



Developing a Culturally Grounded Ethical Behavior Framework for Olympic Athletes on Social Media: Insights from Islamic Ethics and Delphi Consensus

Vahid. Tork Malek¹, Reza. Saboonchi^{2*}, Abbas. Bagheri³

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sport Management, Bo.C., Islamic Azad University, Borujerd, Iran

² Department of Sport Management, Bo.C., Islamic Azad University, Borujerd, Iran

³ Department of Physical Educational, Farhangian University, P.O. Box 14665-889, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: r.saboonchi@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop and achieve expert consensus on a culturally grounded ethical behavior framework for Olympic athletes on social media by integrating contemporary sport and digital ethics with principles derived from Islamic ethics. This exploratory qualitative study was conducted in Tehran, Iran, using a sequential qualitative–Delphi design. Twenty-eight experts in sport ethics, Olympic sport, sport management, Islamic ethics, communication, media studies, athlete education, and related fields were selected through purposive sampling. Data were initially collected using semi-structured interviews focused on ethical responsibilities, digital conduct, cultural expectations, and Islamic moral principles relevant to Olympic athletes' social media use. Interview data were analyzed through conventional qualitative content analysis using an inductive coding process. The resulting categories and behavioral indicators were subsequently converted into Delphi questionnaires and evaluated across two rounds in terms of relevance, cultural appropriateness, clarity, and practical applicability. Consensus was assessed using measures of central tendency, dispersion, percentage agreement, and stability across rounds. The final framework comprised ten dimensions: truthfulness and informational integrity, respect for human dignity, privacy and confidentiality, self-restraint and emotional regulation, responsibility and accountability, social role-model responsibility, Islamic moral conduct, cultural and national representation, commercial and professional ethics, and digital citizenship and platform responsibility. In the second Delphi round, respect for human dignity, self-restraint and emotional regulation, and Islamic moral conduct achieved 100.00% expert agreement. Truthfulness and informational integrity, responsibility and accountability, and digital citizenship and platform responsibility each reached 96.43% agreement. Privacy and confidentiality, social role-model responsibility, and cultural and national representation each reached 92.86%, while commercial and professional ethics reached 89.29%. Median ratings were 5.00 for all dimensions except commercial and professional ethics, which obtained a median of 4.00. The findings support a multidimensional ethical framework in which Islamic moral principles, digital responsibilities, professional conduct, and social role-model obligations jointly shape appropriate social media behavior among Olympic athletes.

Keywords: Olympic athletes; social media; ethical behavior; Islamic ethics; Delphi method; digital citizenship; professional ethics; athlete conduct

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the relationship between athletes, sport organizations, sponsors, fans, journalists, and wider society. Olympic and elite athletes no longer communicate with the public primarily through traditional media institutions; instead, they increasingly maintain direct and continuous contact with audiences through digital platforms that allow immediate publication of personal opinions, images, commercial messages, reactions to public events, and interactions with followers. This transformation has provided athletes with unprecedented opportunities to construct their public identities, communicate personal values, promote professional achievements, attract sponsorship, and participate in social and cultural conversations. At the same time, however, the reduced distance between athletes and audiences has created a complex ethical environment in which individual posts can generate reputational, organizational, commercial, cultural, and social consequences within a very short period. The behavior of prominent athletes in cyberspace therefore cannot be regarded solely as private communication, particularly when athletes occupy highly visible symbolic positions and their digital activities may be interpreted as reflections of professional identity, sporting values, team affiliation, or national representation (1-3).

Social media has also changed the economic and symbolic value attached to athletes. The digital visibility of athletes allows sporting success to be converted into influence that extends well beyond competition itself. Athletes can now function simultaneously as competitors, celebrities, content producers, brand ambassadors, opinion leaders, and social media influencers. This development has intensified the importance of personal branding and created new forms of economic value based on audience size, engagement, perceived authenticity, and the ability to influence consumer attitudes. Recent research has demonstrated that brand sponsorship and social media contribute significantly to the reconfiguration of athlete value, because an athlete's market position increasingly depends not only on athletic performance but also on digital visibility, public image, and commercial communicative capacity (4). Similarly, research on athletes as social media influencers has shown that the type of content athletes

publish can shape audience perceptions and influence how followers evaluate their credibility, attractiveness, professional identity, and endorsement activities (5). Such developments make digital conduct an increasingly important component of professional sport ethics because the boundaries among personal communication, commercial promotion, public representation, and professional responsibility have become progressively less distinct.

The commercialization of athletes' online identities raises particular ethical questions regarding transparency, authenticity, conflicts of interest, and responsible influence. Social media permits athletes to endorse products and services in a manner that may appear more personal and credible than conventional advertising. The persuasive effectiveness of such communication is partly dependent on the audience's perception that the athlete's message reflects a genuine personal position rather than an exclusively commercial transaction. Nichols and Shapiro emphasized the importance of authenticity in celebrity athlete endorsement messages, indicating that the perceived genuineness of athlete communication plays an important role in responses to social media endorsements (6). This creates an ethical tension because athletes may derive financial benefits from maintaining an image of personal authenticity while simultaneously engaging in paid promotional activity. Consequently, ethical social media behavior requires more than compliance with advertising regulations. It also requires transparency concerning sponsorship relationships, avoidance of deceptive representations, responsible selection of products and services for endorsement, and awareness of the potential influence of promotional content on younger or more impressionable audiences. These concerns are particularly relevant for Olympic athletes, whose status is often connected to ideals of excellence, fair play, discipline, national representation, and social role-modeling.

Beyond commercial considerations, social media creates substantial challenges for athlete welfare and interpersonal ethics. Digital communication exposes athletes to continuous public evaluation, criticism, harassment, invasive commentary, and expectations of accessibility. Athletes may experience pressure to respond to controversy immediately, defend themselves publicly, maintain engagement with followers, and manage competing

expectations from sponsors, sport organizations, teammates, fans, and the broader public. Kavanagh, Litchfield, and Osborne have highlighted the relationship between social media and athlete welfare, demonstrating that social media should not be treated simply as a communication tool because its use intersects with vulnerability, exposure, interpersonal harm, and the broader well-being of athletes (2). The ethical dimensions of this environment are therefore reciprocal. Athletes may themselves become targets of harmful online conduct, but they are also responsible for ensuring that their own responses do not contribute to humiliation, aggression, discrimination, harassment, misinformation, or escalation of conflict. Ethical social media behavior consequently involves both protection of athlete welfare and responsible management of the athlete's influence over others.

This issue becomes more significant when the athlete's social position is considered. Prominent and Olympic athletes often serve as visible reference figures whose behavior may influence fans, aspiring athletes, adolescents, and members of the wider community. Ethical conduct in sport has traditionally included principles such as fairness, respect, responsibility, integrity, self-control, and adherence to accepted norms of competition. In digital environments, however, these principles must be translated into behaviors that apply to communication, content production, privacy, criticism, endorsement, representation, and interaction. Research on professional ethics among athletes has emphasized the need to conceptualize ethical behavior systematically rather than reducing it to compliance with formal rules (7). A professional ethics model for athletes must therefore address both the moral foundations of behavior and the situations in which these principles are applied. Social media represents one of the most significant contemporary contexts in which this translation from ethical principle to practical behavior is required.

Ethical sensitivity is particularly important in this regard. Athletes regularly encounter situations in which legal permissibility, organizational policy, personal preference, and ethical responsibility do not necessarily produce the same answer. Decisions about whether to criticize an opponent, publish private information, respond aggressively to provocation, promote a controversial product, circulate unverified information, or comment on culturally sensitive

issues frequently require moral judgment rather than simple rule compliance. Research examining ethical sensitivity among athletes has shown meaningful associations between ethical sensitivity and attitudes toward ethically problematic sport behaviors, suggesting that the capacity to recognize the moral significance of a situation is an important component of athlete conduct (8). Ethical behavior in social media environments therefore depends partly on an athlete's ability to identify potential harm, recognize competing obligations, anticipate consequences, and evaluate whether apparently ordinary digital actions may violate principles of fairness, respect, honesty, or responsibility.

The relevance of self-regulation is equally important. Social media communication frequently occurs under conditions of immediacy, emotional intensity, and public scrutiny. Athletes may post shortly after defeat, controversial officiating decisions, interpersonal disputes, criticism from spectators, or intense media attention. Under such conditions, the ability to regulate emotional reactions and delay impulsive responses can become an ethical competency. Prosocial conduct and conscious awareness among athletes are relevant to this process because ethically appropriate behavior is often dependent on the capacity to recognize one's internal reactions while remaining attentive to the consequences of behavior for others. Research among university athletes has suggested a meaningful relationship among prosocial behavior, conscious awareness, and athlete identity (9). This perspective is especially relevant to social media, where impulsive behavior may rapidly become permanent, reproducible, and widely distributed. Ethical guidance for athletes should therefore address not only what athletes should or should not communicate but also the psychological and behavioral processes through which responsible communication can be maintained during emotionally demanding situations.

Athlete identity further complicates the relationship between personal freedom and public responsibility. Elite athletes often experience overlapping identities as private individuals, public figures, representatives of sport organizations, members of national teams, commercial partners, and cultural symbols. The boundaries between these roles are difficult to maintain online because content produced from a personal account may nevertheless be interpreted through the athlete's professional identity.

Research on college athletes and social media has similarly demonstrated that contemporary digital platforms have expanded athletes' capacity to capitalize on their name, image, and likeness while simultaneously increasing the importance of strategic identity management (1). For Olympic athletes, this complexity may be even more pronounced because participation in the Olympic context often enhances international visibility and symbolic association with national and sporting values. Consequently, an ethical framework for Olympic athletes must recognize that digital communication can rarely be divided neatly into purely private and purely professional spheres.

The cultural context in which ethical expectations are interpreted is also essential. Ethical frameworks that are developed exclusively from generalized professional standards may fail to reflect the moral language, cultural expectations, and value systems through which athletes and audiences interpret acceptable conduct. This issue is particularly important in Iran, where the public behavior of prominent athletes may be evaluated simultaneously through professional sport norms, national expectations, social customs, and Islamic ethical principles. Research concerning Iranian elite female athletes has demonstrated that media representation is experienced within a distinctive sociocultural environment and may create barriers and consequences that cannot be fully understood without considering gendered, cultural, and social expectations (10). Although the challenges experienced by female athletes represent a specific dimension of media engagement, the broader implication is that athlete communication and representation are culturally embedded phenomena. Ethical standards concerning dignity, privacy, modesty, representation, criticism, and public responsibility may therefore require contextual interpretation rather than direct transplantation of models developed in substantially different cultural environments.

Islamic ethics provides a potentially valuable normative foundation for such contextualization. Principles such as truthfulness, justice, trustworthiness, dignity, self-restraint, avoidance of harmful speech, responsibility toward others, and accountability for one's actions are directly relevant to contemporary forms of digital communication. Within an Islamic ethical perspective, communication is not evaluated only according to whether the speaker possesses the formal

freedom to communicate; it is also evaluated according to intention, truthfulness, fairness, respect for dignity, potential harm, and responsibility for consequences. These principles can provide a culturally meaningful basis for translating general sport ethics into specific behavioral expectations for athletes' online conduct. For example, truthfulness may be operationalized through verification of information and avoidance of deceptive promotion; trustworthiness may include protection of confidential team or personal information; preservation of dignity may prohibit humiliation and degrading commentary; and self-restraint may require athletes to avoid impulsive responses during conflict. In this sense, Islamic ethics can function not merely as a separate religious dimension within an ethical framework but as a normative foundation that informs multiple areas of digital conduct.

The importance of culturally congruent ethical structures is further supported by the increasing recognition that psychological and behavioral functioning is shaped by meaning systems, social relationships, and perceived support. Although not directly focused on social media ethics, research on the role of perceived social support among athletes demonstrates that athletes' psychological experiences are embedded within interpersonal and social environments rather than functioning in isolation (11). Similarly, interventions focused on meaning, resilience, affect, and perceived support illustrate the broader importance of values and meaning-making processes in adaptive functioning (12). These insights are relevant to ethical behavior because ethical self-regulation is more likely to be sustainable when behavioral standards are connected to meaningful personal and cultural values rather than experienced solely as external restrictions. A culturally grounded framework can therefore provide athletes with principles that are both normatively coherent and psychologically interpretable within their social environment.

Existing Iranian scholarship has begun to address these concerns directly. Poursoltani Zarandi and Damavandi Jegal proposed a model for managing the ethical behavior of prominent athletes in cyberspace, indicating growing scholarly recognition that the digital conduct of high-profile athletes requires systematic governance and ethical guidance (3). This line of inquiry is important because prominent

athletes encounter ethical risks that differ in scope from those of ordinary social media users. Their communications may affect sport organizations, sponsors, public discourse, fan behavior, national image, and the reputations of other athletes. However, management-oriented models alone may not fully address the normative foundations through which desirable and undesirable conduct should be defined. There remains a need to identify the specific ethical principles that should structure athlete behavior, the behavioral manifestations of these principles in digital settings, and the degree to which experts agree that such principles are culturally appropriate and practically applicable.

At the same time, international research on social media, athlete branding, welfare, endorsements, and digital identity has expanded considerably, yet these research streams often remain fragmented. Studies of athlete marketing focus on sponsorship, authenticity, and consumer perceptions (4-6), while research on athlete welfare emphasizes exposure and psychosocial consequences (2). Other scholarship addresses identity, digital opportunities, and the transformation of athletes into independent media actors (1). Research on ethical sensitivity and professional ethics emphasizes moral judgment and normative responsibility (7, 8), while work on prosocial behavior highlights the relevance of awareness, identity, and socially constructive conduct (9). Taken together, these studies indicate the need for an integrative framework capable of connecting ethical values, psychological self-regulation, professional conduct, commercial behavior, cultural representation, and digital citizenship.

For Olympic athletes, such integration is especially necessary. The Olympic athlete operates within a highly visible environment in which sporting excellence is intertwined with symbolic expectations regarding character, fairness, discipline, respect, and representation. Social media intensifies this visibility by making communication immediate and global while weakening traditional editorial filters that previously mediated athlete statements. Consequently, ethical mistakes may spread rapidly, while constructive behavior may likewise generate broad positive influence. A comprehensive framework should therefore identify not only prohibited behaviors but also positive ethical responsibilities, including truthful communication, protection of dignity, responsible audience engagement,

culturally sensitive representation, transparent commercial conduct, constructive role-modeling, and accountability when mistakes occur. Furthermore, because ethical expectations must be sufficiently clear to inform education and governance, the framework should be developed through a transparent consensus process involving experts from sport, ethics, culture, media, and related fields.

The Delphi method is particularly appropriate for this purpose because the ethical use of social media by Olympic athletes is a multidimensional and emerging problem for which standardized criteria remain underdeveloped. Expert consensus can help distinguish broadly supported ethical principles from individually preferred norms and can clarify how culturally specific values should be translated into observable behaviors. By integrating qualitative exploration with iterative expert evaluation, it becomes possible to develop a framework that is empirically grounded in expert experience while also being conceptually coherent and culturally responsive. Such an approach can contribute to athlete education, sport organization policy, media training, ethical governance, and prevention of harmful digital behavior. It can also provide a foundation for future measurement instruments and intervention programs designed to strengthen ethical decision-making among athletes.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to develop and achieve expert consensus on a culturally grounded ethical behavior framework for Olympic athletes on social media by integrating contemporary sport and digital ethics with principles derived from Islamic ethics.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design followed by a Delphi consensus process to develop a culturally grounded framework for the ethical behavior of Olympic athletes on social media, with particular emphasis on principles derived from Islamic ethics and the sociocultural context of Iran. The study was conducted in Tehran, Iran, and was designed in sequential phases so that the conceptual components identified through qualitative inquiry could subsequently be evaluated, refined, and prioritized through systematic expert consensus. The target

population consisted of individuals with professional or scholarly expertise in sport ethics, Olympic sport, sport management, sport sociology, Islamic ethics, communication and media studies, social media governance, and athlete education. A total of 28 experts participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their capacity to provide theoretically and practically relevant information concerning ethical conduct among elite athletes in digital environments. To ensure that the framework incorporated both normative and applied perspectives, the sample included university faculty members in sport sciences and ethics-related disciplines, sport managers and policymakers, individuals with experience in Olympic and national sport organizations, experts in Islamic ethics and cultural studies, media and communication specialists, and professionals familiar with athlete behavior and social media management. Eligibility criteria included holding at least a master's degree in a relevant academic field or possessing substantial professional experience in elite or Olympic sport, having a minimum of five years of relevant academic, managerial, professional, or research experience, demonstrating familiarity with ethical issues associated with athletes' public and online behavior, and willingness to participate throughout the required stage of the research. Particular attention was given to including participants who could interpret the interaction between universal principles of sport ethics and culturally specific Islamic moral values. Individuals who did not have sufficient experience related to elite sport, ethics, or social media, as well as participants who were unable to complete the required research procedures, were excluded. Recruitment continued until adequate conceptual coverage of the phenomenon had been achieved and the research team determined that additional perspectives were unlikely to result in substantial modification of the emerging conceptual framework. The Delphi phase was conducted using members of the expert group who possessed sufficient familiarity with the conceptual domains identified in the qualitative phase and were able to evaluate the relevance, clarity, cultural appropriateness, and practical applicability of the proposed dimensions and indicators. Before participation, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to all experts, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of individual

responses was maintained throughout data collection and analysis.

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide and successive Delphi questionnaires. The semi-structured interview guide was developed following a review of the conceptual literature on sport ethics, Olympic values, athlete conduct, social media ethics, professional responsibility, Islamic moral principles, digital communication, public representation, and culturally appropriate behavior in elite sport. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to describe the ethical responsibilities of Olympic athletes when producing, sharing, endorsing, commenting on, or responding to social media content. Particular attention was given to issues such as truthfulness, respect for human dignity, privacy, modesty, responsibility for public influence, avoidance of humiliation and discrimination, management of conflicts and criticism, representation of national and cultural values, commercial endorsements, protection of confidential information, interactions with fans and competitors, and the consequences of inappropriate digital behavior. Participants were also asked to identify Islamic ethical principles that could inform athletes' conduct in online environments, including honesty, justice, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, preservation of dignity, avoidance of slander and harmful speech, self-restraint, accountability, and consideration of the individual and social consequences of one's actions. Interviews were conducted individually and continued through probing questions whenever clarification or elaboration was necessary. The interview process was sufficiently flexible to allow new concepts to emerge while maintaining consistency around the major research objectives. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also prepared to document contextual observations, interpretive points, and emerging analytical ideas. Following qualitative analysis, the preliminary dimensions, components, and behavioral indicators identified from the interviews were converted into a structured Delphi questionnaire. Each proposed item was presented to the expert panel for assessment in terms of its relevance to ethical social media behavior among Olympic athletes,

consistency with Islamic ethical principles, cultural appropriateness within Iranian society, conceptual clarity, and practical applicability. Experts were also provided with opportunities to suggest revisions, combine conceptually overlapping indicators, identify missing elements, and recommend deletion of items considered redundant or insufficiently relevant. Feedback obtained during each Delphi round was used to revise the framework before redistribution in the subsequent round. The Delphi process continued until an acceptable level of stability and consensus was achieved regarding the principal dimensions and indicators of the framework. Content validity of the emerging framework was strengthened through repeated expert evaluation, comparison of overlapping conceptual interpretations, revision of ambiguous statements, and retention of components that received adequate expert agreement. Credibility of the qualitative phase was further supported by prolonged engagement with the data, comparison of perspectives across participants with different areas of expertise, member-oriented clarification during interviews, and systematic documentation of coding and conceptual development.

2.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using conventional qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach. Analysis began concurrently with data collection to allow emerging concepts to inform subsequent interviews and facilitate deeper exploration of theoretically important issues. Each transcript was read several times to obtain an overall understanding of the participant's perspective. Meaning units related to ethical social media behavior, athlete responsibilities, cultural expectations, Islamic ethical principles, digital risks, and desirable behavioral standards were then identified and condensed without altering their underlying meaning. Initial codes were generated from these meaning units and continuously compared across interviews to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. Codes expressing conceptually similar ideas were grouped into subcategories, and related subcategories were progressively organized into broader categories and overarching dimensions. Particular attention was paid to distinguishing general principles of ethical behavior from specific behavioral manifestations in social media

environments and to identifying areas in which Islamic moral principles provided culturally distinctive interpretations of athlete responsibility. Constant comparison was used throughout the analytical process to refine category boundaries, reduce conceptual redundancy, and ensure that the final dimensions were internally coherent and sufficiently differentiated from one another. The research team repeatedly reviewed the relationship between raw data, codes, subcategories, and higher-order dimensions to preserve traceability between participants' accounts and the emerging framework. In the Delphi phase, descriptive statistics were used to summarize expert ratings for each proposed dimension, component, and behavioral indicator. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were examined across successive rounds, and the level of expert agreement was evaluated to determine whether individual items should be accepted, revised, reconsidered, or removed. Items demonstrating consistently high relevance and agreement were retained, whereas items with insufficient agreement or substantial conceptual ambiguity were revised according to experts' qualitative comments and presented again when necessary. Changes in expert ratings between successive rounds were also examined to determine the stability of consensus. Qualitative comments submitted through the Delphi questionnaires were subjected to focused content analysis and were used to refine terminology, eliminate duplication, clarify culturally sensitive concepts, and improve the operational wording of behavioral indicators. The Delphi procedure was concluded when expert judgments demonstrated sufficient convergence and additional rounds were unlikely to produce meaningful conceptual changes. The final framework was constructed by integrating the inductively derived qualitative categories with the dimensions and indicators confirmed through the expert consensus process, thereby producing a culturally grounded model that reflected both contemporary ethical challenges associated with Olympic athletes' social media use and the normative principles of Islamic ethics.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 28 experts participated in the study. The participants represented a multidisciplinary group with academic, managerial, ethical, cultural, and sport-related expertise relevant to the development of a culturally

grounded ethical behavior framework for Olympic athletes' social media use. Of the 28 participants, 19 were men and 9 were women. The mean age of the participants was 46.71 years, with ages ranging from 34 to 63 years. In terms of academic qualifications, 20 participants held doctoral degrees, 6 held master's degrees, and 2 possessed professional postgraduate qualifications accompanied by extensive executive or sport-related experience. With respect to professional background, 7 participants were university faculty members in sport management, sport sociology, or sport psychology; 5 were experts in Islamic ethics, Islamic philosophy, or cultural studies; 5 were senior managers or policymakers working in Olympic, national sport, or elite sport organizations; 4 were specialists in

communication, media, or social media; 4 had professional backgrounds in athlete education, coaching, or elite sport; and 3 were specialists in sport ethics or sport law. Participants had between 7 and 32 years of relevant professional experience, with a mean professional experience of 17.64 years. Eleven participants had direct experience working with Olympic or national-level athletes, while 17 had professional or academic involvement with ethical, cultural, media, or governance issues relevant to elite sport. The diversity of the expert panel was deliberately maintained in order to capture both the normative dimensions of Islamic ethics and the operational challenges associated with athlete behavior in contemporary digital environments.

Table 1

Qualitative Categories and Subcategories Identified in the Initial Content Analysis

Main category	Subcategory	Illustrative meaning of the subcategory	Number of coded references
Truthfulness and informational integrity	Accuracy of shared information	Avoiding publication or redistribution of false, manipulated, or unverified information	41
Truthfulness and informational integrity	Transparency in endorsements	Clearly distinguishing personal opinion, sponsorship, and commercial promotion	33
Truthfulness and informational integrity	Avoidance of deceptive self-presentation	Refraining from intentional exaggeration, misrepresentation, or fabrication of achievement or lifestyle	27
Respect for human dignity	Respectful interaction	Maintaining respectful communication with competitors, fans, officials, journalists, and the public	44
Respect for human dignity	Avoidance of humiliation and ridicule	Avoiding mocking, insulting, degrading, or publicly shaming others	38
Respect for human dignity	Non-discrimination	Avoiding discriminatory language based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, or social identity	31
Privacy and confidentiality	Protection of personal privacy	Avoiding unnecessary disclosure of private information concerning self and others	36
Privacy and confidentiality	Protection of team and organizational information	Not disclosing confidential training, medical, tactical, or organizational information	29
Self-restraint and emotional regulation	Control during conflict	Avoiding impulsive online responses during anger, criticism, or controversy	46
Self-restraint and emotional regulation	Deliberation before posting	Evaluating the potential consequences of content before publishing or sharing it	40
Responsibility and accountability	Acceptance of consequences	Recognizing personal responsibility for the social consequences of online behavior	43
Responsibility and accountability	Correction and apology	Correcting misinformation and acknowledging harmful or inappropriate communication	32
Social role-model responsibility	Awareness of public influence	Recognizing the influence of Olympic athletes on youth, fans, and wider society	47
Social role-model responsibility	Promotion of constructive values	Using social media to reinforce fair play, solidarity, respect, health, and socially beneficial conduct	39
Islamic moral conduct	Preservation of dignity and modesty	Observing culturally appropriate boundaries in personal representation and communication	35
Islamic moral conduct	Avoidance of backbiting, slander, and harmful speech	Refraining from defamatory, malicious, or reputation-damaging discourse	42
Islamic moral conduct	Justice and fairness	Avoiding biased accusations and treating others equitably during disagreement or controversy	34
Islamic moral conduct	Trustworthiness	Treating access to information, followers, institutional affiliation, and public influence as a moral trust	37

Cultural and national representation	Respect for cultural values	Demonstrating sensitivity to the cultural values of Iranian society in public-facing digital behavior	34
Cultural and national representation	Responsible national representation	Recognizing that Olympic athletes may be perceived as representatives of their country and sporting community	36
Commercial and professional ethics	Ethical advertising	Avoiding misleading, harmful, or ethically questionable commercial endorsements	30
Commercial and professional ethics	Conflict-of-interest management	Disclosing or avoiding promotional relationships that may compromise professional integrity	24
Digital citizenship and platform responsibility	Responsible content circulation	Avoiding harmful reposting, cyberbullying, misinformation amplification, or participation in online harassment	39
Digital citizenship and platform responsibility	Responsible audience engagement	Managing comments, interactions, and public communication in a professional and constructive manner	35

The initial qualitative analysis produced 24 subcategories organized within nine overarching categories that together reflected the ethical responsibilities of Olympic athletes in social media environments. The most frequently coded concept was awareness of public influence within the broader category of social role-model responsibility, with 47 coded references, indicating that participants consistently viewed the social visibility of Olympic athletes as a defining ethical feature of their online presence. Control during conflict was also strongly emphasized, with 46 coded references, followed by respectful interaction with 44 references, acceptance of consequences with 43 references, and avoidance of backbiting, slander, and harmful speech with 42 references. These findings showed that expert participants did not conceptualize ethical social media behavior merely as compliance with technical platform rules. Instead, ethical behavior was understood as a multidimensional construct involving moral character, public responsibility, self-regulation, cultural sensitivity, and recognition of the athlete's influence on broader society. Truthfulness and informational integrity were repeatedly linked to both Islamic moral expectations and contemporary concerns regarding misinformation, commercial promotion,

and manipulated online presentation. Likewise, participants described respect for human dignity as extending beyond avoidance of direct insult to include protection against humiliation, discriminatory expression, and public shaming. Privacy and confidentiality were interpreted as both individual and institutional obligations, particularly in relation to medical, tactical, organizational, and interpersonal information obtained through participation in elite sport. The category of Islamic moral conduct added a culturally grounded normative layer to the developing framework by emphasizing preservation of dignity, modesty, justice, trustworthiness, and avoidance of harmful speech. Participants further emphasized that culturally appropriate behavior should not be interpreted as restricting athletes' legitimate self-expression, but rather as requiring awareness of the relationship between personal autonomy, public visibility, national representation, and responsibility toward audiences. Overall, the qualitative phase demonstrated that ethical social media behavior among Olympic athletes is best understood as an interaction between universal principles of professional and digital ethics and culturally embedded moral responsibilities shaped by Islamic ethical reasoning.

Table 2

Expert Evaluation of the Main Framework Dimensions in the First Delphi Round

Framework dimension	Mean relevance score	SD	Mean cultural appropriateness score	Mean practical applicability score	Agreement (%)	Delphi decision
Truthfulness and informational integrity	4.75	0.44	4.64	4.61	92.86	Retained
Respect for human dignity	4.82	0.39	4.79	4.68	96.43	Retained
Privacy and confidentiality	4.50	0.51	4.43	4.50	85.71	Retained with minor revision
Self-restraint and emotional regulation	4.79	0.42	4.71	4.75	92.86	Retained
Responsibility and accountability	4.71	0.46	4.68	4.68	89.29	Retained
Social role-model responsibility	4.68	0.48	4.57	4.61	89.29	Retained

Islamic moral conduct	4.86	0.36	4.93	4.57	96.43	Retained
Cultural and national representation	4.57	0.50	4.82	4.43	85.71	Retained with revision
Commercial and professional ethics	4.43	0.57	4.29	4.54	82.14	Retained with revision
Digital citizenship and platform responsibility	4.61	0.50	4.46	4.71	89.29	Retained

The first Delphi round demonstrated a high overall level of expert endorsement for all proposed framework dimensions. Mean relevance scores ranged from 4.43 for commercial and professional ethics to 4.86 for Islamic moral conduct, indicating that all dimensions were considered highly pertinent to the ethical behavior of Olympic athletes in social media. Respect for human dignity received a mean relevance score of 4.82 and achieved 96.43% expert agreement, while Islamic moral conduct received the highest mean cultural appropriateness rating of 4.93 and similarly reached 96.43% agreement. These results suggested that the panel regarded Islamic ethical principles not as an external or supplementary component but as a central normative foundation for culturally grounded ethical conduct. Self-restraint and emotional regulation also received strong support, with a mean relevance score of 4.79 and practical applicability score of 4.75, reflecting experts' concern about impulsive posting, emotionally reactive communication, and escalation of online controversies. Truthfulness and informational integrity obtained a mean relevance score of 4.75 and agreement of 92.86%, confirming the perceived

importance of accuracy, transparency, and responsible representation in athletes' digital communication. Lower, although still favorable, agreement was observed for commercial and professional ethics at 82.14%, cultural and national representation at 85.71%, and privacy and confidentiality at 85.71%. Qualitative feedback indicated that disagreement concerning these dimensions primarily related to wording and scope rather than rejection of the underlying concepts. Some experts recommended clearer differentiation between personal privacy and organizational confidentiality, while others suggested that national representation should not imply complete subordination of athletes' individual expression to institutional expectations. The commercial ethics dimension was revised to distinguish ordinary advertising from endorsements involving health claims, gambling-related content, deceptive promotion, or conflicts of interest. Consequently, all ten dimensions were retained for further Delphi evaluation, although three underwent wording and conceptual refinement before the second round.

Table 3

Second-Round Delphi Consensus on the Final Ethical Behavior Dimensions

Final framework dimension	Median	Interquartile range	Agreement (%)	Stability compared with Round 1	Final status
Truthfulness and informational integrity	5.00	1.00	96.43	Increased	Confirmed
Respect for human dignity	5.00	0.00	100.00	Increased	Confirmed
Privacy and confidentiality	5.00	1.00	92.86	Increased	Confirmed
Self-restraint and emotional regulation	5.00	0.00	100.00	Increased	Confirmed
Responsibility and accountability	5.00	1.00	96.43	Increased	Confirmed
Social role-model responsibility	5.00	1.00	92.86	Increased	Confirmed
Islamic moral conduct	5.00	0.00	100.00	Stable at very high level	Confirmed
Cultural and national representation	5.00	1.00	92.86	Increased	Confirmed
Commercial and professional ethics	4.00	1.00	89.29	Increased	Confirmed
Digital citizenship and platform responsibility	5.00	1.00	96.43	Increased	Confirmed

The second Delphi round demonstrated stronger convergence of expert judgments and confirmed all ten dimensions of the proposed framework. Three dimensions—respect for human dignity, self-restraint and emotional regulation, and Islamic moral conduct—achieved 100.00%

agreement. Each of these dimensions also had a median rating of 5.00, while their interquartile ranges were 0.00, demonstrating particularly strong consensus and minimal variability across experts. Truthfulness and informational integrity, responsibility and accountability, and digital

citizenship and platform responsibility each achieved 96.43% agreement, indicating near-unanimous expert support. Privacy and confidentiality, social role-model responsibility, and cultural and national representation each reached 92.86% agreement, representing a marked increase compared with the first Delphi round after revision of their definitions and behavioral indicators. Commercial and professional ethics remained the dimension with the lowest consensus; however, its agreement increased from 82.14% in the first round to 89.29% in the second round and therefore exceeded the predetermined threshold for acceptance. The greater stability observed between rounds indicated that revision of terminology and clarification of item boundaries successfully reduced interpretive

disagreement among panel members. Qualitative comments provided during the second round also became substantially less frequent and focused primarily on minor linguistic modifications rather than structural changes. Experts repeatedly emphasized that the framework should avoid presenting Islamic ethical principles as a separate checklist detached from general digital conduct. Instead, Islamic ethics was described as a normative orientation capable of shaping truthfulness, respect, justice, modesty, self-restraint, responsibility, and preservation of dignity across all areas of athletes' online behavior. Based on the high level of convergence and the absence of substantive proposals for additional dimensions, the Delphi process was considered sufficiently stable at the completion of the second round.

Table 4

Final Structure of the Culturally Grounded Ethical Behavior Framework for Olympic Athletes on Social Media

Final dimension	Core ethical principle	Principal behavioral indicators	Final expert agreement (%)
Truthfulness and informational integrity	Honesty and veracity	Verify information before sharing; avoid misinformation; distinguish facts from opinions; disclose sponsorship; avoid deceptive self-presentation	96.43
Respect for human dignity	Dignity and respect	Avoid insult, humiliation, discrimination, ridicule, hate speech, and degrading communication; respect opponents and audiences	100.00
Privacy and confidentiality	Protection of legitimate privacy	Protect private information; obtain appropriate consent before sharing identifiable information; protect medical, tactical, and organizational confidentiality	92.86
Self-restraint and emotional regulation	Moral self-control	Avoid impulsive posting; delay responses during anger; manage criticism constructively; consider consequences before publication	100.00
Responsibility and accountability	Accountability for consequences	Accept responsibility for published content; correct false information; apologize for harmful conduct; avoid shifting responsibility to others	96.43
Social role-model responsibility	Social responsibility	Recognize influence on youth and followers; model fair play and constructive interaction; discourage violence, bullying, and harmful conduct	92.86
Islamic moral conduct	Amanah, justice, dignity, and avoidance of harm	Maintain trustworthiness; avoid slander, backbiting, unjust accusation, indecency, and harmful speech; observe fairness, modesty, and dignity	100.00
Cultural and national representation	Cultural responsibility	Respect legitimate cultural values; demonstrate sensitivity to social context; consider implications of public conduct for team and national representation	92.86
Commercial and professional ethics	Integrity in promotion	Disclose commercial relationships; avoid deceptive advertising; avoid promotion of harmful or ethically inappropriate products; manage conflicts of interest	89.29
Digital citizenship and platform responsibility	Responsible participation in digital environments	Avoid cyberbullying and coordinated harassment; avoid amplification of harmful content; engage audiences constructively; use reporting and moderation responsibly	96.43

The final framework consisted of ten interrelated ethical dimensions covering both foundational moral values and situation-specific behavioral expectations for Olympic athletes' use of social media. Respect for human dignity, self-restraint and emotional regulation, and Islamic moral conduct received the highest possible level of expert agreement, with 100.00% consensus. These dimensions

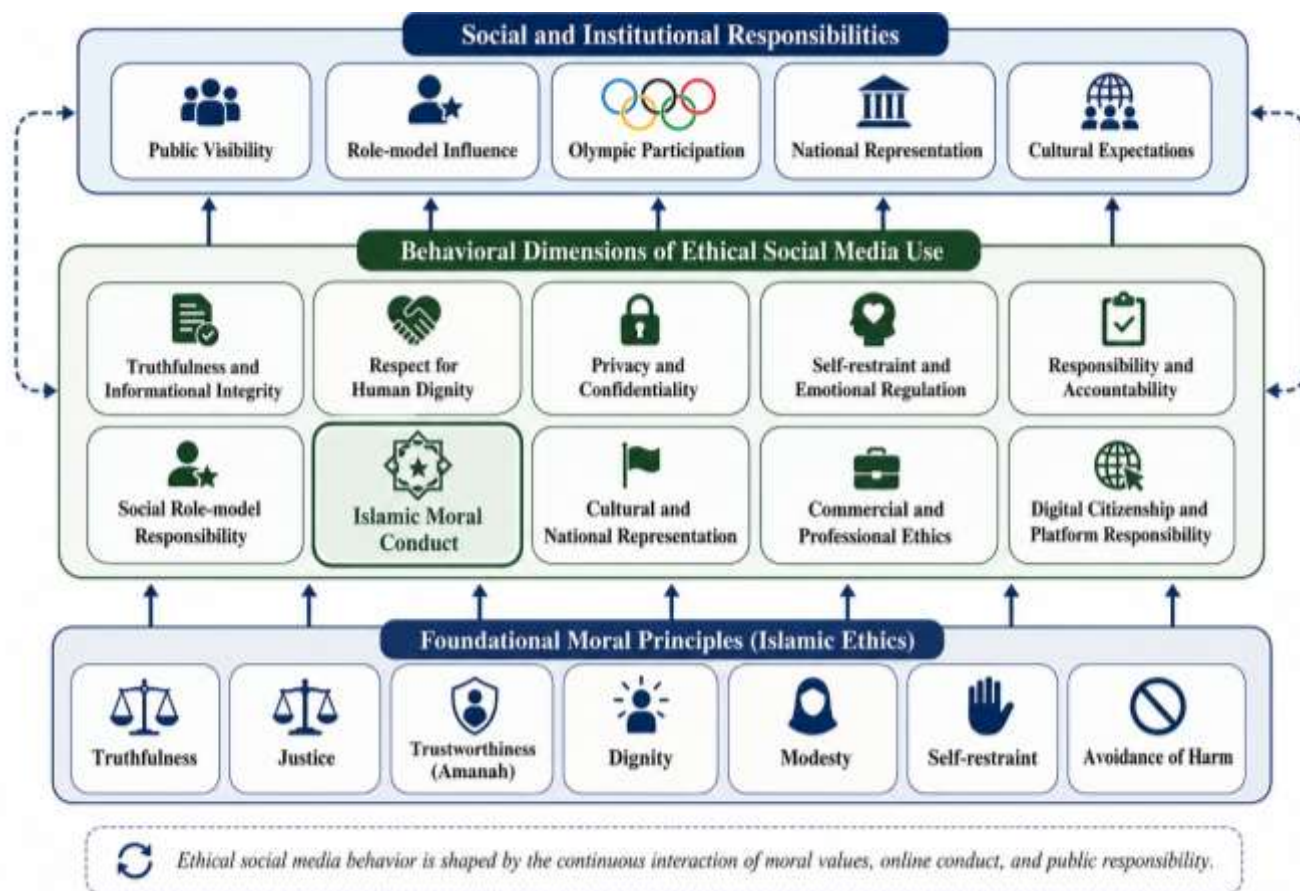
were interpreted as central pillars of the framework because they addressed the moral quality of interpersonal communication, the athlete's capacity to regulate behavior under public pressure, and the culturally grounded ethical principles underpinning responsible conduct. Truthfulness and informational integrity, responsibility and accountability, and digital citizenship and platform

responsibility also received exceptionally high agreement of 96.43%. The framework therefore established that athletes should verify information before publication, avoid deceptive digital practices, assume responsibility for their own content, correct inaccuracies when necessary, and refrain from contributing to cyberbullying, harassment, or the circulation of harmful material. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained as a distinct dimension because Olympic athletes frequently operate within environments involving sensitive medical, tactical, personal, and organizational information. The social role-model responsibility dimension reflected the distinctive public visibility of Olympic athletes and emphasized that ethical evaluation of online behavior should account for their influence on younger athletes, fans, and society. Cultural and national representation acknowledged the symbolic position frequently attributed to Olympic athletes while preserving the principle that culturally responsible conduct should not

eliminate legitimate personal expression. Commercial and professional ethics received comparatively lower, although still strong, expert agreement of 89.29%, reflecting greater variation in experts' interpretations of permissible commercial activity. Nevertheless, the panel consistently supported transparency in sponsorship, avoidance of misleading promotion, disclosure of conflicts of interest, and prohibition of endorsements that could reasonably produce social or individual harm. Importantly, Islamic moral conduct was not limited to religiously explicit forms of communication. The experts conceptualized Islamic ethics as a cross-cutting moral foundation expressed through honesty, justice, trustworthiness, preservation of dignity, modesty, self-restraint, avoidance of unjust accusation, and prevention of harm. Accordingly, the finalized framework integrated culturally specific moral values with widely recognized principles of sport ethics, digital citizenship, professional responsibility, and public accountability.

Figure 1

Conceptual Structure of the Culturally Grounded Ethical Behavior Framework for Olympic Athletes on Social Media



The final conceptual structure demonstrated that ethical social media behavior among Olympic athletes operates through the interaction of three interconnected layers. At the foundational level, Islamic moral principles—including truthfulness, justice, trustworthiness, dignity, self-restraint, modesty, and avoidance of harm—provided the normative basis for ethical judgment. At the behavioral level, these values were operationalized through specific forms of conduct involving truthful communication, respectful interaction, protection of privacy, emotional regulation, accountability, responsible commercial engagement, and appropriate participation in digital communities. At the social and institutional level, athlete behavior was situated within the broader responsibilities associated with public visibility, role-model influence, Olympic participation, national representation, and cultural expectations. The framework therefore did not treat ethical behavior as a set of isolated prohibitions. Rather, it represented a relational model in which personal moral character, digital behavior, and public responsibility continuously influence one another. Self-restraint, for example, was linked not only to emotional regulation but also to the Islamic principle of controlling harmful speech, preservation of interpersonal dignity, and reduction of reputational damage during conflict. Similarly, truthfulness functioned simultaneously as a personal moral obligation, a requirement for responsible digital citizenship, and a professional responsibility in advertising and public communication. Respect for human dignity connected individual interpersonal conduct with broader concerns regarding discrimination, cyberbullying, hate speech, and public humiliation. The framework also positioned accountability as the mechanism through which athletes acknowledge the consequences of digital behavior, including correction of inaccurate information and appropriate response to misconduct. Overall, the resulting model indicated that culturally grounded ethical behavior on social media should be understood as a dynamic integration of Islamic ethical principles, contemporary digital responsibilities, professional sport expectations, and the distinctive social influence of Olympic athletes.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop a culturally grounded ethical behavior framework for Olympic athletes on social

media by integrating expert perspectives, principles of Islamic ethics, and Delphi consensus. The findings resulted in a multidimensional framework comprising truthfulness and informational integrity, respect for human dignity, privacy and confidentiality, self-restraint and emotional regulation, responsibility and accountability, social role-model responsibility, Islamic moral conduct, cultural and national representation, commercial and professional ethics, and digital citizenship and platform responsibility. The Delphi process demonstrated high levels of expert agreement across all dimensions, with particularly strong consensus regarding respect for human dignity, self-restraint and emotional regulation, and Islamic moral conduct. These findings suggest that ethical behavior in the social media context should not be reduced to compliance with formal communication policies or platform regulations. Rather, it should be understood as an integrated form of moral, professional, cultural, and social responsibility in which athletes' personal choices are shaped by their public visibility, symbolic role, and potential influence on others.

One of the most prominent findings was the centrality of respect for human dignity. This dimension received unanimous expert agreement in the final Delphi round and included avoidance of insult, humiliation, discrimination, ridicule, hate speech, and degrading communication. This result indicates that the ethical assessment of athletes' social media behavior begins with recognition of others as legitimate moral subjects whose dignity must be protected even during disagreement, competition, criticism, or public controversy. This finding is compatible with professional ethics approaches that emphasize respect, fairness, and socially responsible conduct as core elements of athletes' ethical behavior (7). It is also consistent with research on athlete welfare, which has emphasized that social media environments can expose athletes and other participants to harassment, abusive communication, and reputational harm, thereby making interpersonal respect and protection from digital hostility essential components of ethical sport communication (2). In this regard, the present framework extends previous work by conceptualizing respect for dignity not only as a protective principle but also as an active behavioral obligation that should guide the language, tone, content, and interpersonal conduct of Olympic athletes in online environments.

The strong consensus regarding self-restraint and emotional regulation represents another important finding. Experts regarded the ability to control impulsive reactions, delay responses during emotional arousal, and consider the consequences of communication before publication as essential to ethical digital behavior. This finding is particularly relevant to elite sport, where athletes are regularly exposed to emotionally intense circumstances including defeat, controversial officiating, interpersonal conflict, performance criticism, media pressure, and hostile audience reactions. Social media allows immediate responses to these experiences, but this immediacy can increase the risk of ethically problematic communication. The finding is broadly supported by research showing that conscious awareness and prosocial behavior are meaningfully associated with athlete identity and behavioral regulation (9). From this perspective, self-restraint should not be interpreted as passivity or suppression of legitimate self-expression; rather, it represents the capacity to choose a proportionate and ethically defensible response rather than reacting automatically under emotional pressure. The present study therefore positions emotional regulation as both a psychological competency and an ethical competency.

The importance assigned to Islamic moral conduct was also a defining feature of the resulting framework. This dimension achieved unanimous consensus and was characterized by principles including trustworthiness, justice, dignity, modesty, avoidance of slander and backbiting, and avoidance of harmful speech. The findings indicate that Islamic ethics can provide a coherent cultural and normative foundation for the ethical use of social media among Olympic athletes in Iran. Importantly, experts did not conceptualize Islamic moral conduct as an isolated religious category detached from other dimensions. Instead, Islamic principles were viewed as cross-cutting values that inform truthfulness, accountability, interpersonal respect, privacy, self-control, and public responsibility. This interpretation is consistent with the broader logic of professional ethics models in sport, in which moral principles are expected to operate across multiple behavioral contexts rather than functioning as abstract values disconnected from practice (7). The present findings therefore suggest that culturally grounded frameworks may be strengthened when ethical

principles are operationalized through concrete behaviors rather than presented only as general moral ideals.

Truthfulness and informational integrity also received very high expert agreement. This dimension included verifying information before sharing, avoiding misinformation, distinguishing facts from opinions, disclosing sponsorship, and avoiding deceptive self-presentation. The prominence of this dimension reflects the increasingly complex role of athletes as direct producers and distributors of information. Unlike traditional media environments, social media enables athletes to communicate with large audiences without editorial mediation. This freedom creates new responsibilities regarding accuracy, transparency, and the reliability of shared content. The finding is particularly consistent with research on authenticity in athlete endorsement communication. Nichols and Shapiro showed that perceived authenticity can significantly affect how audiences respond to celebrity athlete messages on social media, demonstrating that credibility and genuineness are important components of athlete communication (6). Similarly, the changing value of athletes within sponsorship and digital branding environments reinforces the importance of maintaining credible and transparent communication (4). The present framework therefore indicates that truthfulness should be regarded not only as a personal moral virtue but also as a professional responsibility in public communication and commercial engagement.

Closely related to truthfulness was the dimension of commercial and professional ethics. Although this dimension received the lowest agreement relative to the other dimensions, the final level of consensus remained high enough for its inclusion in the framework. The lower level of agreement may reflect the complexity of defining appropriate boundaries between legitimate commercial activity and ethically problematic promotion. Contemporary athletes increasingly operate as social media influencers, and their economic value may depend partly on their ability to integrate sponsorship and personal branding into everyday content. Research has shown that athlete-generated lifestyle and sport-related content can shape consumer perceptions, reinforcing the commercial significance of athletes' digital identities (5). Likewise, sponsorship and social media have increasingly contributed to the reconstruction of athlete

value beyond sporting performance alone (4). These developments help explain why transparency in sponsorship, avoidance of deceptive advertising, and management of conflicts of interest emerged as essential components of the framework. The finding also suggests that athletes require ethical guidance that addresses not only whether commercial activity is permitted, but how such activity should be conducted responsibly when audiences may interpret sponsored content as personal recommendation.

Responsibility and accountability constituted another strongly endorsed dimension. Experts emphasized that athletes should accept responsibility for the consequences of published content, correct inaccurate information, and apologize when their communication causes unjustified harm. This finding is important because digital environments can facilitate diffusion of responsibility. Athletes may attribute problematic content to administrators, public relations staff, platform dynamics, or emotional circumstances; however, the framework established that public communication associated with an athlete's identity remains subject to ethical accountability. This result is consistent with the broader concept of professional ethics in sport, where personal responsibility is considered central to legitimate professional conduct (7). Ethical sensitivity research also supports the importance of recognizing the moral implications of one's conduct rather than treating decisions merely as strategic or reputational choices (8). Therefore, accountability in the present framework functions as the mechanism through which ethical principles are translated into responsibility for consequences.

The social role-model responsibility dimension also received high consensus and reflects the distinctive position occupied by Olympic athletes. Participants emphasized that elite athletes must recognize their influence on younger athletes, fans, and the broader public and should avoid normalizing violence, bullying, discrimination, or other harmful conduct. This finding is compatible with research emphasizing the increasingly public and influential role of athletes within social media ecosystems (1). Athletes are no longer dependent exclusively on journalists or sport organizations to mediate their public identities; instead, they can communicate directly with followers and shape public narratives through their own platforms. This expanded autonomy simultaneously increases ethical responsibility

because high-profile athletes may influence attitudes and behaviors beyond the immediate sport context. The present framework therefore conceptualizes role-model responsibility as a positive obligation rather than merely a reputational concern. Ethical use of social media includes not only avoidance of misconduct but also constructive communication, support for fair play, and responsible engagement with audiences.

The findings concerning cultural and national representation further demonstrate the importance of context in defining ethical expectations. Experts agreed that Olympic athletes should demonstrate sensitivity to cultural values and recognize the implications of their public conduct for teams and national representation, while still maintaining legitimate personal expression. This balancing approach is particularly relevant within the Iranian context, where athletes may occupy highly visible cultural and symbolic positions. Research on Iranian elite female athletes has shown that media representation is closely tied to broader social, cultural, and gendered expectations, creating consequences that extend beyond sport performance itself (10). The present findings similarly suggest that ethical digital behavior cannot be fully understood without considering the sociocultural environment in which athlete communication is interpreted. At the same time, the framework avoids equating cultural responsibility with absolute conformity, instead emphasizing sensitivity, proportionality, and awareness of the social meaning of public conduct.

Privacy and confidentiality emerged as another important ethical dimension. The experts emphasized the need to protect private information, obtain appropriate consent before sharing identifiable information, and avoid disclosure of medical, tactical, organizational, or interpersonal information. This result is particularly relevant to elite sport environments, where athletes may have access to sensitive information about teammates, coaches, organizations, health conditions, and competition strategies. Social media creates incentives for continuous content production, which can blur boundaries between public and private information. The concern for privacy is also consistent with broader athlete welfare perspectives, which emphasize that digital visibility may expose athletes to intrusive attention and reduced control over personal information (2). The present

framework therefore treats privacy not simply as an individual preference but as an ethical obligation that protects both athletes and others within the sport environment.

Digital citizenship and platform responsibility also received very high agreement. This dimension extended ethical responsibility beyond original posts to include reposting, amplification, audience interaction, moderation, and participation in digital communities. This finding is significant because harmful online behavior frequently occurs through redistribution rather than original creation of content. An athlete may contribute to misinformation, harassment, or reputational harm by sharing or endorsing content without directly producing it. The framework therefore recognizes that ethical digital citizenship involves responsibility for the broader circulation and consequences of online content. This perspective aligns with scholarship that situates athletes within increasingly complex digital ecosystems where identity, visibility, communication, and economic opportunity are interconnected (1). It also corresponds with growing concerns regarding athlete welfare and the potentially harmful dynamics of online platforms (2). The result suggests that social media education for athletes should address not only posting behavior but also platform literacy, audience management, amplification, and responsible participation in networked communication.

The findings also demonstrated that professional and ethical conduct cannot be separated entirely from psychological and social functioning. Athletes' capacity to engage responsibly online may be strengthened or weakened by their emotional regulation, perceived support, sense of meaning, identity, and interpersonal environment. Research has shown that perceived social support is associated with mental health among athletes, suggesting that behavior and well-being are embedded within social relationships rather than determined solely by individual characteristics (11). Similarly, research on interventions focused on meaning, resilience, negative affect, and perceived social support demonstrates the relevance of psychological resources for adaptive functioning (12). These findings help interpret the present emphasis on self-restraint, responsibility, and role-model behavior. Ethical conduct in digital spaces may therefore be strengthened when athletes possess adequate

psychological support, reflective capacity, and access to environments that encourage thoughtful decision-making rather than only punitive compliance.

The present findings are also strongly aligned with recent Iranian research specifically focused on ethical behavior of prominent athletes in cyberspace. Poursoltani Zarandi and Damavandi Jegal emphasized the need for systematic management of ethical behavior among prominent athletes in digital environments, reinforcing the importance of structured approaches to governance and conduct (3). The current study extends this direction by providing a more explicitly culturally grounded and normative framework based on Islamic ethics and Delphi consensus. Rather than focusing exclusively on management mechanisms, the present framework clarifies the moral content of appropriate behavior and identifies the dimensions through which ethical conduct can be evaluated. In this sense, the study contributes an integrative model that connects individual virtues, professional expectations, digital citizenship, commercial responsibility, cultural representation, and institutional responsibilities.

The convergence achieved across Delphi rounds further strengthens the interpretability of the framework. All ten dimensions were ultimately confirmed, and agreement increased after conceptual clarification and revision. This pattern suggests that initial disagreement was primarily associated with ambiguity in wording rather than fundamental opposition to the underlying ethical principles. The stability of consensus indicates that experts from different professional backgrounds could identify a shared ethical core despite differences in disciplinary perspective. This is particularly important for Olympic sport, where athlete behavior intersects with multiple systems including coaching, governance, media, sponsorship, culture, and public communication. A framework intended for practical application therefore requires sufficient breadth to represent these overlapping responsibilities while maintaining conceptual clarity.

Overall, the findings support a view of ethical social media behavior as a layered and relational construct. At the foundational level, moral principles such as truthfulness, justice, trustworthiness, dignity, self-restraint, modesty, and avoidance of harm provide normative direction. At the behavioral level, these principles are translated into specific

practices involving communication, privacy, emotional regulation, accountability, role-modeling, commercial conduct, and digital citizenship. At the social and institutional level, athlete behavior is interpreted in relation to public visibility, Olympic participation, cultural expectations, and national representation. The value of the resulting framework lies in its integration of these levels rather than in treating each dimension independently. Ethical behavior becomes sustainable when athletes understand not only which actions are expected, but also why such behaviors are morally significant, culturally meaningful, and professionally necessary.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participants were recruited from Tehran, and although the expert panel included individuals from different academic and professional backgrounds, the findings may not fully represent ethical perspectives from other regions of Iran or from other Islamic cultural contexts. Second, the framework was developed through expert judgment rather than direct observation of Olympic athletes' social media behavior, and the perspectives of athletes themselves, coaches, fans, sport journalists, and sponsors were not examined as separate stakeholder groups. Third, the Delphi method produces consensus among selected experts but cannot establish that the resulting dimensions predict actual ethical behavior or reduce misconduct in practice. Fourth, social media environments change rapidly, and emerging platforms, communication formats, artificial intelligence-generated content, and new forms of digital commercialization may introduce ethical concerns that were not fully captured during the study. Finally, some dimensions, particularly commercial and professional ethics and cultural representation, may require additional contextual interpretation because ethical boundaries in these areas can vary according to specific platforms, sport organizations, sponsorship arrangements, and social circumstances.

Future studies should examine the proposed framework in larger and more diverse samples and include experts and athletes from different provinces, sports, competitive levels, and cultural settings. Quantitative research should be undertaken to develop and psychometrically validate a standardized instrument based on the ten dimensions identified in the present study, allowing researchers to assess

ethical social media behavior among athletes systematically. Structural equation modeling could subsequently be used to examine relationships among moral values, athlete identity, emotional regulation, social media literacy, perceived organizational support, and ethical digital behavior. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for determining whether ethical behavior changes across training periods, major competitions, and high-pressure events. Comparative research across Muslim-majority and non-Muslim contexts could clarify which elements of the framework are culturally specific and which represent broader universal principles of sport ethics. Future research should also examine the perspectives of Olympic athletes themselves and evaluate whether the framework is perceived as realistic, fair, and applicable to their daily digital practices. Experimental and intervention studies could further assess whether structured ethics education based on the framework improves ethical sensitivity, online self-regulation, decision-making, and response to digital conflict.

Sport federations, national Olympic organizations, clubs, coaches, and athlete development programs should use the framework as a basis for structured social media ethics education rather than relying only on disciplinary policies after misconduct occurs. Training programs should provide scenario-based instruction on misinformation, online conflict, privacy, sponsorship disclosure, criticism, cyberbullying, cultural sensitivity, and handling emotionally charged situations. Athletes should receive clear guidance on how Islamic ethical principles such as truthfulness, justice, trustworthiness, dignity, self-restraint, and avoidance of harm translate into everyday digital decisions. Sport organizations should also develop practical social media codes of conduct that distinguish between personal expression, professional obligations, confidential information, commercial content, and representation of teams or national institutions. Access to media specialists, psychological support, and consultation before responding to high-risk controversies could further reduce impulsive or harmful communication. Finally, ethical evaluation should emphasize education, reflection, and accountability rather than purely punitive control, enabling athletes to understand the consequences of their digital behavior and to use social media as a constructive platform for communication, role-modeling, and responsible public engagement.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the study and to manuscript development, and all approved the final version.

Declaration

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only to assist with language editing, translation, and improvement of the manuscript's readability. All conceptualization, study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final approval of the manuscript were performed by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the content.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethics Considerations

The study placed a high emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality strictly maintained, with data anonymized to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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