

Female leadership archetypes in sport: an approach based on the 2024 idols barometer

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Received 28 July 2025
Revised 28 October 2025
Accepted 31 October 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the archetypes of female leadership in sport by analyzing the values that Spanish society attributes to elite female athletes. Moving beyond athletic success as a universal trait, the research investigates how personal narratives, social impact and emotional resonance shape public admiration and define the symbolic leadership of sportswomen in contemporary Spain.

Design/methodology/approach – This research adopts a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative study was conducted based on in-depth interviews with experts in the sports industry. These interviews were used to identify and define the 11 key value vectors that currently characterize women's sport. In a second stage, these 11 vectors were operationalized in the quantitative survey and served as the basis for the statistical segmentation that produced the four archetypes. The quantitative analysis (1,003 surveys, men and women aged 16–65) measured the prevalence and internal structure of those dimensions in the general audience, which enabled us to identify and validate the four archetypes of female leadership in sport. A standardized residuals analysis (Pv's) was applied to determine the dominant attributes associated with each athlete. Athletes were then categorized into leadership archetypes based on how the public perceives and admires them.

Findings – The results identify four distinct archetypes of female sports leadership (1). Resilient Warriors – athletes who embody perseverance, sacrifice and continuous personal growth. Their leadership is rooted in effort, discipline and professional integrity, (2). Voices of Equality – athletes who advocate for gender equality and social change, admired for their courage, activism and commitment to inclusion, (3). Charismatic Captains – leaders with strong interpersonal influence, admired for their collective mindset, empathy and emotional leadership both on and off the field and (4). Wellbeing Ambassadors – athletes who promote physical and mental health, balance, lifestyle values, emphasizing authenticity, ethics and holistic engagement. These archetypes are not mutually exclusive; many athletes display characteristics from multiple profiles depending on their career stage, media exposure and personal commitments. The analysis also reveals intergenerational differences in athlete admiration: while some figures, such as Carolina Marín or Mireia Belmonte, maintain broad cross-generational appeal, others resonate more strongly with specific age cohorts.

Originality/value – This research offers a novel typology of female sports leadership that transcends traditional performance metrics by incorporating emotional, cultural and social dimensions. By focussing on public perception and value attribution, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how women in sport build influence, legitimacy and enduring emotional bonds with audiences. Unlike trait/behavioural approaches, we operationalize public value attributions as the basis of legitimacy and derive four measurable archetypes that integrate emotional, cultural and social dimensions beyond performance. The findings emphasize the long-term legacy of retired athletes and the capacity of sportswomen to act as role models and cultural icons. The study also highlights the importance of broader and more diverse representations of female leadership in sport, providing a useful framework for stakeholders in sport marketing, media and policy to promote inclusive and authentic narratives.

Keywords Leadership, Athletes, Archetypes, Values, Gender, Admiration

Paper type Research article



Sport, Business and Management: An
International Journal
Vol. 16 No. 3, 2026
pp. 382-395
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2042-6798
p-ISSN: 2042-678X
DOI 10.1108/SBM-07-2025-0184

1. Introduction

Women's sports are a rapidly growing, multi-billion-dollar industry. Global revenues nearly doubled, rising from \$981 million in 2023 to \$1.88 billion in 2024, with projections reaching \$2.35 billion by 2025 (Forbes, 2025; Deloitte, 2025). In 2024, commercial income exceeded \$1 billion globally for the first time, encompassing sponsorships, brand collaborations, merchandising and preseason tour revenues. North America leads this global growth, generating 56% of total revenues, although Europe, Asia-Pacific and other regions are also expanding rapidly.

Beyond financial growth, women's sports are elevating female athletes to elite status, inspiring new generations of fans and redefining the future of sport. While athletic success remains a common denominator among sportswomen, differences emerge in how that success translates into unique forms of impact and emotional connection with the public. These nuances enrich how each athlete is perceived and valued, demonstrating that the idolization of female sports figures is not uniform but rather a complex blend of achievements, values and personal narratives that foster emotional engagement (Elyasi, 2024; Deloitte, 2025).

The evolution of success among Spanish female athletes in recent years has been remarkable—not only in terms of titles won, but also in their increased media presence and the growing interest they attract from commercial brands.

In terms of accolades, athletes such as Alexia Putellas have achieved outstanding milestones, including multiple Ballon d'Or awards and international titles with the Spanish national football team. Salma Paralluelo has been recognized as one of the world's top young players, winning the Bronze Ball in 2023 and being named to Time100 Next's list of emerging global figures. Angela Martín-Mora has also made headlines in figure skating, setting national records and ranking among the world's best in international competitions.

Social media visibility among these athletes has surged significantly. For instance, Alexia Putellas [1] has amassed over three million Instagram followers, positioning herself as one of the most influential figures in women's sports. This digital presence has amplified her impact beyond the playing field (Pulgarin-Mesa, 2025).

Brand interest in partnering with Spanish female athletes has also increased markedly. Alexia Putellas became the first Spanish athlete to sign with luxury watchmaker Hublot in 2021. Carolina Marín has starred in major advertising campaigns, such as those for Helios, garnering over five million views. Paralympic athlete Elena Congost has established partnerships with Adidas and Iberdrola, reflecting the growing integration of women's sports into the commercial sports marketing landscape.

In 2024, sponsorship investment in women's sports in Spain surpassed €65 million, according to the *Atlas del Patrocinio* by Intelligence 2P [2] (2025). Between 2016 and 2024, the number of licenced female athletes rose from 44,000 to 110,000—a substantial increase. However, among adolescents, fewer than 25% of all sports licences are held by girls and they continue to drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys (CSD, 2023a, b).

The data confirm that women's high-performance sports in Spain are entering a phase of growth and institutionalization. Spanish sportswomen have seen significant development in terms of competitive success, media exposure and commercial appeal, establishing themselves as references both in sports and in broader cultural contexts.

One of the key factors in sports dropout among adolescent girls is the lack of relatable role models (Peters *et al.*, 2022; Heather *et al.*, 2021). When girls do not perceive athletes who embody values and trajectories they can identify with, they are more likely to disengage. Hence, the importance of building positive, diverse archetypes that reflect multiple accessible realities. The *Ídolos del Deporte* in Spain revealed that values such as humility, perseverance and the fight for equality are the most frequently cited by adolescents when asked about their favourite athletes.

The aim of this article is to construct archetypes of professional female athletes based on the values that the public associates with each of them. The objective is to analyze the reasons behind public admiration for these sportswomen and highlight the specific qualities that elevate them as role models. Ultimately, the goal is to create diverse archetypes of female athletes so that adolescent girls can see themselves reflected in them and, as a result, become and remain engaged in sports participation.

2. Literature review

The academic literature highlights that the presence of archetypes or exemplary role models in sports can significantly enhance motivation and adherence to physical activity, particularly

among adolescents (Lines, 2007; Lyle, 2018). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory posits that individuals tend to imitate the behaviour of admired models, especially when they perceive alignment in values or shared experiences.

Multiple studies suggest that admiration for athletes is related not only to their performance, but also to the values they embody—such as leadership, resilience and integrity (Figgins *et al.*, 2016). Role models who display positive values have been shown to promote a healthy self-image and a sense of competence among young girls (Vescio *et al.*, 2005). Identifying with socially relevant and diverse models can mitigate risk factors for sports dropout, including low self-esteem, stereotypes and a lack of relatable references (Casey *et al.*, 2016).

Promoting archetypes based on values such as leadership, resilience and commitment allows young girls to find figures in whom they see themselves reflected, thus enhancing their sense of self-efficacy and motivation (Walseth, 2006). Showcasing a variety of achievements and career paths enables more girls to envision future possibilities for themselves, thereby challenging limiting stereotypes.

There are empirically validated models that demonstrate how the values associated with professional athletes help construct inspirational archetypes and foster indirect imitation of these values. Four such models underpin this study. First, the theoretical model and empirical evidence on role modelling in sports presented by Kim and Shin (2023), who developed and applied a multidimensional scale measuring two key dimensions of athletes as role models: athletic performance and personality (including ethical values, conduct and character). Based on a sample of 346 university students, their findings revealed that both dimensions significantly impacted four areas of admirers' self-concept: academic competence, career competence, athletic competence and social acceptance. Perceived high athletic performance boosted academic and sporting self-confidence, while a positive personality (e.g. kindness, commitment, integrity) had an even greater effect on social and professional self-concept development.

Second, role identification theory explains how identification with role models enables individuals to adopt observed behaviours and values. This framework suggests that young people imitate values indirectly and without explicit instruction, simply by admiring a figure who "represents" such ideals (Erikson, 1950).

Third, role modelling theory in education and sport psychology proposes that individuals learn behaviours, values and skills through observation and emulation, even in the absence of formal teaching. In the sporting context, when an athlete consistently displays ethical values, these are internalized by their young audience (Payne *et al.*, 2003; Mutter and Pawlowski, 2014; Meier, 2015).

Fourth, an exploratory study published in *Sport Marketing Quarterly* analyzed how consumers perceive athletes' brand attributes. It identified recurring themes that constitute the ideal role model archetype: personal attributes, community impact, a parent-like inspirational figure and a benchmark for other athletes. These traits help create an aspirational archetype that audiences naturally emulate (Taniyev and Gordon, 2022).

Thus, the multidimensional model proposed by Kim and Shin (2023), along with role identification and modelling theories, aligns closely with the objective of constructing female athlete archetypes based on the values that society attributes to them. According to this framework, admiration for an athlete is not solely based on performance but also—and often primarily—on personality and the ethical values conveyed publicly, such as effort, authenticity, solidarity and social commitment.

This dual component—performance and personal values—enables the identification and classification of different female sports archetypes, such as the charismatic leader, the resilient fighter, or the activist. Through these profiles, adolescent girls can find not only sporting role models but also personal and social references. Role identification theory posits that when a young person recognizes themselves in the values embodied by an admired figure, they tend to adopt similar attitudes and behaviours, often unintentionally. This internalization process unfolds progressively and is reinforced by repeated media exposure.

Additionally, modelling theory supports the idea that repeated observation of ethical and exemplary behaviour in well-known athletes promotes the spontaneous adoption of those values. In this sense, the visibility and consistency of athletes' public conduct are key factors in their effectiveness as inspirational archetypes. Consequently, the construction of positive female archetypes in sport not only encourages adolescent girls to remain active in sports but also fosters a more ethical, inclusive and socially engaged sports culture.

This review synthesizes recent literature exploring how society perceives female athletes, the identification of inspiring values and the impact of these representations on sports participation among adolescent girls. It spans topics such as admiration for female athletes' achievements and perceived values; media portrayals and the construction of role models; the most admired values—authenticity, effort and social commitment; and the influence on adolescent behaviour—the role of archetypes as retention mechanisms (Ronkainen *et al.*, 2019).

In 2001, Klaus Heinemann addressed the sociological perspective of values in sport, arguing that such values are not inherent to sport itself, but assigned by individuals and institutions. He examined how various stakeholders—athletes, clubs and institutions—attribute meanings to sport and how these affect public perception and practice. Since then, numerous studies have confirmed that although athletic performance remains a foundation for admiration (Putukian, 2001; Barrack *et al.*, 2013; Shollen and Hanold, 2025), in the case of female athletes, public perception is strongly shaped by values such as resilience, approachability, social commitment and authenticity (Geurin, 2017; Elyasi, 2024). These qualities go beyond competition and foster emotional connection with audiences, particularly among young women (Murata *et al.*, 2023).

Miranda-Rochín *et al.* (2024) analyzed research published between 2013 and 2023 on values in sport. They identified four core themes: fair play, personal values, gender dynamics and social norms. Their study also emphasized the widespread use of the Portrait Values Questionnaire, while calling for more culturally and contextually adapted research.

Harris and Trussell (2024) examined—through a critical feminist lens—the marketing representation and sponsorship experiences of professional female athletes, the ways in which gender ideals are reproduced, negotiated and resisted, and the reimagining of a more equitable future for women in elite sports. Their findings underscore the need for systemic change for women to be perceived as legitimate and worthy of investment.

The media framework plays a crucial role in archetype construction. Studies by Romney and Johnson (2020) and Napoli *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that media visibility of female athletes remains shaped by gender stereotypes and normative aesthetics. However, when athletes are portrayed in empowered, diverse and active roles, their value as positive role models is strengthened. Archetype construction cannot be separated from how the media highlights certain values (e.g. leadership and effort) over others (e.g. appearance or personal life).

Research on female athlete personal branding shows that the most publicly appreciated values include perseverance, approachability, positive leadership and advocacy for social causes (Chahardovali and McLeod, 2022; Kelly *et al.*, 2024; Smith *et al.*, 2025). This combination of professional excellence and social responsibility shapes a new typology of female archetypes that transcends purely athletic identity (Sonnier *et al.*, 2024; Wagner, 2018).

Guillermo García Fernández (2020) examined professional athletes' perspectives on the transmission of values in sport, considering the role of professional sport, school sport, families and the media. Through surveys, he identified key elements in athletes' experiences and proposed a sports model that promotes positive values and holistic youth development.

Lion *et al.* (2022) and the WHO (2019) both examine the link between elite sport success and behaviour in the wider population and report evidence of a positive relationship: when high-performance athletes or national teams achieve notable success, this can be followed by increases in physical activity levels and overall sport participation among the public. In this sense, elite sport is understood not only as a high-performance objective, but also as a potential driver of broader engagement in sport and exercise.

Elyasi (2024) reports growing recognition of the commercial and social value of women's sports sponsorship, driven by shifting public perceptions and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Key actors—including companies, sports organizations, media outlets, NGOs and athletes themselves—play a central role. Effective strategies increasingly leverage digital platforms and social networks to enhance visibility. However, significant disparities in investment, media coverage and public perception persist.

The study of female archetypes in sport has gained importance in recent years to understand how admiration is built and which values lead to lasting role models. Implementing a typology of relatable and value-based models for girls and adolescents requires diverse profiles, the promotion of meaningful values (leadership, resilience, commitment), tailored role model training and visibility strategies both in local and mass media settings. Impact is maximized when adolescent girls see themselves reflected in real and accessible examples, fostering both continued sports participation and a deeper sense of belonging (Kelly *et al.*, 2023).

The construction of female archetypes in sport should be seen as a strategic tool to promote sustained participation among adolescent girls. Admiration for athletes is based not only on their achievements but also on the values they project. Academic literature and case studies confirm that identification with diverse and socially relevant role models can serve as a protective factor against premature sports dropout. A value-based taxonomy—focussing on leadership, resilience and social engagement—helps create positive references in which young girls can see themselves and feel motivated to remain active in sport.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach with a predominantly quantitative orientation, aimed at analyzing social perceptions of female leadership in sport. The study is based on data from the “Spanish Female Sports Idols Barometer”, conducted by the consultancy Punto de Fuga (2024). The methodological objective was to identify patterns of admiration toward female athletes and to classify these patterns into recognizable and transferable leadership archetypes.

The qualitative study was based on in-depth interviews with experts in the sports industry. These interviews were used to identify and define the 11 key value vectors that currently characterize women's sport. In a second stage, these 11 vectors were operationalized in the quantitative survey and served as the basis for the statistical segmentation that produced the four archetypes.

In other words, the qualitative phase did not simply illustrate the quantitative findings; it directly informed them. First, expert input allowed us to conceptualize the relevant dimensions (the 11 vectors). Then, the quantitative analysis (1,003 surveys) measured the prevalence and internal structure of those dimensions in the general audience, which enabled us to identify and validate the four archetypes of female leadership in sport. Finally, we associated each archetype with specific high-profile athletes who embody those value vectors, making the archetypes both analytically robust and communicable. The overall aim of this mixed design was to determine how women's sport is currently perceived and to identify the motivational drivers that generate emotional connection between fans and female athletes.

3.1 Sample and research design

Fieldwork was conducted during the first quarter of 2024 through a structured questionnaire administered to a representative sample of 1,003 individuals residing in Spain. The sample included men and women aged 16 to 65, with quotas established by gender, age and autonomous community. This segmentation allowed for a generational and geographical analysis of perceptions regarding women's sport. The sampling was non-probabilistic by quotas, a common strategy in social research focused on symbolic representation and public perception and it was implemented via certified online panels. The sampling error was estimated at $\pm 3.1\%$ for a 95% confidence level, ensuring sufficient adequacy for inferential subgroup analysis.

3.2 Data collection instrument

The questionnaire was developed based on a prior literature review and exploratory workshops with professionals from the sports sector. It was structured into several sections, with particular emphasis on Question 10, which was the central focus of this analysis. Respondents were asked to select the three main reasons they admired a particular athlete from a set of 20 Spanish female athletes presented with photos and names. These athletes had been pre-selected by a multidisciplinary expert panel comprising journalists, former athletes, sports sociologists and sports marketing professionals.

Eleven possible reasons for admiration were provided, ranging from athletic success to social, emotional and identity-based factors:

- (1) Their sporting achievements
- (2) Their personal resilience and ability to overcome adversity
- (3) Their personality
- (4) Their advocacy for gender equality
- (5) The freshness and innovation they bring to sport
- (6) Their global visibility and popularity
- (7) Their commitment to mental health and wellbeing
- (8) Their role as inspiration for future generations
- (9) Their leadership
- (10) Their ability to break gender or cultural barriers
- (11) Other reasons

3.3 Statistical analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation techniques, with a focus on standardized residual scores (Pv-scores), which identify the strength of association between each athlete and the reasons for which they are admired. This approach allowed for the identification of both general trends and specific profiles for each public figure, ultimately placing them within distinct archetypical patterns.

The most frequently cited values and recurrent associations were then grouped into four broad symbolic territories, which were converted into analytical categories or archetypes. Internal validity of this classification was tested through a combination of cluster analysis and expert panel validation, ensuring the conceptual consistency of the resulting typologies.

4. Results

The survey results reveal several key axes that describe the current landscape of women's sports in Spain. Women's sports are no longer a passing trend—they represent a consolidated reality that continues to grow and shape culture, particularly by winning over key target groups, such as Generation Z and families. Female athletes are increasingly elevated to the status of idols: admiration leaves a legacy.

Among the 20 most admired female athletes:

- (1) Eight are retired (40% of the most admired sports figures).
- (2) Together, they represent 11 different sports disciplines, including long jump, swimming, tennis, badminton, motorsports, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronized swimming, weightlifting, race walking and football.

The “Barómetro de Ídolas del Deporte Español 2024” proposes an innovative model for analyzing female leadership in sport, identifying four main archetypes that synthesize how athletes connect with the public, the media and brands.

These archetypes are built around the reasons people admire female athletes, highlighting the qualities that set them apart. Athletic success is a common denominator, but the differences lie in how that success translates into unique forms of social impact and emotional resonance. These nuances enrich the way each athlete is perceived and valued, showing that the idolization of female sports figures is not uniform but rather a complex blend of achievements, values and personal narratives.

The proposed archetypes reflect not only sporting success but also the symbolic, emotional and social dimensions that make these women role models. This typology helps us to understand how female athletes construct influence beyond performance by incorporating identity, values, commitment and personal storytelling.

Statistical analysis led to the identification of four major archetypes or leadership styles—distinct models of charisma through which athletes resonate with audiences (Table 1):

- (1) Resilient Warriors: leaders of perseverance and determination.
- (2) Voices of Equality: leaders in the fight for gender equality.
- (3) Wellbeing Ambassadors: leaders committed to mental and physical wellness.
- (4) Charismatic Captains: emblematic leaders with strong collective influence.

Resilient Warriors are athletes whose careers are marked by personal and professional resilience. They face adversity with determination, perseverance and consistent effort, becoming icons of sacrifice and inner strength. Their leadership is grounded in professionalism and mental toughness. Athletes such as Carolina Marín, Sandra Sánchez and Teresa Perales embody this archetype, especially resonating with audiences that value silent, sustained hard work and individual merit.

Voices of Equality are defined by their activist role, taking strong public stances on gender equality and social justice. These athletes stand out not only for their talent but also for their commitment to inclusion, diversity and structural change within sport. Their influence goes beyond competition and transforms them into agents of empowerment for younger generations. Ana Peleteiro is a prime example of this archetype, widely admired for both her athletic achievements and her inclusive, activist discourse.

Charismatic Captains are athletes who, through personal charisma and emotional intelligence, emerge as generational symbols and unifying forces. Their leadership is not limited to technical or strategic roles but is rooted in shared values, camaraderie and the joy of sport. Alexia Putellas, Aitana Bonmatí and Mireia Belmonte fit this profile, known for captaining teams and embodying a collective identity in women’s sport.

Table 1. Summary of the four archetypes

Archetype	Core attributes	Values	Main representatives
Resilient Warriors	Determination, perseverance and sacrifice	Effort, professionalism and humility	Carolina Marín, Teresa Perales, Sandra Sánchez
Voices of Equality	Social change agents and break gender barriers	Courage and inclusion	Ana Peleteiro, Jennifer Hermoso, Laia Sanz
Wellbeing Ambassadors	Promote healthy lifestyles, balance and self-care	Empathy, ethics and solidarity	Almudena Cid, Ona Carbonell, Paula Badosa
Charismatic Captains	Charisma, team leadership and collective inspiration	Leadership, camaraderie and joy	Alexia Putellas, Mireia Belmonte, Aitana Bonmatí

Source(s): “Barómetro: Ídolas del deporte femenino” (Punto de Fuga, 2024)

Wellbeing Ambassadors are athletes whose influence stems from promoting a balanced, healthy lifestyle. Through their careers and public discourse, they advocate for physical and mental wellness, resonating with audiences focused on quality of life. Their leadership is characterized by authenticity, ethical commitment and social sensitivity. Though their visibility may be more subtle, their cultural relevance is growing in a context where holistic health is increasingly prioritized. Examples include Almudena Cid, Ona Carbonell and Paula Badosa.

It is important to note that these archetypes are not mutually exclusive. An athlete may embody traits from multiple profiles depending on the stage of their career, personal context and causes they choose to represent. The proposed typology broadens the concept of leadership in women’s sport by incorporating emotional, cultural and social variables that transcend athletic performance and enrich our understanding of public admiration.

The most admired athletes, in descending order of admiration, include Carolina Marín, Mireia Belmonte, Ana Peleteiro, Alexia Putellas, Arantxa Sánchez Vicario, Aitana Bonmatí, Almudena Cid, Gemma Mengual, Jennifer Hermoso, Ona Carbonell, Lydia Valentín, Teresa Perales, Conchita Martínez, Edurne Pasabán, Garbiñe Muguruza, Maria Pérez, Laia Sanz, Olga Carmona, Paula Badosa and Salma Paralluelo.

Social media analysis further revealed generational differences in athlete connectivity (Table 2). The top five idols differ significantly across generational groups, with Figures 1 and 2 illustrating which athletes resonate most with Gen Z & Gen Y versus Gen X & Boomers.

Table 2. Generational admiration of female sports idols

Generation Z	Generation Y	Generation X	Boomers
Carolina Marín	Carolina Marín	Carolina Marín	Carolina Marín
Mireia Belmonte	Mireia Belmonte	Mireia Belmonte	Arantxa Sánchez Vicario
Alexia Putellas	Alexia Putellas	Arantxa Sánchez Vicario	Mireia Belmonte
Ana Peleteiro	Ana Peleteiro	Almudena Cid	Ana Peleteiro
Aitana Bonmatí	Almudena Cid	Ana Peleteiro	Alexia Putellas

Source(s): “Barómetro: Ídolos del deporte femenino” (Punto de Fuga, 2024)

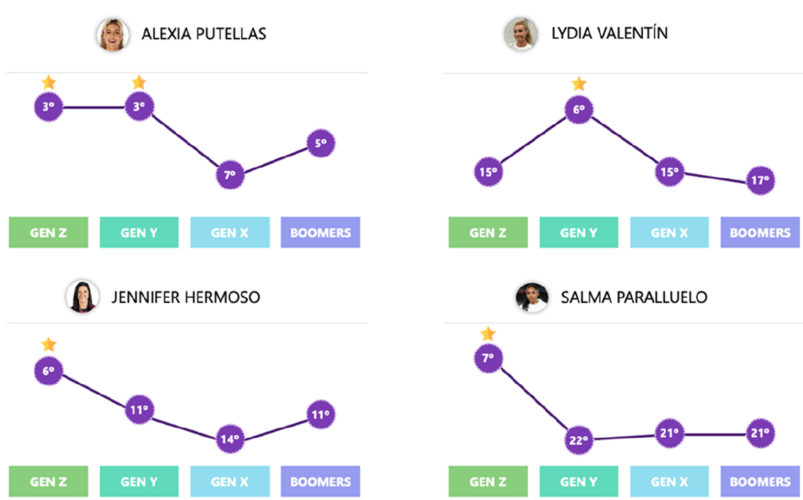


Figure 1. Top idols among Gen Z & Gen Y

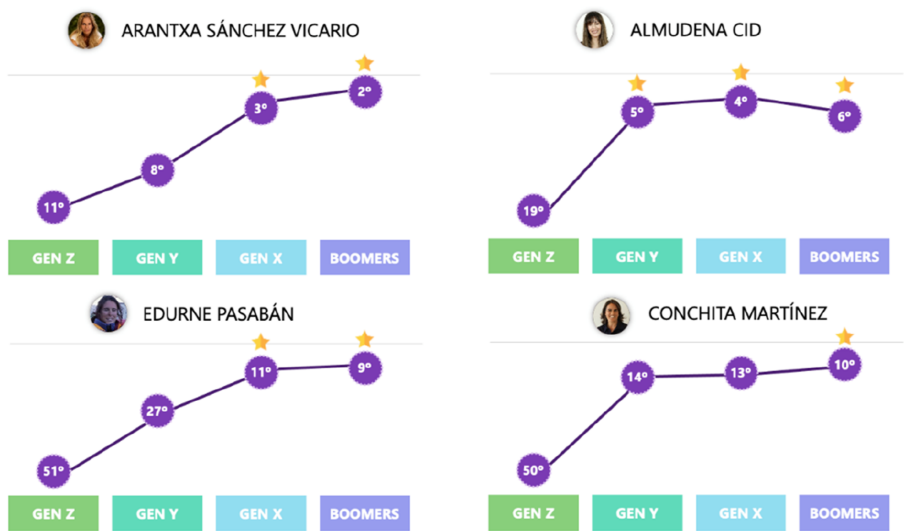


Figure 2. Top idols among Gen X & Boomers

5. Discussion

The results of the 2024 *Barómetro de Ídolas del Deporte Español* (Barometer of Female Sports Idols in Spain) reveal a structural transformation in how Spanish society perceives and values women’s sports. This shift is evident not only in the economic and media growth of sports practiced by women but also in the recognition of new forms of leadership and social influence embodied by female athletes. These athletes are no longer admired solely for their competitive achievements but also for their ability to represent values, inspire causes and construct identities with which the public feels emotionally and culturally connected.

One of the main contributions of this study is the identification of four major female leadership archetypes: Resilient Warriors, Voices of Equality, Charismatic Captains and Wellness Ambassadors. This typology helps explain how different athletes connect with different audiences not only based on their sporting achievements but also on their life stories, social engagement and communication styles. Women’s sports, in this regard, emerge as a polyphonic space in which multiple leadership models coexist, all of them valid and necessary to enrich the collective imagination of what it means to be a role model in sport.

From a sociological perspective, the diversity of admired profiles carries significant implications. Unlike traditional hierarchical or authoritarian leadership models, the female leadership emerging from this study is grounded in authenticity, empathy, commitment and the ability to build symbolic connections. The admiration for female athletes is emotionally complex, composed of layers of meaning that combine athletic merit, social causes, personal challenges overcome and inclusive leadership styles. This allows a broader range of individuals—particularly adolescents and young women—to identify more genuinely with these figures.

A central finding is that 40% of the most admired female athletes are already retired. This is particularly noteworthy, as it confirms that an athlete’s influence is not confined to their active competitive career. Rather, it reflects a cultural and symbolic form of leadership that remains relevant through memory, media presence, intergenerational transmission and consistency in values. Athletes such as Arantxa Sánchez Vicario, Teresa Perales and Almodena Cid continue to receive recognition, demonstrating that their legacy not only endures but continues to impact new generations of fans and sports professionals.

In terms of generational distribution, the study reveals a notable segmentation. While some athletes—such as Carolina Marín and Alexia Putellas—have a cross-generational impact, consistently ranking among the most admired across all age groups, others resonate more strongly with specific audiences. This phenomenon is partly shaped by generational value systems and by media consumption habits, especially the use of social media. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z, prioritize attributes such as authenticity, activism and emotional closeness, favouring content from athletes who are accessible and consistent across digital platforms. In contrast, older generations tend to value long careers, discipline and sustained effort. This differentiation suggests that archetypes are not static but evolve alongside cultural, technological and generational contexts.

Beyond providing an analytical framework, the proposed archetypes have practical implications for gender-aware sports marketing and sponsorship. Brands seeking to associate with women's sports must recognize that an athlete's value lies not only in their medals but also in their capacity to represent causes, build emotional connections and foster community. The archetypes defined in this study allow for the segmentation of athletes according to these attributes, enabling more authentic and coherent partnerships with greater reputational impact. In a context of increasing corporate social responsibility, female athletes act as brand ambassadors who promote not only products but also values, lifestyles and cultural change.

Finally, this study opens new avenues for reflection and research. The construction of archetypes offers a theoretical and practical framework for understanding how women lead through sport and how their trajectories can have a multiplier effect in terms of motivation, retention and empowerment—particularly during critical stages such as adolescence. Future research could assess, for example, the impact of these models on the retention of girls and young women in federated sports, the choice of sports-related career paths, or the perceptions of female leadership in other fields.

In conclusion, the analysis of female leadership archetypes based on the *Barómetro de Ídolas 2024* not only reveals a paradigm shift in how female athletes are admired but also contributes to consolidating an inclusive, diverse and emotionally resonant vision of leadership in contemporary sport. This perspective is key to fostering a more equitable sports culture committed to social transformation.

6. Conclusions

This study offers an in-depth understanding of the depth and complexity of female leadership in Spanish sport through an innovative archetype-based approach. Far from constituting a uniform category, the figure of the admired female athlete is shaped by a dynamic combination of competitive, narrative, emotional and symbolic elements that interact with generational differences, media environments and social values. The data from the *Barómetro de Ídolas del Deporte 2024* not only reveal the consolidation of women's sport as a cultural and economic phenomenon but also highlight new forms of emotional connection between athletes and their audiences.

One of the key conclusions is that while athletic success remains the foundation for admiration, it is no longer the sole criterion for an athlete to become an idol. Values such as resilience, social commitment, empathy and advocacy for physical and mental well-being increasingly shape the construction of female role models. This transformation responds to a broader social demand for leadership models that are authentic, inclusive and ethically engaged, and it directly influences the motivation and continued participation of young women in sport.

The categorization of athletes into four archetypes—Resilient Warriors, Voices of Equality, Charismatic Captains and Wellbeing Ambassadors—helps to structure and visualize the various ways women exercise leadership through sport. This typology not only facilitates the identification of positive role models for girls and adolescents but also provides a valuable tool for communication strategies, equality policies and gender-conscious sponsorship initiatives. Its flexibility—allowing a single figure to embody multiple archetypes—enhances its relevance

by accommodating the complexity of each athlete's personal trajectory. Unlike trait/behavioural approaches, we operationalize public value attributions as the basis of legitimacy and derive four measurable archetypes that integrate emotional, cultural and social dimensions beyond performance.

The study also emphasizes the importance of generational factors. Perceptions of female leadership vary significantly by age group, with figures like Carolina Marín, Alexia Putellas and Mireia Belmonte standing out for their broad appeal across generations. However, there are notable differences in admiration hierarchies, particularly between Gen Z and Baby Boomers, indicating that leadership styles and values are not perceived uniformly across cultural contexts. This generational dimension should be considered in public policy design and in initiatives aimed at promoting women's sport among adolescents.

Another key conclusion is that a significant proportion of the most admired athletes are no longer active. This underscores the creation of a symbolic legacy that transcends the temporality of competitive performance. Female idols leave a lasting cultural and emotional imprint that can be strategically mobilized to promote values, foster belonging and combat early dropout from sports—particularly among girls and young women.

The study also highlights the growing role of social media as a space for personal branding, direct audience engagement and the consolidation of public influence. Athletes who communicate their values, causes and sporting vision consistently are more likely to become enduring role models. This reinforces the need to support athletes in developing communication and public positioning skills, while also addressing the risks of exposure and media pressure that come with such visibility.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer a useful framework for sports institutions, sponsoring brands, media organizations and entities promoting gender equality in sport. Integrating the archetype perspective into talent development strategies, institutional communication and social campaigns can contribute effectively to building a more inclusive, diverse and sustainable sports culture.

Finally, this research opens new avenues for further exploration. Future studies should investigate how these archetypes manifest in different cultural contexts, how they influence career choices among aspiring female athletes and how they intersect with identity factors such as social class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Longitudinal research could also examine the impact of these models on retention in federated sports and on female leadership in areas such as sports management, governance, or specialized journalism.

In short, the study of female leadership archetypes in sport brings visibility and legitimacy to forms of influence that have traditionally been overlooked or undervalued. Recognizing, analyzing and promoting these models is a critical step not only in consolidating women's sport but in transforming sport into a more equitable, representative, and transformative space.

Notes

1. <https://www.sportspro.com/insights/analysis/most-marketable-athletes-sponsor-campaigns-personal-endorsements/>[accessed: 28/10/2025].
2. <https://www.2playbook.com/biblioteca-2playbook/2playbook-intelligence>

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