

# WORK IT OUT

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A TYPOLOGY OF MANAGERIAL ATHLETICISM IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS

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## **Work it Out - A Typology of Managerial Athleticism in Professional Service Firms**

### **Abstract:**

In the past years, the interest in sports and fitness among executives has increased, coining the term managerial athleticism. This qualitative study explores the phenomenon of managerial athleticism and how it expresses itself in professional service firms. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 32 partners, managers, and executives within these firms and by applying social identity theory and goal-setting theory, this thesis examines how identity, gender, and goals shape the expression of managerial athleticism. The ideal-type analysis was used to create a typology, in turn identifying 4 types of managerial athletes; Feel-goods, Fulfillment-functionalists, Health-functionalists, and Fanatics. The results show that firstly, there are different types of managerial athletes. Secondly, the managerial athletes' goals vary in terms of tangibility and connection their pursuits have to their identity. Thirdly, the differences and similarities identified create the basis for explaining how the types' training regimes differ from one another. This thesis aids in explaining the phenomenon of managerial athleticism and thereby contributes to broadening the understanding of a contemporary leadership characteristic and expression.

### **Keywords:**

Managerial athleticism, leadership, professional service firms, ideal type analysis, typology

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*Ellen and Lea*

## Definitions and Abbreviations

<b>Term</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Managerial Athleticism	MA	The adoption of a physically fit and active lifestyle by corporate executives as a means of improving their leadership abilities and overall organizational performance (Johansson, 2017).
Professional Service Firm	PSF	Organizations where the primary business is to offer expert knowledge and expertise to their clients, with the purpose of providing advice, diagnosis, or implementation of solutions to problems or opportunities (von Nordenflycht, 2010).
Social Identity Theory	SIT	Theory that explains how individuals derive their identity from membership in social groups by classifying themselves and others into different categories based on certain characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

There is no denying that exercise and sports provide numerous mental and physical benefits and are widely recognized as a way to enhance health and well-being (WHO, 2022). One group where this is widely adopted is among corporate executives. Fitness has been suggested to become an essential component of their lives as a means to increase their managerial performance (Burton et al., 2012; Dong et al., 2019; Limbach & Sonnenburg, 2015; McDowell-Larsen et al., 2002; Raisio et al., 2021). Testaments to this trend include the creation of the Ironman Executive Challenge, a triathlon competition dedicated to executives, and the doubling of the number of CEOs completing at least one marathon between 2001 and 2010 (Thanem & Cederström, 2018).

To capture this rising trend, the term *Managerial athleticism* (MA) refers to the adoption of a physically fit and active lifestyle by corporate executives as a means for improving their leadership abilities (Johansson, 2017). Sports and fitness bear many connotations that are valued in corporate life, such as competitiveness, strength, endurance, and emphasis on goal-setting (Jeong et al., 2021; Knoppers, 2011; Rasio et al., 2021). Within professional service firms (PSFs), characterized by high job demands and performance expectations (Costas et al., 2016; Michel, 2011; Riach & Cutcher, 2014), MA has become prevalent and could be viewed as a strategy to deal with intense work pressure (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Limbach & Sonnenburg, 2015; Reitz et al., 2020). Consequently, the adaptation has been noted to impact self-identity and fuel a portrayal of executives as fit individuals who prioritize their health and are in full control of their bodies (Knoppers, 2011; Marvelias, 2015; Rasio et al., 2021). As many of the connotations to sports bear typical masculine values (Johansson, 2017), it raises the question of how identity, goals, and gender reflects into leadership roles and how the expression of MA is shaped.

With leadership ideals evolving and as the phenomenon of MA unfolds, it becomes important to decipher what being a managerial athlete entails. Given the high demands on executives (Hambrick et al., 2005), it is possible that MA continues to be a prevalent response, making it important to grasp the nuances of this phenomenon. This thesis therefore aims to create a typology to compare different expressions of MA through the lens of social identity theory (SIT) and goal-setting theory, enhancing the understanding of the phenomenon.

## **1.2. Prior research and research gap**

Physical fitness has been noted to be important in high-demanding jobs and consequently MA has become prevalent in professional service firms (PSFs) (Costas et al., 2016; Michel, 2011; Riach & Cutcher, 2014). MA has thus been researched as a way to deal with work demands (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2019; Limbach & Sonnenburg, 2015; Reitz et al., 2020) and several researchers have found positive relationships between physical activity and managerial performance (e.g., Burton et al., 2012; Dong et al., 2019; Limbach & Sonnenburg, 2015; McDowell-Larsen et al., 2002;). Thus, athleticism can be considered a strategy to both cope with demands, and to define the identity and corporate reality of individuals in leading positions (Heuse et al., 2021; Johansson, 2017; Maravelias, 2015; ). In turn, the perceived effects of MA have been proven to be multifaceted with concern to leaders, their organization, and society (Rasio et al., 2021).

MA has also been proven to impact goals and goal-setting within professional and private domains (Johansson, 2017). The impact from a competitive sports background has been noted as one explanation (Rasio et al., 2021), and a link between exercise and goal-attainment among small business owners have been researched (Goldsby et al., 2005). MA can thus be a way to deal with demands, set and work for goals, while also shaping identity. Past studies have acknowledged differences in the expressions and perceptions of MA between gender (Fotaki, 2013; Johansson et al., 2017; Johansson, 2017). Yet, the implication of gender for shaping the identity with the aforementioned aspects of goal-setting and attainment has not been researched together in the context of a PSFs, resulting in a research gap. By investigating how goal-setting and identity shape the expression of MA through the creation of a typology, this can broaden the understanding of MA is shaped and expressed among leaders.

## **1.3. Purpose and research question**

The aim is to investigate the expression of MA by creating a typology through understanding if, and how, social identity and goal-setting shape the expression of MA among managers, through a micro perspective. By studying and understanding MA in PSFs, one can learn from these leaders and broaden the understanding of how they enact and evaluate athleticism, goals, and identity. This understanding can shed light on how these leaders navigate the complexities of their job in PSFs. By applying the ideal-type analysis, the thesis aims to contribute with a typology of different types of managerial athletes with concern to identity and goal-setting, to widen the image and idea of who a managerial athlete is. Therefore, the research questions of this thesis is:

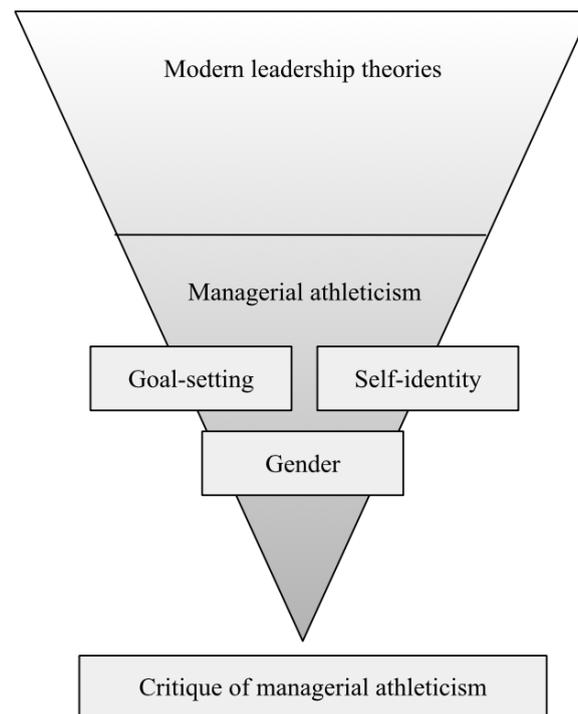
*How does social identity and goal setting shape the expression of managerial athleticism in professional service firms?*

#### **1.4. Primary focus and delimitation**

Since the phenomenon of MA has been noted to be prevalent in PSF, the thesis limits itself to managers, executives, and partners working at privately owned PSFs located in Stockholm. These work-places are characterized by high levels of work pressure, long working hours, an always-on culture, and high significance of individual performance (Alvesson, 2004). Typical examples of PSFs are firms within management consulting, investment banking, law, executive search, and IT consultancy, which will be reflected in the sample of the thesis (Alvesson, 2004; Greenwood et al., 2005).

## 2. Literature Review

In order to gain a better understanding of MA in relation to identity and goal-setting the literature review presents the following areas; i) Modern leadership theories and the corporate athlete, ii), Goals and athleticism iii), Self-image and self-identity of leaders, iv) Gender and managerial athleticism, v) Critique of managerial athleticism (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *Funnel of Literature Review (Dahlfors & Koerner, 2023).*

### 2.1 Modern leadership theories and the corporate athlete

Leadership literature is extensive and offers a wide range of ideas on how the most effective, charismatic or transformational leader is. The discourse on what traits and skills are the most necessary for leaders is ongoing. Still, typical masculine values are routinely privileged in assessments of what makes an effective leader (Höpfl et al., 2007). One idea of the modern leader as presented by Loehr and Schwartz (2001) is the ‘corporate athlete’. They propose that executives can sustain high performance over time in environments of high pressure, if they train in a systematic and multilevel way, similar to elite athletes. This suggests that leaders need to display both mental and physical health to optimize their performance. By identifying how

MA can be expressed differently among managers contributes to broadening the view of modern leadership characteristics and behaviors.

## **2.2 Managerial athleticism**

### **2.2.1 Goals and athleticism**

Goal-setting is a commonly used mental skill in sports. Research has adopted the goal-setting theory in sports psychology (Jeong et al., 2021), management, and leadership studies (e.g. Bronkhorst et al., 2015; Heslin et al., 2009; Neubert et al., 2016;), making the link between athletic pursuits and leadership integrated. Goldsby et al. (2005) investigated if entrepreneur's who maintain a fitness regime are more effective in goal-attainment, expressed by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. They discovered that exercise helps entrepreneurs improve performance and goal-attainment. As entrepreneurs are under a high level of stress (ibid), similar to managers in PSFs, it is interesting to investigate how goal-setting within PSFs shapes the expression of MA.

In line with Goldsby et al. (2005), literature suggests that exercise can improve goal-setting, especially when combined with a competitive sports background. This can be reflected in management work through emphasis on measurability, analysis of results, and subsequent learning and improvement (Rasio et al., 2021). However, emphasis on competitiveness and goal-setting have also been recognized as a threat to managers overall well-being (ibid). Moreover, goal-setting has been highlighted among managers and within sports as an important habit integrated into their professional lives, which increases their commitment to achieving their professional goals set. Thus, their ability to control and discipline their physical capacity leads to a higher ability to accomplish goals at work (Johansson, 2017). Since goal-setting is a prominent part of sports and of many manager's professional responsibility, it is important to understand how they relate to each other, and if they do this differently, which has not been examined in the setting of PSFs.

### **2.2.2 Self-image and self-identity of leaders**

From the perspective of the leaders, it has been found that many aim to project a positive self-image to inspire and support their employees by promoting healthy behaviors (Brown & Trevino, 2005). Moreover, good health is widely perceived as a reflection of good character and competent personal qualities (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Thus, maintaining and achieving physical fitness can be seen as a self-leadership strategy enhancing self-control and self-management (Lovelace et al., 2007). Yet, the notion of how these perceived

expressions vary among managerial athletes remains unexplored. Although athleticism can become an expression for a leader's competence and powerfulness through the control of their health and body (Maravelias, 2015; Sinclair, 2005), a broader understanding of their pursuits can be developed by understanding managerial athletes through their self-identity. Furthermore, the connection between self-image and self-identity plays a significant role in the construction of a professional identity (Alvesson, 2001; Covaleski et al., 1998). Thus, MA can offer a way to regulate one's self-image and leadership-identity. Yet, no research has investigated how the self-identity varies among managerial athletes.

### **2.2.3 Gender and managerial athleticism**

Leaman and Carrington (1985) asserts that an excessive focus on athletic values reinforces existing gender-based stereotypes and reproduces gender marginality. Petrie and Greenleaf (2011) further argues that men tend to engage in sports to primarily achieve a hegemonic masculine identity. Masculine sports are characterized by impulse, determination, competitiveness, physical aggression, endurance, and self-control (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Woodward, 2009). For men, physique is often thought to define masculinity and is, besides physical attraction, a symbol of masculine values such as strength, power, confidence, and independence (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011). On the contrary, women use their involvement in athletic activities to attain a socially legitimate status comparable to that of men (Leaman & Carrington, 1985). Another reasoning presented by Johansson et al. (2017) suggests that women on the one hand engage with the masculine symbolic order to form their identity, while they on the other hand, seek to overcome abjection. This implies that MA can have connections to some sports and characteristics, which can create a narrow frame for leaders to comply with if they want to reap the positive associations relating to MA. As discussed in section 2.1, leadership traits are not unilateral and typical masculine displays are not the only skills important for leaders. This study can thus enhance the understanding of how leadership ideals and MA is shaped by social identity and gender.

### **2.3 Critique of managerial athleticism**

The concept of MA has been problematized and Sinclair (2005) argues that the excessive pressure and prescriptions on how to manage your physique can create a 'prison' for leaders, making them feel judged if they deviate from the idealized image. Building an image of yourself as a managerial athlete may lead to an excessive occupation of physical attributes and promotion of a preoccupation with 'perfect bodies' (Roberts et al., 2005; Sinclair, 2005). Furthermore Johansson (2017) challenges the belief that athleticism is a desirable trait in a good

leader by highlighting that a leader's personal interests and habits should not be assumed to automatically enhance their leadership or image as a good leader. Within organizations, Butler (1993) and Kenny (2010) raises the idea that the strong need for recognition and the fear of being abjected is powerful, making individuals comply with norms even if it causes harm, which could influence the expression of MA. In support of this, Ghin (2019) suggests that individuals who deviate from the norm of a fit, exercising leaders risk not being hired or promoted to a leadership position in demanding jobs. Masculine connotations and heroic individualism in relation to MA have also been investigated. Competitive sports were found to enhance individualistic, performance-oriented, and stereotypical masculine identities (e.g., Bardon et al., 2021; Ghin, 2019; Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). In research from Rasio et al. (2021) the downsides of MA were highlighted concerning the thin border between harmonious and obsessive passion for physical movement. They problematized the rise of stereotypes from physical active leaders as overachievers or superhumans, suggesting that this can be harmful for the leading individual's belief of attaining a narrow role and identity. By offering a wider perspective on MA with concern to social identity and goal-setting the authors aim to shed light on the different forms of MA and contribute to the existing literature.

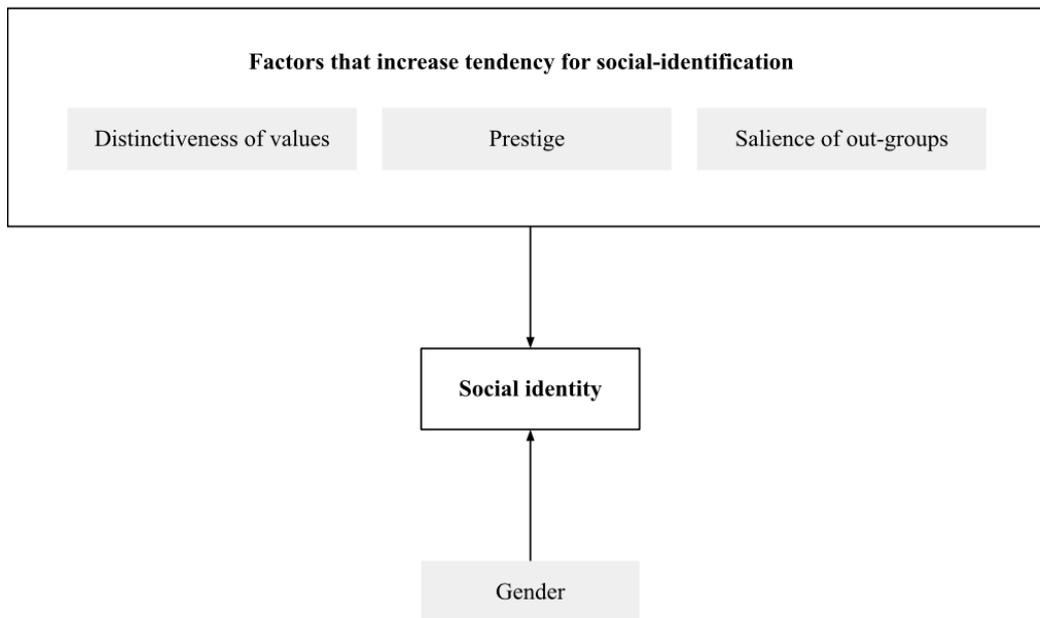
### 3. Theoretical Framework

MA has been researched from a micro-perspective, yet it has not investigated if and how identity and goal-setting varies among managerial athletes. Given the identified research gap, the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke & Latham, 2002) can be combined to identify how the phenomenon of MA is shaped and influenced. Based on these theories presented subsequently, a typology can be built, drawing upon the patterns which the theories propose should vary among individuals.

#### 3.1 Social identity theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggests that people classify themselves and others into different categories based on certain characteristics. Firstly, these categorizations serve as a way for people to segment and order the social environment. Secondly, social classification permits individuals to define themselves in relation to the social environment and social identification occurs when a person perceives to belong to a defined social group. In turn, the self-categorization may enhance or reduce behaviors, values, and attitudes. While several studies on SIT refer to intergroup relationships and group processes (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bartels et al., 2006; van Dick et al., 2006), the relevance of this theory for this study is on the individual level. Thus, the application is delimited to the individual's perceived social identity in regards to athleticism. Furthermore, Rees et al. (2015) suggests that the SIT can contribute to understanding phenomenon and behaviors related to sport, highlighting the relevance of viewing MA through the lens of social identity.

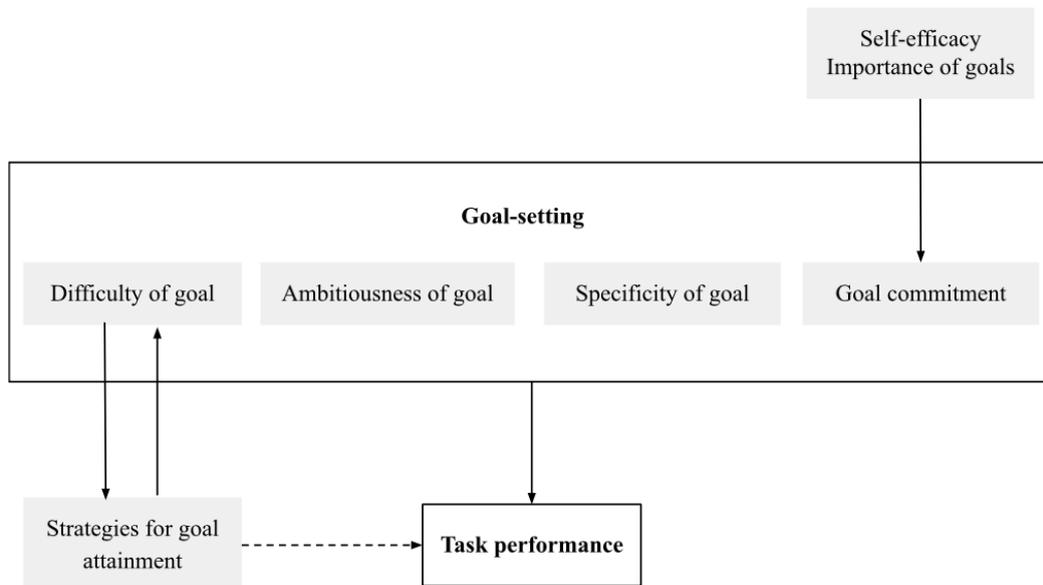
Social identity draws upon several factors summarized in Figure 2. As a part of the identification and categorization, the positive and negative distinctiveness of a group's values and practices are used. This can in turn reframe associations, or change the means of comparing from a perceived out-group to an in-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Oakes & Turner, 1981). The prestige of the group is also related to identification since individuals want to identify as winners (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Chatman et al., 1986; Dutton et al., 1994; Fuller et al., 2006). Salience of the perceived out-groups can furthermore reinforce awareness of an in-group (Allen et al., 1983; Turner, 1981). Additionally, gender has been proposed to impact the perceived identity. Carter (2014) suggests that gender can be a status characteristic in individual, role, and group identity. Furthermore, Schmader and Bock (2015) propose that traits can become conflated with the desired gender identity resulting in active avoidance of traits incompatible with the desired gender identity.



**Figure 2:** Summary of SIT, edited by Dahlfors & Koerner (2023)

### 3.2 Goal-setting theory

Since goal-setting is a commonly adopted tool in sports and for managers (Jeong et al., 2021), the goal-setting theory can contribute to understanding MA. One of the pillar-stones from Locke and Latham (1990, 2002) is that high, hard, and specific goals lead to a higher level of task performance, compared to goals that are vague, easy, or abstract. Under the circumstance that an individual is committed to the goal, has the ability to attain it, and does not have conflicting goals, they suggest a positive linear relationship between goal difficulty and task performance. In addition, two factors have been identified to enhance the goal commitment. Firstly, the individual's degree of self-efficacy to achieve the goal. Secondly, the expected outcomes of achieving the goal in terms of importance to other people or themselves. Moreover, Earley and Perry (1987) proposed that people who are trained in strategies and have high-performance goals become more likely to adopt appropriate strategies. Elaborating on that note, Smith et al. (1990) argued that when individuals are presented with tasks which are related to a goal, they will deliberately plan and develop strategies that enable them to attain the goals. This implies that those with higher goals tend to develop strategies which work towards increased performance (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Summary of goal-setting theory, edited by Dahlfors & Koerner (2023)

### 3.3 Theory discussion and application

With the SIT, the empirics of this study can be analyzed to understand how MA is affected by perceptions, values, and gender. Uncovering how the interviewees' self-identity shapes their expression of MA, and the extent of the perceived prestige they associate with being a managerial athlete, could thus contribute to the identification of different types of MA. Moreover, SIT can examine how they value an identification as a managerial athlete and how it can be reflected in other aspects of life. Concerning the goal-setting theory, actions relating to goal-setting and attainment can be linked to individual performance. This can provide a perspective of how athletic goals could relate to professional goals as seen in previous research (Goldsby et al., 2005; Johansson, 2017; Rasio et al., 2021).

The SIT has been criticized for overemphasizing group identity and norms, and thereby failing to account for the complexities of the construct of individual identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Since this thesis investigates managers' social identity on the notion of their own beliefs, values, and attitudes towards exercise, the risk of neglecting the individual perceptions is low. Similarly, one prominent critique towards the goal-setting theory is that it oversimplifies the complex nature of human behavior and neglects individual differences (Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke & Latham, 2007). Thus, goal-setting alone cannot explain why individual behavior as the theory fails to acknowledge contextual factors such as social support, organizational culture, and

leadership style (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). The authors thus acknowledge that other theoretical lenses could provide valuable insights to the phenomenon of MA. However, combining the theories provides more insights and depth than by looking at them in isolation. Using other theories would evidently highlight other aspects of MA. Yet, for the purpose of this thesis and identified research gap, the theories in combination provide a suitable theoretical lens for creating a typology.

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Research stance

In order to provide an answer to how social identity and goal-setting shape the expression of MA in PSFs, a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was conducted with a deductive approach. Based on the literature review and identified research gap, the interview guide was structured to identify if there are different types of managerial athletes with concern to goal-setting and identity, to categorize them according to the ideal-type analysis. This study was therefore conducted within the objective ontology where reality is given and externally observable (Saunders et al., 2019). As the aim is to provide nuances to the concept of MA, the epistemology is positivistic and assumes the existence of the physical and social world to be an external reality (ibid).

### 4.2 Data collection

#### 4.2.1 Sample

In accordance with the ideal-type analysis, at least 30 interviews were needed to build a typology (Stapley et al., 2021). In total, 62 people were contacted via email and 32 semi-structured interviews were carried out. None of the participants belonged to the same PSF, and 2 participants were the result of snowball sampling (Bell et al., 2019). All candidates fulfilled the criteria stated below. When contacting candidates, the authors sought to have diversity in age and industry with the final sample including 17 females and 15 males (Appendix A). The male participants range in age between 30 to 61, and the females age between 35 to 53, and the sample reflects at least one candidate of each gender in each industry (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Division of interviews

<b>Professional Service Firm Industry</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>
Communications Consultancy	5	4	1
Executive Search	5	4	1
Financial Services*	10	2	8
IT Consultancy	4	1	3
Law Firm	4	3	1
Management Consulting	4	3	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>15</b>

\*Firms in Auditing, Asset Management, Investment Banking, Private Equity

#### **4.2.2 Criteria for the interviewees**

A purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2019) of the participants was conducted. All interviewees work at privately owned PSFs as a partner, manager, or executive. LinkedIn was used to identify their role, firm, and industry. The authors conducted a purposive sampling based on the research question, thus the candidates needed to have an interest in exercise or athletic pursuits. However, the authors did not prior to interviewing decide who qualifies but instead described the study when contacting potential candidates (Appendix B). During the interviews the authors found that all participants had an interest in exercise to varying degrees and with different attitudes.

#### **4.2.3 Interview process**

The interviews were carried out with an interview guide (Appendix C) and ranged between 30-40 minutes. All interviews were carried out with both authors present, permitting flexibility in the conversations, several interpretations, and potential ways of clarifying the gathered material, both during and after the interviews. A majority of interviews were carried out physically at the interviewees' offices, while 6 of the 32 interviews were conducted digitally due to interviewee preferences. The effect of this on the empirics is not seen to be significant, as all interviews followed the interview guide and had the same conditions for follow-up questions. While body language could not be determined, this was not something that significantly impacted the physical interviews, suggesting that the adoption of digital interviews did not significantly affect the dependability and credibility of the thesis (Bell et al., 2019).

#### **4.2.4 Transcription and coding**

With the approval from the candidates, all interviews were transcribed live by one of the authors, taking turns in interviewing and transcribing. Later, the transcribed material was coded individually by the authors to identify themes and patterns, building up to the ideal-type analysis elaborated on in section 4.3.1. This was done after a trial-coding to confirm that the authors interpreted the transcribed material in a similar manner. The interviews were carried out and transcribed in the mother tongue of the interviewees, Swedish, to reduce any type of language barriers potentially causing misunderstandings. To ensure accuracy, the empirical data was translated upon using certain quotations.

#### **4.2.5 Discussion of sample and empirical gathering**

The sampling could have been improved by a balanced gender division in the industries. An additional consideration is the geographic and potential demographic delimitation of the study, since the concept of MA could be a micro trend within PSFs in Stockholm. Furthermore, by

doing a purposive sampling and reaching out to managers and executives through email, responses may be skewed so that those that engaged in physical activity are those who are the most inclined to respond and participate in such a study. Therefore, the authors acknowledge that the transferability given another location or other industries might yield different results and explanations to the prevalence and existence of MA (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Concerning the participant's credibility and reliability there are several aspects that can impact the interviewees' testimonies such as self-ideal representation and interviewee bias (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviewees might have prior knowledge and preconceptions about MA, including its positive and negative implications. This could have impacted or influenced their answers depending on their view of themselves in relation to the phenomenon. To counteract this, the authors highlighted the aim of the thesis prior to and in the interviews, pointing to the importance of discarding any preconceptions of how a managerial athlete should be. Additionally, to mitigate bias and skewness, interviewees were reminded of their anonymity of both them and the company, encouraging them to answer without restraint (Saunders et al., 2019). Concerning the empirical credibility, the authors on the one hand acknowledge that structured interviews could have been beneficial with concern to the deductive approach and aim of building a typology. Therefore, it can be argued that structured interviews would have provided a consistent data collection, increasing the reliability of the typology. As the authors concluded a typology from the sample, the sample size was sufficient to reach saturation given the theoretical framework and ideal-type analysis, despite the semi-structured approach.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

#### **4.3.1 Ideal-type analysis**

The ideal-type analysis was applied to analyze the material from the 32 interviews to identify if there are different types of managerial athletes, building a typology. A typology categorizes objects or people based on similarities and differences and is commonly used in social sciences (Stapley et al., 2022). This method was chosen since it allows for a thorough analysis of similarities and differences within and between interviewees, enabling clear identification of patterns and perspectives. The data analysis followed the seven steps as suggested by Stapley et al. (2021) in Figure 4 and the categorization process involved dividing the participants into distinct types based on shared characteristics (ibid). The similarities and the differences between the groups are clear. In turn, every participant classified as a certain type has similar characteristics and the differences between the groups are clear (Kluge, 2000).

#### 7 steps to Ideal-Type Analysis by Stapley et al. (2021)

1. Researchers familiarize themselves with the dataset, by, for example, conducting interviews and transcribing interviews.
2. Researchers summarize each interview into case reconstructions (description of the data for each participant) that are relevant to the research questions.
3. The case reconstructions are used to form the ideal types through systematically comparing and contrasting each case with each other in order to explore similarities and differences.
4. The researchers then identify a single case as the 'optimal case' to represent each ideal type. Optimal cases are those that best represent the pattern of similar cases in each group.
5. Each ideal type is given a name and described in detail, reflecting the optimal case and the group of similar cases it represents.
6. An independent researcher attempts to regroup the cases based on these descriptions to ensure the clarity and differentiation of ideal-type descriptions.
7. The report summarizes similarities and differences within and between each ideal type, including a comparison with the optimal case.

**Figure 4:** *Ideal-Type Analysis (Stapley et al., 2021) summarized by Dahlfors & Koerner (2023)*

Step one was further elaborated on by identifying first- and second order themes to detect specific characteristics of each type. The first five steps have then been revisited multiple times, refining the types and regrouping the participants. For the sixth step, a peer, enrolled in the same bachelor program at Stockholm School of Economics, grouped the participants based on the provided description of each participant with participants' gender being unknown to avoid any gender-based biases (Appendix D). Based on that session, insights were gathered which contributed towards enhancing the distinctiveness between the groups. While not all cases in each group have the exact same experience, there is a fundamental similarity linking them and separating them from other groups (Stapley et al., 2021). The ideal-types presented in the empirics describe the participants that best represent the pattern of similarities between the participants in each group. They serve as the reference point for comparison within and between groups and therefore help in understanding how the expression of MA can vary with concern to identity and goal-setting (Stuhr & Wachholz, 2001; Wachholz & Stuhr, 1999).

#### **4.3.2 Discussion of ideal-type analysis**

In comparison to other qualitative data analysis techniques, for example thematic approach, ideal-type analysis does not seek to only identify a set of themes across the dataset, but rather to

identify groupings of participants within the dataset (Stapley et al., 2022). First- and second order themes were identified through coding, including elements of thematic analysis in the ideal type analysis. Yet, the findings are presented with a focus on how the individual's experience relates to the experiences of other participants in the dataset, in accordance with ideal-type analysis, rather than presenting findings thematically. With this approach, the authors acknowledge the risk of creating stereotypes based on the gathered material and interpretation of it. The purpose of the study is not to examine if certain types of the identified managerial athletes are more or less desirable than others, but rather to provide perspectives on the nuances of MA by taking a positivistic research stance. Furthermore, Stapley et al. (2022) only suggests one round of an independent researcher to re-group the participants according to their case descriptions, however the authors of this study acknowledge that another round could have yielded more insights and potentially improved the typology. It is thus a risk that the interpretation of the interview material by the authors could have focused on certain characteristics of the participants, which could have influenced the case descriptions and thus the regrouping of cases. However, this was not deemed an issue since the re-grouping occurred several times by the authors themselves.

#### **4.4 GDPR and ethical consideration**

Prior to all interviews, all participants agreed to sign a GDPR consent form. By doing so, the authors were granted access to transcribe the interviews and work with the associated material. For the purpose of the interviewees confidentiality and privacy all participants name's and firm connections have been anonymized by pseudonym names and by only disclosing their gender, industry, and main sports interest as seen in Appendix A (Saunders et al., 2019). This was especially important with the risk of stereotyping since projecting values towards the interviewees could create harmful associations. To counteract this, the semi-structured interview approach was necessary from an ethical standpoint as this allowed for flexibility and permitted the participants to only disclose information they were comfortable with.

## 5. Empirics

From the 32 semi-structured interviews with managers, partners, and executives in PSFs, four types of managerial athletes were identified through the ideal-type analysis. These are presented in their own distinctiveness in the subsequent section. In each section, the ideal-type is presented along with the within-group characteristics based on the coded material and identified views, values, and attitudes towards physical activity. The presentation of the types is followed by overlaps between the types. In Appendix E, extensive quotations are presented.

**Table 2:** Compilation of Managerial Athlete types

	<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Gender Division</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>Feel-goods</b>	<i><b>Ideal type: Alice</b></i> Anna, Vera, Signe, Maja, Astrid, Philip, Ester, Johanna, Katarina	Total: 10 Males: 1 Females: 9	- Exercise is fun, social and needs to be voluntary - The focus is recovery oriented - Avoids quantifiable goals
<b>Fulfillment Functionalists</b>	<i><b>Ideal type: Sebastian</b></i> Mathias, Hedvig, Ulrika, Simon, Charlotte, Ingrid	Total: 7 Males: 2 Females: 5	- Exercise as a means to achieve a feeling - Disinterest in competition - Exercise as a necessity for representation at work
<b>Health functionalists</b>	<i><b>Ideal type: Stina</b></i> Felicia, Erik, Alexander, David, Niklas	Total: 6 Males: 4 Females: 2	- Highly disciplined exercise - Tangible and measurable goals are dominant - Holistic approach
<b>Fanatics</b>	<i><b>Ideal type: Patrik</b></i> Nils, Jesper, Carl, Fredrik, Benjamin, Jonathan, Emelie, Amalia	Total: 9 Males: 7 Females: 2	- Goal-driven training - Exercise as a lifestyle - Competitiveness in both work and training

### 5.1 Feel-goods

The ideal type *Feel-good*, Alice, describes exercise as something she loves to do. She practices running on a regular basis and loves to physically move her body. If she had the choice she would happily work less, only to engage in more physical activity. The prominent goal with exercise is to reduce stress, feel stronger, and build an overall better physical health. Exercise is

integrated into her everyday life through social aspects with her partner, friends, and family. She actively avoids engaging in competitions, tracking, or setting tangible goals relating to exercise.

### **5.1.1 Exercise is fun, social and voluntary**

The primary goal behind working out is that it is fun, enjoyable, lust filled, and voluntary. There is no need of optimizing the choice of work-out based on quantifiable goals, but rather assuring that the feeling of well-being is achieved. The social aspect is closely linked to the choice of sport, as exercise is a way to spend time with friends, family, and colleagues.

*“In the mornings we usually work out together at the gym, I feel good about working out, it is like my sanctuary.” - Maja*

*“I experienced how good I felt about it [exercise], and clearing thoughts and getting rid of stress and so on, it’s a good and social thing.” - Philip*

### **5.1.2 The focus is recovery oriented**

With the primary goal being to exercise because it's fun and lust-driven, an indirect goal is to get recovery. It is a shared idea that exercise is an opportunity for recovery and recharging. Another explanation is to avoid injuries, sick leave, compensate for aging, and proactively build better health.

*“You want your body to be sustainable throughout life, I am going to work for 25 more years and then everything [in training] cannot be perfect.” - Alice*

*“Finding a balance is there all the time, the training helps me to get it [balance] and gives me time to reflect about what I think is important and want to prioritize.” - Astrid*

### **5.1.3 Avoids quantifiable goals**

A common denominator of the type of goals among the Feel-goods are that they are intangible. Boundaries are set and there is an active avoidance to participate in sports competitions to avoid excessive pressure.

*“I am more conscious of not pushing too hard or to set too high goals after being burned out.” - Katarina*

*“I don’t have any goals with my training, it is to feel good [in the body], that is the goal.” -  
Signe*

## **5.2 Fulfillment-functionalists**

The ideal-type *Fulfillment-functionalist*, Sebastian, seeks mainly to achieve a feeling with his exercise routine. He wants to feel strong and accomplished, but has no specifically formulated goals for this purpose, besides the feeling afterwards and the break from work. The connection between stress at work and exercise is prominent, as exercise is seen as vital to adhere to work pressure in the long-term. Exercise is partly motivated by wanting to appear physically and mentally fit.

### **5.2.1 Exercise as a means to achieve a feeling**

Fulfillment-functionalists see physical activity as a tool to achieve a desired feeling, for example feeling challenged or strong.

*“I have stopped thinking about it [goals]. I did that earlier but now I don’t care, I just want to achieve the feeling.” - Sebastian*

*“It [exercise] is probably an identity thing. I want to feel alert and fresh and like a person who takes care of me.” - Ingrid*

### **5.2.2 Disinterest in competition**

They dislike competition, and their goals are intangible because they prefer to not strive for and associate their training with quantifiable results.

*“I didn’t need goals for motivation, I experienced that I pushed myself too hard and that it spilled over on my social life.” - Mathias*

*“It has been shown that when I do it [exercise] without performance, it happens more often.” -  
Simon*

### **5.2.3 Exercise as a necessity for representation at work**

Fulfillment-functionalists view exercise as a necessary part of their work-life. Yet, in comparison to Fanatics, they do not see it as an opportunity to perform, but rather to keep themselves physically representable.

*“The physical aspect alone will not improve performance, but how you think about it will. The internal narrative around it. [...] In this world [PSFs], we are our own tools so we have to take care of ourselves, and many people neglect that.” - Hedvig*

*“It’s important to last a long time, from a health perspective but also to cope with work and remain physically attractive as a partner [at work].” - Ulrika*

### **5.3 Health-functionalists**

The ideal type *Health-functionalist*, Stina, cycles everyday to work unconditionally, regardless of weather conditions. She has a routine for her training and incorporates multiple measurable goals. She would never give up the exercise in fear of the physical and mental health issues she would face. The view on exercise is that it is an obligation one has towards themselves and their health.

#### **5.3.1 Highly disciplined exercise**

Health-functionalists live and act in a routine over their training, having it as a non-negotiable aspect. They prioritize and make sure that the exercise is carried out in accordance to their goals. They set clear deadlines and schedules for themselves in order to achieve the desired amount of exercise they deem necessary for their health.

*“I train a total of 4 times a week, sometimes 5 but always at least 4. [...] been doing Vasaloppet for 12 years in a row.” - Niklas*

*“I always do three sessions every week, I make sure it happens and everyday I always walk at least 10 000 steps.” - Felicia*

#### **5.3.2 Tangible and measurable goals are dominant**

Health-functionalists set tangible and measurable goals. Measurable goals include keeping track of statistics regarding steps taken, kilometers run, duration, oxygen uptake capacity, and blood pressure. These goals are set to optimize individual health, and avoid diseases and injuries.

*“Of course it [goal-setting] is important, I am a competitive person, I compete against myself and want to beat my personal record of 6 km in rowing.” - Stina*

*“I want to be like one of the King’s soldiers, I want to run the mile under one hour pretty effortlessly [...] I want to know that I have a good physical level.” - Erik*

### **5.3.3 Holistic approach**

While the goal is to optimize physical health, there is less significance of performance in connection to work life. While exercise is important, the bigger picture of health including diet, temperature and light, is highlighted through a holistic approach.

*“I am focused on light, cold, heat, and nutrition. That’s what I focus on and what I like to see.”*  
- David

*“I work at a company with very ambitious people, you could sit and work everyday if you want to, but there must be a balance, you have to prioritize certain things in life.” - Alexander*

## **5.4 Fanatics**

The ideal-type *Fanatic*, Patrik, works out on average 1.75 hours per day. He competes in one triathlon per year, Iron Mans, and other cycling competitions. He rides his bike 20-30 kilometers to work everyday, regardless of the weather, and is able to track over 20 different segments on an app to beat his own time, or race faster than the ones in his network. He acknowledges that he has a strong winner mentality at work and in exercise, and that he likes to compete. Low-intensity training is not prioritized because of time constraints.

### **5.4.1 Goal-driven training**

Fanatic managerial athletes are characterized by their goal-driven training. The goals are tangible and focused around measurements, such as time, kilometers, number of workouts per week. Low intensity-training is not common.

*“I need a goal for motivation. [...] I want to run a marathon at 3:30h.” - Jesper*

*“There are clear cut-offs that are mathematically pleasant and they have been my specific goals.” - Carl*

### **5.4.2 Exercise as a lifestyle**

Fanatics sometimes train multiple times a day. To fit in these workouts, exercise is integrated as an essential part of their everyday life for example, by running or bicycling to work, making it a part of their lifestyle and pursued no matter the external conditions.

*“I normally commute by bike year round, regardless of the weather.” - Patrik*

*“The number of workouts in a week is probably 7 to 12. Especially with triathlon that is 3 sports [the workouts] become 1 to 5 hours long. So in a week I train between 15 to 20 hours on average. It is like a part-time job.” - Fredrik*

### **5.4.3 Competitiveness in both work and training**

Many compete in triathlons or in marathons, Iron Mans or Vasaloppet, and see it as a way to challenge and improve themselves. They have time or rankings in the races as quantifiable goals that they train for and acknowledge their competitiveness is a personality trait that is reflected in their work life as well.

*“I am extremely goal-oriented and structured when it comes to such a journey. I don't forget a goal on Monday, in my career it has really always been that way.” - Benjamin*

*“I compete in everything I do, every negotiation is [a competition], it is something natural that belongs together.” - Emelie*

## **5.5 Overlaps**

In contrast from the between group differences, there are elements that were not distinctly different between the types or similar within types. The factors could thus not be used as a foundation for the typology, yet, they are relevant for the understanding of MA and for the credibility of the thesis. The following factors have been recognized as varying among all managerial athletes; attitudes towards workplace initiatives, preferences in types of exercise form, frequency, and physical activity in the social circle.

### **5.5.1. Attitude towards workplace initiatives**

There was no identified pattern regarding the attitude towards workplace initiatives, or benefits provided by the company. Those who followed a training routine, did this mostly on their own, or during office hours when managing their own schedule. Some stated that they participated in

workplace initiatives such as running clubs, or utilized gym facilities provided by the company. Workplace initiatives were not expressed as a condition for pursuing physical activity, although for some it facilitated it.

*“I wish I could say that I always participate in our company activities, but I don't do that. For my own part, it [training] is an opportunity for recovery and focus on myself. If I do it in a work context, I focus on my workers, and then it becomes work.”* - Anna, Feel-good

*“No one books meetings on Thursday lunch because that's when the running club takes place.”* - Benjamin, Fanatic

### **5.5.2 Exercise in social circle**

Some managerial athletes acknowledged that there is an increased awareness of physical activity among friends, colleagues, and family. Yet, for many the interest and engagement in physical activity varied in their social circle, and no clear pattern between or within the types were identified. Thus, an active or inactive social circle was not a determinant for different types of managerial athletes.

*“It is mixed. I am not only attracted to communities of people who exercise.”* - Erik, Health-functionalist

*“Absolutely, family, friends, colleagues, that [exercise] is what we do together, it is a way of being with each other, skiing, sailing. It is as natural as waking up and brushing your teeth.”* - Anna, Feel-good

### **5.5.3 Types of exercise and frequency**

The most common exercises, found in all types, were running, strength, skiing, and cycling. Overall, individual sports are dominant. Yet, social and team sports such as bootcamps, golf, and padel were common. While some types of exercise only exist within certain groups, there is a wide range of types and frequency of training within and between groups. Thus, type of sports and frequency was not found to be a sufficient distinction to determine which ideal type the participant belonged to (Table 3).

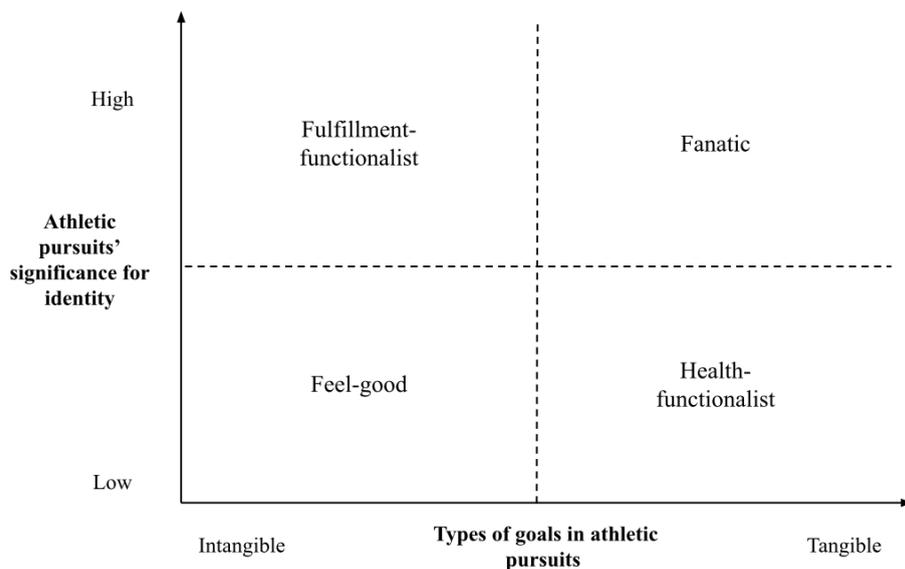
**Table 3:** Summarized frequency and type of training within the identified types

<b>Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Type of training</b>
<b>Feel-goods</b>	1 - 4 times a week	Strength, dancing, running, skiing, hiking, mountain biking, walking, cycling, golf, spinning, yoga, padel, tennis
<b>Fulfillment-functionalists</b>	2 - 4 times a week	Golf, skiing, cycling, strength, running, padel, gymnastics, martial arts, yoga, climbing, golf
<b>Health-functionalists</b>	1 - 5 times a week	Skiing, running, strength, walking, padel, yoga, cycling, tennis
<b>Fanatics</b>	4 - 12 times a week	Swimming, running, cycling, strength, skiing, boxing, climbing, tennis, surfing, snowboarding

While there are overlaps and similarities between the identified types, these are not distinctive enough to be applied in the typology. To further understand the different types, the goal-setting theory and SIT will be applied to analyze how they shape the expression of MA and the overlaps.

## 6. Analysis

To answer the research question “*How does social identity and goal setting shape the expression of managerial athleticism in professional service firms?*”, the empirical findings propose that there are four types of managerial athletes. By plotting the types on two axes illustrating tangibility of goals, and significance of athletic pursuits for the identity, the empirical data can be analyzed by understanding the interplay between the two aspects, and in turn how the types differ from each other. In the empirical material, the purpose of setting and attaining goals varies among the participants. The tangibleness of the goals depends on the degree to which it is specific, well-defined, and able to objectively measure (Locke & Latham, 1990; 2002). The perceived self-identity and view of their athletic pursuits varies depending on differing values and perceptions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The combination of these aspects suggest that there are multiple expressions of MA. These can be viewed as training regimes, consisting of the managerial athletes’ goals, behavior, values, and perceptions of exercise.



**Figure 5:** *Types of managerial athletes in PSFs (Dahlfors & Koerner, 2023)*

### 6.1 Feel-goods

Feel-goods do not view training as performance, nor as a factor of evaluating themselves against others. This implies that Feel-goods incorporate what they consider to be fun, voluntary and

what they have suitable resources for doing into their training regime. According to the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this suggests that their active avoidance of competitions and quantifiable goals becomes a proof that performance in sports is not something they seek to associate with their identity. Despite their lack of tangible and quantifiable goals, they seemingly reach their goals even if they are intangible and hard to measure which contradicts the goal-setting theory. Regardless of their self-efficacy to attain high and tangible goals, their dedication, perceived freedom of their training, and low associated pressure with training, are factors that lead to their goal-attainment. Since their active avoidance of quantifiable goals is what helps them feel-good about their exercise, this further contradicts Locke & Latham (1990), as setting harder, specific goals would not enhance their well-being or task performance.

The recovery-orientation of Feel-goods could be a response to others' training pursuits, that Feel-goods do not want to associate with their identity. Seeing others actively competing, becoming injured, getting sick, or experiencing burn out or pressure from exercise personally, has made the prestige in engaging in intense and competitive exercise low. This further builds upon Rasio et al. (2021), which suggests that overemphasis on goals and competitiveness can become a threat to overall well-being. Thus, Feel-goods classify rigorous or intense training regimes as non-desirable (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Consequently, Feel-goods may refer to themselves and their view of their training as an in-group which in turn strengthens and reinforces their identity making their values more distinctive in contrast to non-recovery oriented regimes, in contrast to e.g. Fanatics. Another explanation could be that competitive aspects of exercise are perceived to be male attributes and therefore non-desirable for their identity and the self-image they wish to uphold (Schmader & Bock, 2015). By thus actively avoiding association with those traits the relative importance of exercise for their identity becomes less (Carter, 2014). This could explain why 1 out of 15 males were categorized as a Feel-good managerial athlete, suggesting that men as proposed by Petrie and Greenleaf (2011) still tend to engage in sports primarily to achieve a masculine identity. Meanwhile, as noted among the Feel-goods, women generally intend to uphold their self-identity through other ideals, not related to competitive exercise.

## **6.2 Fulfillment-functionalists**

In the Fulfillment-functionalists regime, the goal-setting itself does not fulfill their training, but their active work towards reaching them and, by doing so, staying persistent with an identity they want to be associated with (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The feeling achieved by training and as

a means to represent one at work arguably makes the recognition of training more prestigious than the tangible results from the training. The focus on representation could be a strategy to fit in and deal with the pressure from working in a PSF, as opposed to competing in training. Without properly doing so, they might increase the risk of being embodying less desirable traits of a stressed, sedentary, and overworked individual who does not prioritize their mental or physical health, potentially discrediting their competences.

Their disinterest in competition points towards a purpose with their regime that is aligned with a need for self-fulfillment and embodying a desirable identity. As training is important to feel representable and competent, there is not as much need to set quantifiable goals, as self-fulfillment cannot be measured in tangible ways. This contradicts the goal-setting theory as they seemingly still achieve their goals. However, as the outcomes of achieving this feeling is highly important this increases their commitment to their exercise regime, as it separates them from non desirable traits and strengthens their identity and representation.

With the Fulfillment-functionalists gender division being less skewed compared to that of Feel-goods and Fanatics, the notion of self-fulfillment through training could lack roots in gender connotations. However, as suggested by Johansson et al. (2017), their view could also be explained by overcoming abjection, and reaching a social acceptance by embodying a prestigious ideal.

### **6.3 Health-functionalists**

There is a strong interconnectedness among the Health-functionalists' disciplined training and their tangible and measurable goals. The combination of these characteristics serve as a confirmation of the goal-setting theory as their tangible goals consequently calls for effort to achieve them, resulting in their disciplined training regime (Locke & Latham, 1990). Furthermore, the Health-functionalists encompass a holistic approach to their training which can symbolize an awareness that they are not willing to do everything to reach their goals. Yet, they focus on several aspects of health e.g, diet, light, and temperature, confirming that exercise can become an excessive preoccupation (Roberts et al., 2005; Sinclair, 2005). Still, the link between athletic pursuits and identity is decoupled since their holistic approach to health entails more than just exercise, suggesting that training is less associated with their identity, but rather focused on creating an optimized training regime for their health.

Unlike the Fanatics, they do not embody their athletic pursuits into their identity since they do not exercise to reach prestigious ideals, but for the purpose of sustaining and improving their health (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Since health-related aspects can take form physically, in contrast to feelings, Health-functionalists are, in comparison to Feel-goods and Fulfillment-functionalists, more inclined to set tangible goals as it makes it more clear whether they have achieved their goal or not. While being healthy can be a reflection of good character and competent personal qualities (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 1998) and in that sense carry prestige, this was not brought up as a driver for the exercise regime among the identified Health-functionalists. Instead, measurements and quantifiable goals work as a receipt for their exercise regime, further suggesting why they perceive their goals to be of high value and importance. In turn, these values build into their strategy of reaching their goals and effectively their self-identity and self-efficacy.

Similarly to the Fulfillment-functionalists, the gender division is less skewed. This suggests that overall goal-setting and the need to sustain and improve health, has no specific connection to typical masculine or feminine attributes, and does not conflate gender identity (Schmader & Bock, 2015). Thus, goal-setting and social identity shape the Health-functionalists expression of MA in a way that makes their goals the transactional receipt for the input of their exercise. As their desired output is sustained or improved health, the Health-functionalist focuses more on their individual preferences of exercise and less on socially desirable or prestigious traits of managerial athletes.

#### **6.4 Fanatics**

Competitions and quantifiable goal-setting are habits reflected in the Fanatics training regimes. This is arguably explained by a high perceived importance of reaching the set goals by themselves and in the view of others (Locke & Latham, 1990). This could also be explained by a high level of self-efficacy since Fanatics seemingly continue to reach their goals and subsequently set new goals. By doing so their self-efficacy can be interpreted as a way for them to practice self-leadership (Lovelace et al., 2007), turning themselves into their own coach. Consequently, the emphasis on competition and goal-orientation, confirms the goal-setting theory as Fanatic's high goals inevitably lead to higher performance in both their training and work. This could explain why a significant part of their training and work becomes interlinked and associated with competing, performance, and setting goals.

By training to achieve their goals, in order to set even harder goals, Fanatics work to constantly excel and enhance the task performance. Therefore, their willingness to sustain their perceived

identity as a managerial athlete is high, suggesting that they perceive sports related attributes with a high status and prestige which also are valued in the corporate sphere (Knoppers, 2011). Another explanation behind their goal-setting could also be to sustain the image of a hard-working individual to strengthen their desired identity. This could in turn be explained by a desire to embody prestigious ideals and increase their salience to distinguish themselves from other less desirable traits. This can explain why low-intensity training is deprioritized as it is not recognized as a means to reach their goals, resulting in an active avoidance of low-intensity training. Consequently this becomes a part of their training regime and strategy, to faster reach their goals. The overrepresentation of male participants identified as Fanatics (7 out of 15), in contrast to females (2 out of 17), can be explained by the Fanatic's attitude towards goal-setting and performance that are characterized by determination, competitiveness, and goal-driven training, aligning with traditional masculine values (Messner 2002; Woodward 2009). This gender division suggests that men tend to prioritize goal-driven training and competitiveness in the context of their professional work, confirming that competitive sports may enhance individualistic, performance-oriented, quantifiable and stereotypical masculine identities (Bardon et al., 2021).

## **6.5 Overlaps**

In the light of the research question, the empirics presented three overlaps, namely; attitudes to workplace initiatives, exercise in social circle, and types and frequency of exercise. These were not distinctly different between, or similar within the types. Therefore, the findings could not be integrated into the typology. Yet, through the lens of SIT and goal-setting theory, the overlaps provide a nuanced understanding of MA.

### **6.5.1 Attitudes to workplace initiatives**

The goal-setting theory suggests that the variance in participation and view of initiatives will be evaluated in line with their goals for their training. Therefore, this thesis suggests that all types can participate in workplace initiatives, if it builds into their strategy and training regime of reaching their implicit or explicit goals. Moreover, what is cultivated within the organization could have an impact if the initiative is perceived as something of high value and prestigious. This suggests that those who train at workplace initiatives can do so to be perceived as a desired person and to reap the connotations of sports that are valued in work-life (Knoppers, 2011). In turn, this could strengthen their self-identity which further builds into their individual training regime. Similarly, the contrary could hold if the work-place training conflicts with the corresponding goals.

### **6.5.2 Exercise in social circle**

The managerial athlete's social circle could be viewed in a similar light. With varying testimonies among all the participants of sports interest among their family and friends, training in the social circle can be sought for, or actively avoided as a strategy to correspond to their training regime. The presence of individuals with sport interest in one's social circle could impact the managerial athlete's view of training depending on how they view those individuals. Therefore, the social circle can influence the managerial athlete to various degrees but arguably not shape the expression of MA alone. Similarly, the managerial athlete can influence their social circle, further embodying and enacting values they wish to associate their training with as an aim to strengthen their identity.

### **6.5.3 Type and frequency of training**

Consistent with attitudes towards workplace initiatives and degree of exercise in social circle, the preferred frequency, and type of training is dependent on the goals for the athletic pursuits and identity. As there are multiple strategies to achieve the different types of goals and desired identities found among managerial athletes, no specific frequency or type of training is distinctive for any of the types. Managerial athletes thus evaluate what type and frequency of training will make them uphold their training regime. For some, team sports may carry connotations that one wishes to highly identify with, while for some individual sports may contribute to their desired identity more, and others completely avoid certain types of sports because they fail to contribute to their goals or perception of a desired identity.

While the identified overlaps show that there are commonalities between, and differences within, the groups, these do not triumph the distinct characteristics of the types. Each type has a unique expression of MA, shaped by their goal-setting and the significance of athletic pursuits for their identity. Still, the overlaps serve to increase the credibility and authenticity of the thesis by showing the interconnectedness of different aspects within MA, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

### 7.1 Answer to the research question

To answer the research question: *How does social identity and goal-setting shape the expression of managerial athleticism in professional service firms*, this study has concluded that MA in PSFs is shaped in four unique combinations, identified as four ideal-types; Feel-goods, Fulfillment-functionalists, Health-functionalists, and Fanatics. Each type demonstrates a training regime represented in the model (Figure 5). The chosen theories thus provide a high explanatory power for identifying and understanding the different types. However, it is important to note that the overlaps between groups showcase nuances to the phenomenon of MA. While these nuances are not sufficient to neglect the types, they are significant for understanding the complexities of MA.

### 7.2 Contributions

Through the typology presented, the authors widen the image of what constitutes a managerial athlete with regards to goal-setting and social identity. Moreover, the expression of MA is not static, but rather dependent on notions of different values and perceptions, in turn explaining why there are both nuances within the identified groups and overlaps between them. This further builds into the prior research that MA can become an expression for a leader's competence and discipline through the control of the body (Sinclair 2005, Maravelias, 2015). In turn, the importance of MA for the construction of the professional identity seems to play a role for the Fulfillment-functionalists and the Fanatics, however not for the Feel-goods and Health-functionalists. This both confirms and challenges what Covaleski et al. (1998) and Alvesson (2001) says about self-identity playing a significant role in the construction of a professional identity.

The identified types show that the expression of MA and how it relates to an expression of competence varies. This confirms that MA could be a strategy taking different forms identified by the training regimes, to deal with demands that rise within PSFs and from being a leader (Lovelace et al., 2007, Johansson 2017). Through this, the authors showcase that the characteristics associated with MA (Johansson, 2017) should be broadened which in turn could make more leaders reap the benefits associated with MA. Moreover, through looking at gender through the SIT and goal-setting theory, the study challenges and confirms the notion that typical masculine values are emphasized within MA (Meriläinen et al., 2015; Johansson et al.,

2017). While there is a skewness among men within Fanatics, displaying competitiveness and other masculine connotations, and there is a recognition of other types of managerial athletes that do not identify with these values.

Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that it is important to avoid stereotyping managerial athletes and emphasize that athleticism should not be assumed to translate into good leadership qualities (Johansson, 2017, Rasio et al., 2021) since stereotypes of managerial athletes as overachievers or superhumans can be harmful for the leader's view on identity (Rasio et al., 2021). Deciphering how social identity and goal-setting shape the expression of MA, the authors have enhanced the understanding of the phenomenon, expanding on what makes a managerial athlete.

### **7.3 Implications**

Since the expression of MA takes different forms, the findings suggest that different managerial athletes have different needs, preferences, and behaviors. In turn, this implies that these behaviors could affect their environment in various ways. From an organizational perspective, the embodiment of ideals can contribute to exclusion of non-managerial athletes. This is important to acknowledge to avoid the creation of abjection within a company culture opposed to reaping positive benefits of exercising (Butler, 1993; Johansson, 2017; Kenny, 2010). From an individual perspective, MA should thus not only be considered a positive trait (Johansson et al., 2017, Sinclair, 2005), since overreliance on a training regime could affect both others' and the leaders' well-being.

As seen among e.g., Feel-goods and Fulfillment-functionalists, the link between MA and work performance does not have to be in the form of goal-setting, but would rather be because of other perceived effects of MA, such as self-leadership, discipline, and cognitive abilities (Alvesson, 2001; Covaleski et al., 1998; Lovelace et al., 2007; Johansson, 2017). Contrarily, the Fanatics and Health-functionalists have specified goals, but varying perceptions of how MA relates to their professional identity. The study also implies that all managerial athletes within this sample have a training regime to partly deal with work-related demands further confirming Lovelace et al. (2007) and Limbach and Sonnenburg (2015). Yet, the forms of the training regimes are governed by different beliefs, perceptions, and values. There is thus no universal training regime to achieve enhanced well-being or work performance which implies that everyone can create their own regime.

#### **7.4 Limitations**

This study was conducted by taking a snap-shot in time of the managerial athletes' views and thoughts. Following managerial athletes over a longer period of time could have enriched the study by getting to know the participants in depth and whether the expression of MA changes over time. With a longer time frame, goal-attainment and potential discrepancies could be examined, as currently the examination of actual goal attainment was beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, the theoretical lens was chosen based on the identified research gap, however other theories could serve to explain the prevalence of MA and enrich the creation of a typology.

#### **7.5 Future research**

As MA is prevalent among both leaders and in demanding environments, one could further investigate if the adoption and expression of MA is necessary to adhere to these environments or the leading role. The prevalence of MA in other contexts and environments, such as other private organizations, government owned companies, or non-profit organizations, could be interesting to investigate to understand how and why MA arises and how if it does so because of the work environment. Additionally, looking at expressions among non-managers could be relevant to understand to what degree MA is affected by the pressure and job demands that come with being a partner, executive, or manager.

Furthermore, the notion of how and if managerial athletic attributes are desirable leadership traits and if these perceptions are influenced by gender of the managerial athlete could be further analyzed. In addition, studying the perceptions and the implications of MA from the perspective of non-managerial athletes, followers, and groups could contribute towards understanding MA's impact on others within an organization. Furthermore, an organizational perspective could contribute to understanding how athletic pursuits can be promoted in a sustainable and inclusive way within organizations so that employees, beyond leaders, can reap the positive associated benefits of MA.

#### **7.6 Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the phenomenon of MA among managers, partners, and executives in PSFs. The findings reveal that there are 4 different types of managerial athletes. They vary in their connection to their identity and the tangibility of their goals, which widens the idea of who a managerial athlete is. Despite overlaps between the types, the differences between them are not overshadowed by their similarities, as each type has a unique combination of values for their

identity and goal-setting, creating an exercise regime to adhere to those. Through this thesis, the authors contribute to the discourse of MA, providing a foundation for further research on the phenomenon and its effects on individuals, leadership, and organizations. Overall, the results of this study have implications for both organizations and individuals, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of MA in the workplace as it is prevalent among leaders.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - List of Interviewees

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Alias</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Main sports focus</b>
<b>Executive search</b>	Philip	Partner	Male	Walking, strength
	Charlotte	Manager	Female	Running, yoga, strength
	Ulrika	Partner	Female	Strength, gymnastics, padel
	Maja	Executive	Female	Strength, cycling, golf, running
	Alice	Executive	Female	Running, dancing, strength, mountainbike, hiking, skiing
<b>Law firm</b>	Benjamin	Partner	Male	Triathlon (running, swimming, cycling)
	Emelie	Partner	Female	Running, swimming
	Anna	Partner	Female	Strength, running, tennis, yoga
	Ingrid	Partner	Female	Walking, running, skiing, swimming
<b>IT Consultancy</b>	Simon	Manager	Male	Strength, climbing, golf, skiing
	Carl	Executive	Male	Running, strength, boxing
	Katarina	Executive	Female	Yoga, walking, running
<b>Financial Services</b>	Jonathan	Partner	Male	Climbing, surfing, snowboarding, tennis, running, cycling
	David	Partner	Male	Running, cycling, strength
	Mathias	Partner	Male	Running, cycling, strength
	Jesper	Manager	Male	Cycling, running, strength, skiing
	Niklas	Manager	Male	Running, skiing, strength
	Patrik	Partner	Male	Cycling, swimming, running, skiing
	Nils	Partner	Male	Running, strength, cycling, skiing
	Sebastian	Manager	Male	Strength, skiing, golf
	Felicia	Partner	Female	Skiing, running, strength, walking
	Johanna	Partner	Female	Skiing, running, strength
	Amalia	Partner	Female	Endurance, strength
<b>Management Consulting</b>	Alexander	Partner	Male	Running, skiing, tennis

	Erik	Partner	Male	Running, floorball
	Hedvig	Partner	Female	Yoga, martial arts
	Stina	Executive	Female	Cycling, tennis, running, strength
	Ester	Executive	Female	Running, strength
<b>Communications consultancy</b>	Fredrik	Executive	Male	Triathlon (running, cycling, swimming), skiing
	Astrid	Manager	Female	Padel, skiing, running
	Signe	Partner	Female	Walking, strength
	Vera	Manager	Female	Spinning, running, strength, kayaking, skiing

## Appendix B - Contact Email (Translated to English)

*Emails were sent out from the author's Stockholm School of Economics emails.*

Hi [name of person contacted],

My name is [name of author contacting] and I'm contacting you together with my thesis partner [name of other author] from Stockholm School of Economics regarding our thesis about exercise and health among individuals in leading positions. We think that this is both important and interesting and our goal is therefore to investigate what different forms exercise and health can take among these individuals.

We see that you are a suitable candidate for our study, and therefore wonder if you would be willing to participate in a short interview, around 30 minutes.

During the interview, we will ask questions about your views on training, health and exercise, and how it is expressed for you and at your workplace.

We are flexible with time and place and can adapt completely to your schedule. It would be deeply appreciated if you want to contribute to our study.

Warm regards,  
Ellen & Lea

## Appendix C - Interview Guide (Translated to English)

Inform about the purpose of the thesis and research question. Inform that the participation is voluntary and that the disclosure made will be completely anonymized.

1. Tell us about your current role.
2. What does the company do?
3. What are your areas of responsibility?
  
4. How would you describe the company's view on exercise?
5. Does the company support a healthy lifestyle among the employees?
  
6. Is everyone part of these activities/initiatives?
7. Tell us about your view on physical activity.
8. What forms of exercise do you engage in?
9. How do you transport yourself to and from work?
10. How do you work out? (Alone/with others)
11. How often during a week do you work out?
12. Do you engage in low intensity training?
  
13. How long have you had this interest in exercise?
14. Do you have any goals with your training?
15. Have you participated in sports competitions?
16. What is your view on physical results?
17. Is your view on exercise reflected into other parts of life?
18. Do people in your surrounding have an interest in exercise?
  
19. Would you like to clarify something?
20. Would you like to share a reflection or return to a question?
21. Could you recommend us to contact anyone in your network for the study?

## Appendix D - Example of Case Description

*The participant was classified as a Feel-good.*

Participant X runs, plays tennis or goes to the gym 4 times a week. In addition, they also practice yoga every day. For them, physical activity is a moment of relaxation and self-focus. They do not acknowledge exercise as a way to assert themselves nor do they associate a higher athletic performance with better work performance. They deem that it is not sustainable to always chase performance and wins, and instead prioritize time for recovery and self-reflection. Physical and tangible results are uninteresting, the main goal is to keep up and remain energized as they age.

## Appendix E - Extensive Quotations

### Feel-goods

<b>Exercise is fun, social and needs to be voluntary</b>	<b>The focus is recovery and sustainably oriented</b>	<b>Avoids quantifiable goals</b>
<p>“I get energy from other people, it’s the group dynamic. When I choose a form of exercise, I like to choose group exercise classes because I think it creates energy and motivation.” - Vera</p> <p>“[Working out] with family, friends, and colleagues, that is what we do together, it is a way of hanging out” - Anna</p> <p>“I love exercising, running, and love to move.” - Alice</p> <p>“I am a serial trainer, I have my gym-card. I usually wait for inspiration to grab me and then I go exercise. Now I have not been there on a month” - Signe</p> <p>“The exercise is not connected to anxiety if I don’t manage to do it, it’s more about feeling really good and enjoying it when I do it” - Astrid</p> <p>“It [exercise] needs to be fun, otherwise I can’t do it” - Katarina</p> <p>“When I can’t train I miss it because I get so much energy from it, it makes me happy and I think it’s so fun” - Astrid</p>	<p>“You need to have time for recovery and reflection, everything cannot be a competition” - Anna</p> <p>“I want to feel good in my body and not have pain anywhere. I want to be able to lift my children.” - Ester</p> <p>“The importance of physical activity for long-term sustainability is something I stand for and talk to employees about.” - Johanna</p> <p>“The need for exercise and what you exercise and how you eat changes with your age and it’s important to talk about it from a health perspective.” - Vera</p> <p>“To excel in an intellectual profession, you have to unplug sometimes, you can’t just push push, sometimes you have to unplug.” - Signe</p>	<p>“To have energy and feel good is the primary goal, the physical results are not interesting” - Anna</p> <p>“I’ve never had that [goal]. I do not think I got a kick out of that [time-keeping] being the goal either. For me it has not been about that kind [physical] of goal setting.” - Johanna</p> <p>“I have never cared about times and so on. Maybe I have a too relaxed approach to training.” - Ester</p> <p>“I try to avoid it [measuring]. I stop myself because I think it is very easy that if you are performance-oriented, it is easy that training does not become stress recovery but becomes performance.” - Alice</p> <p>“No competitions, I don’t think I ever will do one again, it tears to much on the body” - Philip</p> <p>“Apart from feeling good. Not any explicit [goals] and I don’t record how much I lift or bench press or how many burpees I do.” - Astrid</p>

## Fulfillment-functionalists

Exercise as a means to achieve a feeling	Disinterest in competition	Exercise as a necessity for representation at work
<p>“[My goal is when] I feel that I cannot do any more, that my mind and body are blocked, and getting there is a lot of fun.” - Sebastian</p> <p>“ I like to perform and want it to be difficult, to be challenging.” - Hedvig</p> <p>“I have never felt that it [training] is something I do to keep my weight, but rather because it is fun and that it feels fun” - Mathias</p> <p>“I have never identified myself as a sporty person but I’m probably very utilitarian, I exercise to feel good and to feel strong. ” - Ulrika</p> <p>“It was hard in the beginning with the 6.30 training session, but then when you have done it, it feels nice.” - Charlotte</p>	<p>“I want to be better but I have no goals to win or participate in competitions.” - Ulrika</p> <p>“I do not measure [my training]” - Hedvig</p> <p>“I was dragged into it [goal-setting], then I hurt myself and could not really do it [training] anymore as a fun thing so I stopped it [competing]” - Mathias</p> <p>“[My goals] is probably feeling strong and that I go do it [the training]” - Charlotte</p> <p>“[My goal is] really nothing more than well-being.” - Charlotte</p> <p>“We compete all the time [at work], it can become too much.” - Sebastian</p> <p>“I get demotivated by [seeing] social media posts about people's training and before and after pictures, it feels like it doesn't give me anything.” - Simon</p>	<p>“Any goal I have implicitly is that I should be able to keep going until I drop. I would not start something today that I didn't think I would not do for 30 years.” - Mathias</p> <p>“[...] but I do not think I become more dedicated at work or privately, but on the other hand it gives me more energy and focus which I need.” Simon</p> <p>“To be able to perform no matter what you do, you need to be in good health, and health can be both mental and physical, they are interrelated.” - Charlotte</p> <p>“If I think about those who train a lot, they tackle tasks, get done, and move on and are effective people. I have some colleagues I have seen get fatter and fatter and paler and paler and not better and better at their job but rather slower and grumpier. So, I definitely see the connection that people who exercise perform better.” - Ingrid</p>

## Health-functionalists

<b>Highly disciplined exercise</b>	<b>Tangible and measurable goals are dominant</b>	<b>Holistic approach</b>
<p>“I find time to work out between the job and my family to go running in the wood or to go to the gym” - Erik</p>	<p>“I have a goal to keep my weight and then I need certain training and diet to to achieve that” - David</p>	<p>“A healthy life-style can be debated, it does not have to be to run in competitions, but also mental exercise and well-being. - Stina</p>
<p>“For me it is an attitude to want to constantly improve [in training] and challenge myself ” - Stina</p>	<p>“I cycle to and from work 10 km one way. I can measure how many calories are burned: 200 per one-way trip.” - David</p>	<p>“To feel good and be healthy is also an important part of the training. It should be positive for the work also since I am never sick, only once every fifth year or so.” - Niklas</p>
<p>“I want to know how to make things optimal and then I follow it.” - David</p>	<p>“It makes me think that I have only taken 8000 steps and then I go out after dinner and walk 2000 more.” - Felicia</p>	<p>“It [why I train] is not so much the performance, lifting more, or running faster.” - Felicia</p>
<p>“Training is necessary to to get a break and clear the head, I make sure to get in my sessions for the health” - Alexander</p>	<p>“I keep a lot of statistics about my training tracking steps, how many training sessions I do, and how fast I run.” - Felicia</p>	<p>“Diet, in general, and health are still linked somewhere and also perceived stress.” - Felicia</p>
	<p>“As I am running a couple of marathons per year and “Lidingöloppet”, I want to keep a reasonable time.” - Niklas</p>	<p>“[I have] long-term goals, looking at diet, exercise and the big picture and do not set any goals that I cannot have for the rest of my life or that I can't achieve. I am not going to have a diet that I only do for 1 week. I want to do things that I think I want to do for the rest of my life.” - David</p>
	<p>“I was about to say, does not everyone have that [goals]. For the mile I aimed at 40 [minutes] but got to 41 [minutes] so I almost made it” - Alexander</p>	
	<p>“[I think] time goals more than appearance [goals].” - Alexander</p>	

## Fanatics

Goal-driven training	Exercise as a lifestyle	Competitiveness in both work and training
<p>“It would surely be good, but I think it is a question of time constraints. If I were to do [low-intensity training] I would have to cut down on other things.” - Patrik</p>	<p>“I commute to work by bike. The big advantage of commuting by bike is the regularity. I have about 2 miles to work, so [I get] two 45 min sessions a day with pretty hard training.” - Jesper</p>	<p>“Promotions and quantifiable things such as pay from year to year especially [are important]. The receipt if I do well is higher pay or more responsibility.” - Fredrik</p>
<p>“I want to do Vätternrundan in under 11 hours. Under 10 hours, you’re good, under 11 hours you’re better than the average Swede and need stay at 30 kilometers per hours” - Nils</p>	<p>“I enjoy all types of movement, I often run to and from work. I think it is good exercise to run when you do not have much time. I do it periodically, but it’s 7 km so it is not so bad.” - Jonathan</p>	<p>“I am probably very goal-driven. I find it funny how people near me ask so much about how I do it, both with work and training.” - Carl</p>
<p>“[My goal] is to run as fast as possible, to be able to run, I use a Garmin watch for all kinds of analysis.” - Jesper</p>	<p>“I have always exercised, it is not just a hobby but a lifestyle for me and a necessity for me to feel good, not just to move a little but I need this to feel good.” - Emelie</p>	<p>“Yeah, well, I’m a sore loser. Winner’s mentality.” - Nils</p>
<p>“In climbing there are so many small goals, at least 100 of them [...] and then I might need to get stronger in my fingertips in order to try climbing a new passage” - Jonathan</p>	<p>“Exercising is something that is very quantitative. You can always do it more and better, it’s like easy successes in life.” - Carl</p>	<p>“I like to compete and train and work and progress in what I do. I love adrenaline, I think that’s why I work in investment banking too, because if you do well you are clearly rewarded.” - Jonathan</p>
<p>“I absolutely have goals. I will run the half marathon in the Swedish Championships. There it is both [goals] with placement and time. Less about how I look, my body is my tool to reach my goals and the quantifiable goals.” - Emelie</p>	<p>“For me, it is a survival strategy to always stick with my training. I always try to have my days when I train and then I try to adjust my work after that.” - Amalia</p>	<p>“I’ve probably always been a competitive person, both in sport and in my job.” - Patrik</p>
<p>“Now in this STRAVA world, you can keep track of everything, it’s always fun to try to improve and it is incredibly easy to measure. There may be 20 different segments on the</p>	<p>“You have to prioritize and choose not to do other things. When you actively choose to train, you disregard other things.” - Nils</p>	<p>“I have always had the same attitude [competitiveness] in everything I have done. That is how it always has been” - Fredrik</p>
	<p>“I think I train 15 hours a week over 11-12 sessions. It is often in the morning, in the evenings it is easy for something</p>	<p>“I compete in the American Championships and want to qualify for the World Championships [in triathlon].” - Benjamin</p>

<p>road where you can try to beat your time or drive faster than someone else.” . -Patrik</p> <p>“I have some things written down and see how much I have done in certain exercises and move forward.” - Amalia</p>	<p>else to happen which I cannot prioritize away.” - Benjamin</p>	
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### Overlaps

<b>Attitude towards workplace initiatives</b>	<b>Type of exercise</b>	<b>Exercise in social circle</b>
<p>“It [the work initiatives] are fun, you get to shine and do things together.” - Katarina, Feel-good</p>	<p>“ I do strength training with a personal trainer, run on my own, I play tennis once a week with a coach and I do yoga every day at home.” - Anna, Feel-good</p>	<p>“Among friends it is mixed. When we were younger, I would say that everyone did some form of exercise. But today it's half and half since many have families.” - Vera, Feel-good</p>
<p>“I initiated a weekly activity with one exercise position everyday, afterwards we have a fruit-break.” - Charlotte, Health-functional</p>	<p>“[I do] a little bit of everything depending on the season, in the summer I run a lot, in the winter I ski, cross-country and downhill, ice skating. I do some workouts at the gym.” - Felicia, Health-functional</p>	<p>“Growing up, I spent more time with football people and like-minded people. Since I started working, I have spent more time with the people I work with, and we've shaped each other.” - David, Health-functional</p>
<p>“There is nothing to offer on site, as in my previous workplace with group training, gym and ballroom. [...] my training still happens in other way” - Simon, Fulfillment-functional</p>	<p>“Running, cycling and going to the gym are convenient because they can be done anywhere.” - Mathias, Fulfillment-functional</p>	<p>“It [interest] is very scattered. I do not live in a world where it is something that everybody does; it is very widespread” - Hedvig, Fulfillment-functional</p>
<p>“We do not have a lot of joint training here, but for us the days are very flexible. [...] so it does not matter to me.” - Jonathan, Fanatic</p>	<p>“What I do: running, cross-country skiing, cycling to work.” - Jesper, Fanatic</p>	<p>“I have a few friends who exercise but not the same level [as me]. It is probably more common that they go to the gym and do what is easy and measurable. -" Carl, Fanatic</p>