite athlete due to their skill level (64%).

Beyond skill and style of play, 30% of sports fans value an athlete's off-field personality.

While not leading reasons for athlete fandom, 1 in 10 like athletes because they have a social media presence or talk about issues – highlighting the impact of everyday engagement and positive sentiment.

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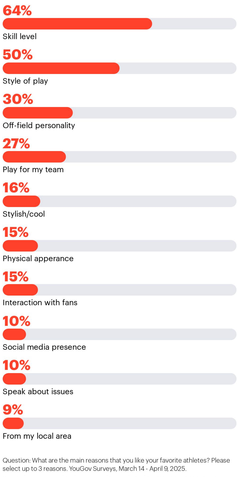


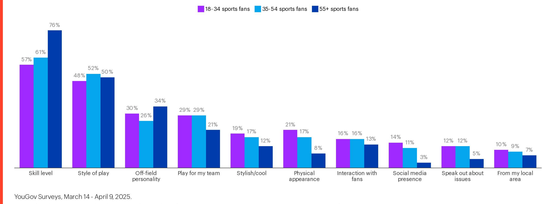
Question: What are the main reasons that you like your favorite athletes? Please select up to 3 reasons. YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 100 (Among those who have at least 1 favorite female athlete). "Don't know" and "Other" responses not shown.

The generation divide: What fuels athlete following among different age groups?

It is not just younger fans for whom an athlete's character is important, with 55+ sports fans rating off-field personality highest.

Other non-performance related attributes such as physical appearance, whether an athlete is perceived to be stylish/cool, and their social media presence rank higher for 18-34 sports fans, providing ways that young fans can idolise and imitate their sporting heroes.

What are the main reasons that you like your favourite athletes? Please select up to 3 reasons



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.
Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 850

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The role of social media: How sports fans engage online

The role of social media

The majority of sports fans follow their favorite teams and athletes on social media

This increases to 7 in 10 among sports fans aged 18-34.

More than 4 in 10 sports fans aged 55+ follow athletes, demonstrating the importance of social media for engaging all fan groups, tailoring the platforms and content to align with their online behaviors.

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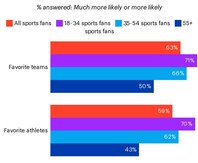
How likely, if at all, are you to follow your favorite teams and athletes on social media?



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.

Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 2,900. N/A - I don't have a favorite team/athlete, N/A - I don't use social media respondents excluded.

Which types of content do you enjoy seeing athletes posting on social media? Please select all that apply.

YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.

Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 11,100. "Don't know" and "None of these" responses not shown.

The role of social media

While game highlights are the most popular content type, fans also want off-pitch insight to develop personal connections

Interaction with other athletes are enjoyed by 1 in 4 sports fans, highlighting the opportunity to use this to bring in fans from different sports through collaborative content.

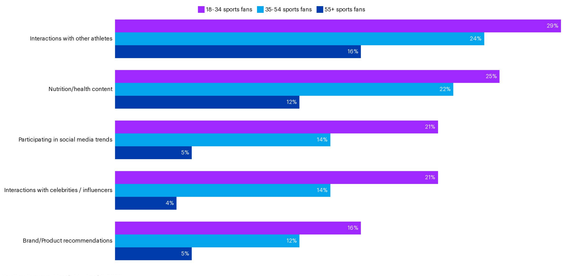
Brand/product recommendations and sponsored content are rated lowest, with fans being suspicious of corporate messages. Looking for ways to align these with more popular areas, such as nutrition/health content, will help them land as authentic and aligned with fans' interests.

Get in touch for more data

The role of social media

Generation spotlight: What each age group enjoys on social

Younger sports fans want to see a wider range of content from their favorite athletes, with interactions with celebrities/influencers and seeing their favorite athletes take part in the latest social media trends highly sought after. The 35-54 sports fans group are more similar to their younger counterparts than older fans in their content preferences, with the 55+ group having the least interest in off-field posts.



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.

Question: Which types of content do you enjoy seeing athletes posting on social media? Please select all that apply. Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 3,500. "Don't know" and "None of these" responses not shown. Top 5 options with highest differences shown

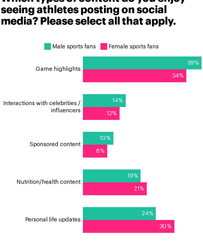
The role of social media

Gender spotlight: What men and women enjoy on social

Female sports fans are significantly more likely to enjoy personal life updates compared to their male counterparts. Men, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to enjoy game highlights and interactions with other celebrities and influencers.

Get in touch for more data

Which types of content do you enjoy seeing athletes posting on social media? Please select all that apply.



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9, 2025.

Sports fans by gender - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n> 5,100. "Don't know" and "None of these" responses not shown. Top 5 options with highest differences shown

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Purchase power: Assessing the impact of athlete endorsements

Purchase power

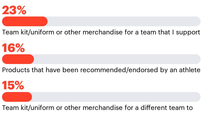
16% of sports fans have bought products that have been recommended/endorsed by an athlete

This demonstrates the influence and trust athletes have in the minds of fans – however, this can quickly be lost if it is not done in a genuine and authentic way.

Sports fans are also open to buying merchandise for teams they don't support - with sporting kit/uniform being a fashion choice and not solely a statement of allegiance.

Get in touch for more data

Which, if any, of the following types of merchandise have you ever purchased primarily because of a specific athlete? Please select all that apply



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.

Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets. [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 12,200. "Don't know" and "Not Applicable - I have never purchased merchandise because of a specific athlete" responses not shown.

How likely are you to buy a product due to an endorsement/ recommendation by an athlete?

YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.

Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 3,600

Purchase power

Younger sports fans are significantly more likely to be influenced by athlete endorsements

1 in 3 sports fans aged 35-54 are also likely to buy a product recommended by an athlete, whilst those 55+ are less likely to see them as a reliable source of purchasing advice.

Get in touch for more data

Purchase power

Which brands are top of mind for athlete endorsements?

Nike and adidas significantly lead the way for **unaided brand recall** of athlete endorsements, with sports apparel brands making up half of the top 12. The drinks category (energy and soft) is the next biggest contributor, with Gillette and Rolex the remaining brands - both having longstanding sports sponsorship credentials.

1. Nike, 59% Sports apparel brand	**2. adidas, 51%** Sports apparel brand	**3. Puma, 18%** Sports apparel brand
4. Under Armour, 5% Sports apparel brand	**5. Reebok, 4%** Sports apparel brand	**6. Red Bull, 4%** Energy drink brand
7. Coca-Cola, 4% Soft drink brand	**8. Gatorade, 3%** Energy drink brand	**9. Pepsi, 3%** Soft drink brand
10. Gillette, 2% Personal care brand	**11. New Balance, 2%** Sports apparel brand	**12. Rolex, 2%** Luxury watch brand

Question: Which brands first come to mind when you think about athlete endorsements/recommendations? Please name up to 3 brands in the text boxes below. YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025. Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 5,000 (Among those who have recall at least 1 athlete endorsed/recommended brand). "Other" responses not shown.

Purchase power

Generation spotlight: Puma and Red Bull have greater recall among younger sports fans compared to other generations

Nike and adidas are the most recalled brands (unaided) among sports fans across all age groups, with the top 10 brands featured being largely consistent.

	18-34 sports fans	35-54 sports fans	55+ sports fans
1	Nike 62%	Nike 61%	Nike 54%
2	adidas 54%	adidas 51%	adidas 47%
3	Puma 24%	Puma 18%	Puma 13%
4	Red Bull 5%	Under Armour 6%	Coca-Cola 4%
5	Under Armour 4%	Reebok 5%	Under Armour 4%
6	Gatorade 4%	Pepsi 4%	Reebok 3%
7	Pepsi 3%	Coca Cola 4%	Red Bull 3%
8	Coca Cola 3%	Gatorade 3%	Gatorade 2%
9	Reebok 3%	Red Bull 3%	Rolex 2%
10	New Balance 2%	Gillette 2%	Gillette 2%

Question: Which brands first come to mind when you think about athlete endorsements/recommendations? Please name up to 3 brands in the text boxes below. YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.

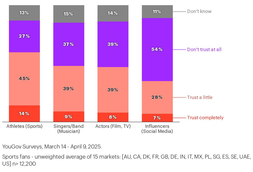
Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 1,600 (Among those who have recall at least 1 athlete endorsed/recommended brand). "Other" responses not shown.

Purchase power

Sports fans are significantly more likely to trust athletes than celebrities in other fields for product recommendations

59% of sports fans trust athletes a little or completely, compared to 48% who trust singers, 47% who trust actors, and 35% who trust influencers.

How much do you trust endorsements/recommendations from individuals in the following industries?



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.

Sports fans - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 12,200

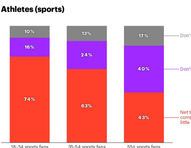
Purchase power

Athletes are most trusted by fans of all age groups, with younger groups being more open to influencer endorsements

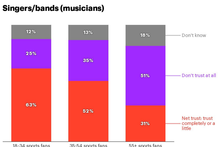
Almost 3 in 4 sports fans aged 18-34 trust athletes a little or a lot for endorsements/recommendations. Recommendations from influencers are trusted by the majority of sports fans aged 18-34, while only 14% of those aged 55+ feel the same.

How much do you trust endorsements/recommendations from:

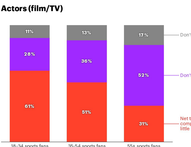
Athletes (sports)



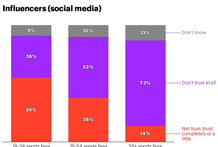
Singers/bands (musicians)



Actors (film/TV)



Influencers (social media)



YouGov Surveys, March 14 - April 9 2025.

Sports fans by age - unweighted average of 15 markets: [AU, CA, DK, FR, GB, DE, IN, IT, MX, PL, SG, ES, SE, UAE, US] n= 3,600

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Key takeaways

Player power:

3 in 10 sports fans have started following a new sport because of a specific athlete, showing the impact a star can have on amplifying an entire sport to a wider audience.

Team appeal:

Athletes play a greater role in fan support in basketball compared to football/soccer, where teams are a bigger driver of fandom. Of the primarily individual sports, the team aspect of golf has a stronger appeal than tennis.

Big hitters:

Ronaldo and Messi still dominate global fandom of male sports stars, whereas amongst female athletes we see a greater role of homegrown heroes.

Personality play:

30% of sports fans value athletes due to their off-field personality, increasing to 34% among those aged 55+. To maximize fan appeal, an athlete's role extends beyond performing on the pitch.

What the fans want:

Fans want off-pitch insight to supplement game highlights on social media. Interactions with other athletes are popular, providing a way to cross-promote and reach new audiences.

Scoring influence:

Sports fans are more likely to trust athletes than celebrities in other fields for product recommendations, with 16% having bought products endorsed by an athlete.

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Report methodology

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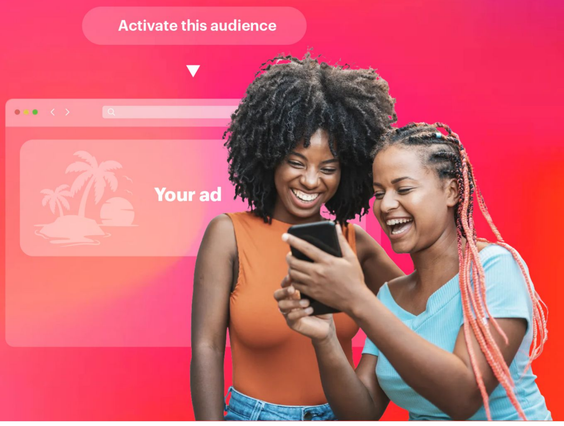

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Report methodology

The insights in this report have been sourced via YouGov Surveys – providing rapid answers from the right audience.

The multi-region survey was conducted from March 18 - April 9, 2025, with 16,619 respondents in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, the UAE, and the US.

The target group "Sports fans" refers to respondents who answered extremely interested, somewhat interested, or a little bit interested to the question: "How interested, if at all, would you say you are in sports?"

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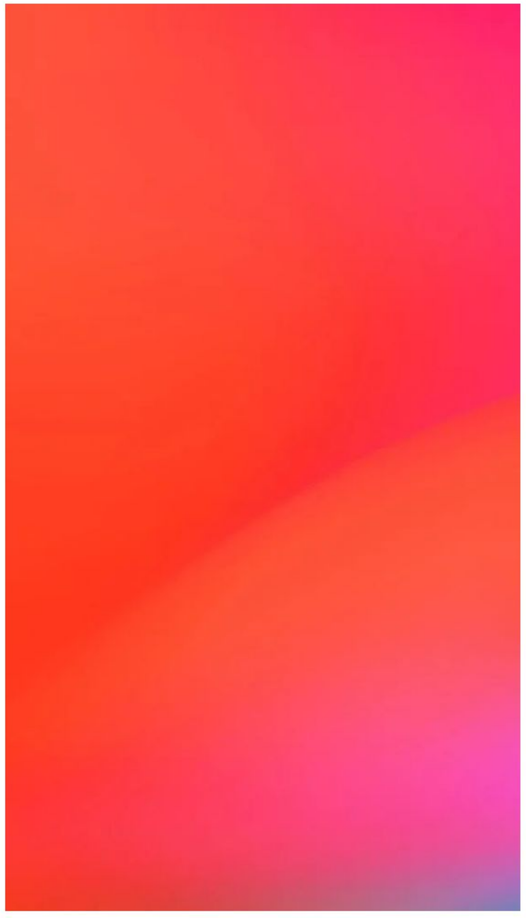

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