

Unveiling Athlete Sponsorship

A Multi-method Qualitative Study of the Evolving Roles of Athletes in the Digital Era Sponsorship Agreements

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Abstract

The sports industry has undergone a profound transformation due to digitalization. Within this shifting landscape, one key aspect of sports marketing that has experienced significant changes is sponsorship. With the pervasive influence of social media on sports consumption, an escalating number of companies are integrating social media marketing into their sponsorship strategies. This study examines the updated roles of athletes in sponsorship agreements. By applying a multi-method qualitative approach, this research employs triangulation, combining multiple data sources. The roles are categorized by investigating online sponsorship-linked marketing activations by using an empirical typology. The empirics are further strengthened by in-depth interviews. The interviewees represent three stakeholder perspectives, which are contrasted for a comprehensive understanding. The perspective of athletes, sponsoring companies, and sports agents are investigated. In addition, the research acknowledges contemporary market shifts and trends by employing thematic analysis. The study finds that athletes assume four main roles and four additional subroles in partnership agreements with sponsors. The main roles are Brand Ambassador, Endorser, Co-Creator, and Support Grantee, and the subroles; Co-Worker for representation and events, Co-Worker for product development, Co-Creator in product development, and lastly, Campaign-Based Endorser. The findings also reveal two prominent market development themes, the decrease in the duration of sponsorships and the growing impact of social media on sponsorship practices.

Keywords: *Sports marketing, Sponsorship, Athletes, Social media marketing, Empirical Typology*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2021, the sports sponsorship global market was valued at 64.8 billion U.S. dollars and is expected to expand, ultimately achieving a worth of 112.2 billion U.S. dollars by 2030 (Statista, 2023). Sponsorship has become an important component of the marketing communications mix (Kim et al., 2015) and sports sponsorship is the largest part, accounting for two-thirds of the overall sponsoring market (Batt et al., 2021). One of the most successful athlete endorsements and sponsorship agreements of all time is Michael Jordan's partnership with Nike, which had an enormous impact and is still generating huge amounts for both Nike and Jordan himself (Badenhausen, 2020). According to Badenhausen's article, the Jordan Brand revenue reached 3.1 billion US dollars in early 2019, however, is said to be worth above 10 billion US dollars due to the halo impact it has had on other Nike products' sales. Sponsorship and athlete endorsements were one of the greatest success factors for Nike, partnering with athletes for product development was shown to be a tremendous benefit for the brand (Kim, 2020).

Sports sponsorships and athlete endorsements have long been an efficient advertising strategy (Jones & Schumann, 2000; Cornwell, 2019), however, the athletes' roles vis-a-vis the brands for which they advertise are changing (Filo et al., 2015). Digitalization has revolutionized the sports industry, notably transforming the realm of sponsorship, a traditional area of sports marketing strategy (Garza Segovia & Kennett, 2021). The adoption of new digital platforms in sponsorship marketing, the evolution of social media marketers, and the commercialization of sports have spurred an updated view on the use of sponsorship as a marketing tool (Filo et al., 2015) and athletes' current roles in the context.

Sports marketing is a crucial aspect of the sports industry and for many sports organizations, teams, and athletes, sponsorships are an essential source of revenue (Cornwell et al., 2005). According to Cornwell et al. (2005), sports sponsorship can be defined as *"a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically a sports, entertainment, non-profit event, or organization) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property,"* and sponsorship-linked marketing as *"the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for the purpose of building and communicating an association to a sponsorship"*.

Sponsorship-linked marketing activations involve a range of different activities (Jones & Schumann, 2000). In the context of the current study, activations are defined as *“communications that promote the engagement, involvement, or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor”*, following Weeks et al.'s (2008) definition. Brands and athletes enter into agreements of varying forms, including various activations of promotion, at different points in the athletes' careers (Dolphin, 2003). The objectives and performances of sports sponsorship agreements vary from one relationship to another (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022).

The evolution of digital media has changed the landscape of sports marketing. Digital technologies have been adopted within various marketing domains and are impacting companies' sports marketing strategies, including sponsorship (Garza Segovia & Kennett, 2021). In parallel, the rise of social media platforms is said to have impacted the delivery and consumption of sports profoundly (Filo et al., 2015). Broadly viewed, the number of social media users has been increasing continuously in recent years and according to forecasts, the worldwide count of social media users is expected to rise steadily from 2023 to 2028, adding a total of 1.14 billion users meaning a 23.21% increase (Statista, 2023). As of January 2023, Sweden has a social media penetration rate of 82.2%, indicating that a significant portion of the population is using social media (Statista, 2023). As a result of this, sponsoring companies are increasingly incorporating online marketing into their sponsorship activations and social media is taking up a growing part of the strategies for sponsorship activations (Gillooly et al., 2017; Meenaghan et al., 2013). Simultaneously, athletes now have a greater ability to pursue innovative partnership activities on digital platforms (Su et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2020). Through social media, athletes can significantly influence and promote their personal brands by pursuing branding initiatives (Su et al., 2020). We conclude all the mentioned factors have resulted in a shift in what commitments and counter performances are taken on by athletes and what role they play in sponsorship agreements with companies.

1.2 Purpose and Contribution

Sponsorship as part of sports marketing is a well-studied field at large (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019). However, while there is a considerable body of literature on athlete endorsements and sponsorship, we see a lack of studies on the athlete's perspective of how the work within

sponsorship deals has developed. The ever-changing digital environment has had a debated impact on the world of sports (Filo et al., 2015). This has spurred a need to update the understanding of athletes' commitments in sponsorship agreements and outline the part they play (Garza Segovia & Kennett, 2021).

This study will provide a further understanding of athletes' roles in sponsorship, categorizing athletes' updated roles by means of an empirical typology. The research will outline athletes' different roles by investigating sponsorship-linked marketing activations on athletes' and sponsoring companies' channels. Specifically, we examine the stakeholders' digital platforms and gather in-depth insights from interviews with athletes, sports agents, and company representatives working with sponsorships. By contrasting the three stakeholder perspectives, the study gains insights into the different commitments of athletes and how their work in sponsorship deals has developed. The study thereby, in addition to a typology of athletes' roles, provides themes of the prominent contemporary market changes.

The typology will serve as a description of the roles and inspiration to practitioners, both athletes and sponsoring companies, for how to form and advance their work moving forward. The market changes identified provide readers oversight of current shifts and trends which need to be considered by practitioners as well as present avenues for future studies.

1.3 Research questions

To establish the purpose of the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: What are the various roles athletes assume in partnership agreements with sponsors?

RQ2: How have the roles of athletes in sponsor partnerships developed in recent times?

1.4 Delimitations

The research is delimited to capture and understand the current market practices of the study's chosen field. The first delimitation to our study and thesis scope is that we are investigating one geographic sector, studying our field of research. The study concerns the sports industry of Sweden, observing only Swedish athletes, company representatives, and sports agents. Secondly, the time frame for the content included in the data collection of the desktop study is delimited to posts published between 2019-12-31 and 2023-03-01. Our third and final

delimitation is the investigation of one sporting industry in the in-depth interview part, focusing on the skiing sports industry.

1.5 Disposition

The report is built around six chapters, starting with a background about the current situation and development of sports sponsorship, leading to the contribution and the purpose of this study, and the delimitations that were taken. The report continues with a theoretical framework, consisting of previous research and academic knowledge about the subject. The third chapter, methodology, starts with our research design and is then structured after the data collection, (i) our desktop study, (ii) the in-depth interviews, and lastly, a part presenting the process of the data analysis. The findings from the desktop study and interviews are presented in the fourth chapter of results, followed by the fifth chapter of analysis. The analysis is based on our theoretical framework and results, which combined gives valuable insights into athletes' roles in sponsorship agreements with companies. Lastly, a discussion of the research is found, including a study conclusion, theoretical and managerial implications, limitations of the research, and proposed future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this section is to describe and explain the underpinning literature on which this study is based. It aims to serve as a knowledge foundation of the subject, leading to the research gap that has been identified which study proposedly fills.

2.1 Sponsorship

The phenomenon of sponsorship has since long been a prominent marketing activity in businesses and takes many different forms (Cornwell, 2019). Used as a tool of advertising, it has an influence on brand equity across many different contexts such as sports, arts, and other causes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019). Sponsorship is an activity that captures an exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity and a sponsee in support of an activity performed by the sponsee (Lin & Bruning, 2020). Companies engage in sponsorship for several reasons and are intended to create both long-term and short-term benefits. Sponsorship studies have shown that there are positive outcomes of sponsorship advertising such as favorable attitudes and increased loyalty toward the sponsor (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022). Previous research

has stated that congruence between a sponsor and a sponsee influences sponsorship effectiveness (Weeks et al., 2008), however, it has been shown in later studies that the importance of congruence between sponsor and sponsee property has decreased in recent years, due to the increased commercialization of sport (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019). According to O'Reilly and Lafrance Horning's (2013) study, on strategies for leveraging sponsorship, sponsorship offers brands a sustainable competitive advantage among other positive outcomes, agreed by several other authors (Jones & Schumann, 2000; Cornwell et al., 2005; Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022). However, O'Reilly and Lafrance Horning (2013) note that sponsorship is not suggested to be used as a 'stand-alone' communication tool, but should actively leverage the sponsorship by performing other promotional activities. The authors argue that simply acquiring a sponsorship property is not a guarantee of results, however, well-activated sponsorships can break through promotional clutter and reach the desired objectives.

Literature reviews of sponsorship-linked marketing conclude that there is an abundance of research that focuses on how audiences respond to marketing activities linked to sponsorship, but there is a lack of research that examines how marketing is managed during the sponsorship process (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019). Furthermore a lack of integrative understanding of what factors are influencing sponsorship outcomes (Kim et al., 2015). The ever-evolving landscape of digital technologies adds another layer of challenges for both practitioners and academics according to Garza Segovia & Kennett (2021) as they need to stay in step with the influence of digitalization on sports sponsorship. The authors indicate that outlining the impacts requires a new agenda for research explored in future studies.

2.2 The rise of social media in a sponsorship context

In the past few decades, the rapid development of digital technology has had a profound impact on society, including the rise of social media as a ubiquitous presence on the agendas of both consumers and businesses (Filo et al., 2015). Brands have adapted their communication strategies and revenue generation techniques with the development of social media and its interactive online tools (Meenaghan et al., 2013). The characteristics of social media have given rise to a distinctive role in modern communication as it stands out as a highly cost-effective medium (Brison et al., 2016). The mediums enables interactivity with fans and stakeholders (Gillooy et al., 2017), embracing one-to-many communication, and integrating communication and distribution channels (Filo et al., 2015). Today, the mere adoption of social media is no

longer a competitive edge for companies, as everybody is on social media and the question is now how to best use it to market brands, products, and services more effectively (Lin et al., 2018).

In a comprehensive literature review on sports and social media authored by Filo et al. (2015), it is stated that the rise of social media platforms has impacted the delivery and consumption of sports profoundly. According to the authors, the opportunities and challenges arising from the use of social media in the world of sports have stimulated academic research in this domain. The use of social media for sponsorship activation has increased (Meenaghan et al., 2013) and it has been shown that there are a range of objectives that sponsorship activation through social media enables sponsors to achieve. These include interacting and engaging with fans, increasing brand awareness, and influencing consumer attitudes toward the brand (Gillooly et al., 2017). Although there is a growing body of literature on the use of digital platforms in sports, literature on how sponsors use them as a sponsorship activation tool remains limited (Gillooly et al., 2017).

2.3 Celebrity athlete endorsements

The utilization of celebrities in marketing communication has long been a strategy to support and enhance corporate or brand identity (Erdogan, 1999). Using athlete endorsers has become prevalent in marketing communications as a means of promoting products and services (Jones & Schumann, 2000), and research shows that it can be an effective strategy for enhancing brand awareness and brand image, and boosting sales (Kwak et al., 2018). Athletes are the celebrity endorser category that occurs most often, in a study published in 2008, 20 percent of all ads featured a celebrity, and approximately 60 percent of those featured athletes (Carlson and Donovan, 2008). Marketers often aim to achieve a transfer of the athlete's favorable traits onto their brand, thereby stimulating consumers' interest in the endorsed product or service (Schouten et al., 2019). According to Aw and Labrecque (2020), social media has arguably impacted the relationship between consumers and celebrities, thereby, transforming the landscape of celebrity endorsements. The authors describe that through social media, consumers can develop even stronger ties with celebrities, given celebrities' vast opportunities to engage with their fans. However, companies increasingly abandon traditional celebrity endorsers in marketing efforts in favor of social media influencers (Schouten et al., 2019).

Since the advent of social media, social media influencers (hereafter referred to as ‘influencers’) have become prominent figures in the realm of online marketing (Kozinets et al., 2010). Influencers can be defined as online personalities influencing consumers across social media platforms (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). By sharing curated content they attract millions of followers and although ‘traditional’ celebrities also use social media platforms, influencers built their careers online (Schouten et al., 2019). For the understanding of this study, what differentiates a celebrity endorser from an influencer has to be outlined. A traditional endorser has gained public recognition from professional talent, for instance acting or performing a sport, in contrast to influencers who have achieved fame by successfully establishing themselves as authorities on social media platforms (Schouten et al., 2019).

For a company to leverage its brand by collaborating and associating itself with celebrity athletes is common and the advantages have been well documented (Kwak et al., 2018). In Anthony Carrillat and d’Astous research (2014) on celebrity athlete endorsement, two avenues to reach positive outcomes are distinguished, celebrity athlete endorsements, and athlete sponsorships. In the authors' definition, athlete endorsement refers to cases where an athlete is compensated for acting as a spokesperson for the brand which, in turn, benefits from the ensuing image that is transferred from the endorser. Athlete sponsorship in contrast refers to cases where brands support athletes to increase consumer goodwill perception. In this current study, both are referred to as athlete sponsorship deals, involving several different approaches to fully grasp the current status of the sport sponsorship market and the scope chosen. On both avenues, the use of athletes as spokespersons and endorsers has been highly beneficial for brands (Coleman et al., 2001).

2.4 Athletes’ promotional activities on social media

When it comes to branding tools for athletes, social media is arguably the most important one (Doyle et al., 2020). Athletes can use social media to build a personal brand and promote other brands, such as sponsoring partners (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). They can also use it to build relationships and communicate with fans and supporters (Doyle et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). Being visible and reaching out to followers and sponsors is becoming increasingly important for athletes, operating in an environment where many are fighting for attention and need to break through the promotional clutter (O’Reilly & Lafrance Horning, 2013). According to Su et al. (2020), an athlete's personal brand is one of their greatest assets. A strong brand

enables greater earnings from endorsement and sponsorship deals, in addition to the earnings from athletic performances, and it also helps maintain an image when athletic performances are absent and provides the athletes with a platform to showcase their full lifestyle (Su et al., 2020). Athletes can create and cultivate their personal brand with minimal investment through social media platforms, as the platform's features are easy to use and have benefits such as reach and accessibility (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Previous research has suggested that athletes with superior sports performance are likely to generate more consumer engagement on their platforms, however, new studies prove that athletic performance is not the key driver of consumers engagement with sports celebrities (Ferreira et al., 2022). According to Doyle et al. (2020), the type of content that athlete posts on their social media is a factor proven to influence engagement. For example, good-quality photos or the inclusion of teammates in posts positively influences engagement, whereas extensive use of hashtags has a negative influence, according to Doyle et al. (2020).

Ballouli and Hutchinson (2010) argue that athletes can use social media to build a personal brand which provides both risks and opportunities. The authors propose that with high exposure, athletes need to be careful about how they present themselves to protect their brand. One of the advantages can be that it facilitates contact with sponsors (Su et al., 2020), which can benefit the athlete financially. However, Ballouli and Hutchinson (2010) state that missteps can lead to a decline in trust and result in the loss of sponsors and decrease in the ability of the athlete to make a living from their sport.

2.5 The role of an athlete in sponsorship

Jones and Schumann (2000) explain that in the jungle of Sports Sponsorships, the role of an athlete takes many shapes as sponsorship agreements are formed differently. Athletes tend to play several different roles and are no longer simply viewed as sports entertainers, in fact, they can be utilized for other things due to their prominence in society with attractive lifestyles and attributes according to the Jones and Schumann (2020) article. Jones and Schumann (2000) further establish that athletes have for a substantial time not only been admired for their athletic performances but also for their “off the arena” activities and character. Athletes are commonly promoting brands and products due to their strong influence on consumers (Doyle et al., 2020). In that role, they are not only expected to serve as spokespersons and poster profiles but rather

assume the role of a catalyst of information to fans and a wide following base (Jones & Schumann, 2000).

For an athlete to build and maintain a brand, dedication, consistency, and planning is required. However, brand-building expertise is rare among athletes, and in addition, the opportunity to capitalize on their professional brand is limited to a short window of time (Su et al., 2020). This puts pressure on the athletes' performance throughout their careers, besides the athletic performance, emphasizing the commercial part of it. According to Woisetschläger et al. (2017) athletes and sponsors are overlapping brand associations when they partner for a long time, which is in most times an objective sought. The authors stated that the longer partners stay together, they go together, and, in a sports context, the partners go through both winning and losing. Woisetschläger et al. (2017) conclude that consumers are less likely to infer that the sponsors' partnership objective is mainly commercial as they increase with sponsorship duration, instead, it elicits "real" commitment.

In a typology, the authors Rundin & Colliander (2021) categorized influencers' roles in advertising, emphasizing that the relationships vis-a-vis influencers and the brands they promote have developed. Since the emergence of influencers and the use of influencer marketing as a tool of advertising, the roles they take in collaborations with brands have sophisticated (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). In the same way, we have seen influencers' roles in advertising evolve, and so have athletes. Not the least because of the rise of influencers on the marketing scene. Athletes are to be seen as celebrity endorsers, according to our distinction between influencers and "traditional celebrity endorsers". There are studies stating that companies are shifting their spokesperson advertising efforts and sponsorship-linked marketing from using traditional celebrity endorsers to increasingly using influencers (Schouten et al., 2019). We believe that this will, if it does not already, impact the opportunities for athletes to find or maintain sponsorship deals. As these are critical aspects of an athlete's career, generating additional earnings than that from athletic performances (Su et al., 2020), the impact could be significant.

2.6 The identified research gap

In a recent systematic review of sponsorship-linked marketing research, a shortage of studies that examines marketing management of sponsorship processes is identified, in contrast to the

surplus of research examining audience responses (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019). The rise of social media practices in sports has spurred academic interest and increased the body of literature in recent years (Gillooly et al., 2017; Filo et al., 2015; Su et al., 2020). The identified opportunities and challenges inherent to the usage of social media in sports have been studied from several angles, including strategic and operational standpoints (Filo et al., 2015). Athlete brands are increasingly recognized and research to date provides knowledge of factors influencing consumer engagement (Ferreira et al., 2022) and athletes' following on social media (Su et al., 2020). However, we observe a lack of discussion about how social media is impacting athletes in the context of sponsorship-linked marketing and how it might alter the way athletes have previously worked. The current study, therefore, outlines the main development factors experienced by currently active practitioners in sponsorship-linked marketing and seeks to categorize athletes' updated roles employing an empirical typology.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Treating the field of sports marketing and sponsorship, the research builds on the knowledge of sponsorship collaborations between professional athletes and corporate institutions, considering contemporary digital changes for an updated view. The study is conducted by a multi-method qualitative approach through a desktop study and semi-structured interviews (Bell et al., 2019, p.369). The gathering methods of the multiple data sources are individually presented in detail below. The qualitative method is suitable for the study in allowing for a great in-depth understanding of the constantly shifting social reality (Bell et al., 2019, p.35). Using multiple sources of data, the study is applying triangulation. Triangulation is an approach that involves more than one method or source of data to study social phenomena and allows a process of cross-checking findings (Bell et al., 2019, p.364). The primary purpose of applying triangulation of sources in this research is to achieve an enriched understanding of reality and result in greater confidence in the findings (Bell et al., 2019, p.364). In addition, it helps to reduce any potential research biases and increases the study's reliability and credibility (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). By investigating and gathering insights from different stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to categorize the main roles and subroles of athletes by contrasting stakeholder standing points and identify recent development factors.

Our research is conducted by an abductive reasoning approach, using a combined process of shifting between the empirics and theoretical literature to develop a deeper understanding of the research area (Bell et al., 2019, p.24). We are conducting our research by frequently overlapping the data analysis with data collection, making us able to expand our understanding of phenomena and utilize in-depth insights from empirical data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Desktop study

The initial phase of data collection involved a comprehensive desktop study to map out the main roles that athletes undertake in the context of sponsorship. The process of gathering the desktop study data was influenced by Rundin & Colliander's (2021) research method, categorizing influencers' roles in advertising, by examining digital channels and investigating pre-set factors (presented in detail further down in Table 2).

A sample of 30 professional Swedish athletes was observed across various online channels, owned by both athletes and the sponsor companies. The specific online channels were not pre-defined but consisted of Instagram, Webpages, Twitter, Tiktok, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube as these were the platforms frequently used by the athletes and companies for sponsorship advertising. The athletes were chosen based on the author's judgment of availability and appropriate commercial value. The athletes are performing varying sports as well as they have different content and number of followers on the previously mentioned platforms, which contributes to creating an empirical variety. The sample selected follows a certain number of criteria, shown in Table 1.

Inclusion criteria for athletes
Active or recently retired from their sport
Competed on international level
Belonging to team or individual sport
Over the age of 18 years

Table 1.

In the different channels chosen we observed content that either was an “ad” or “embedded ad” (Cain 2011). The term “content” in this context refers to photos/videos/texts posted by athletes on different social media platforms, such as images and videos on Instagram, tweets on Twitter, and videos on YouTube. Rundin & Colliander (2021) defined “ad” content as content that is clearly sponsored and indicates such through explicit labels such as “collaboration”, “paid partnership”, “sponsored”, and other similar expressions (Rundin & Colliander, 2021), a definition this study has employed. Content categorized as “embedded ad” is content that is not as evidently sponsored content, however clearly advertisement by the athlete as the athlete is e.g. tagging brands in the post or using direct links to the company's webpage. Examples of “embedded ad” posts included are when the athlete mentions the brand in the content caption (Rundin & Colliander, 2021), this could be *“Time to focus with #noccoramonade. My goal for the year is to be fit for ski racing again. What's yours? #nocco”* and/or using hashtags preceded by the # symbol; e.g., #Nocco, in the content caption or comment field. Including “embedded ad” in our study was important because many athletes are often not labeling their sponsorship content as a “paid partnership”, therefore, for us to get as much information as possible we have chosen to use less strict rules of social media advertising. It is acknowledged that this approach may be a controversial choice, as it increases the probability of including content that might not be paid-for advertising in the study but deemed necessary.

During the desktop study process, various factors were examined, including information about the athlete such as their name, gender, and sport, as well as the name of the sponsoring company, the owner of the channel (whether athlete or company), and the channel(s) in which the sponsorship was displayed. In addition, the length of the sponsorship was determined, either through the company's or athlete's announcements and identified as a campaign (when the sponsorship is limited to a shorter time frame, e.g., for a specific event) or the number of years the relation has been active. The study was limited to the period between 2019-12-31 and 2023-03-01 and factors such as the frequency (how often the athletes show the sponsor in their channels) of advertising in the main channel (on a scale of low/medium/high), involvement (if the athletes are affecting the results of the outcome of the product) of the product (in a scale of low/medium/high), whether sponsored company products were related to the athlete's sport, type of mentioning (in a scale of low/medium/high) were assessed using our own judgment. The desktop study also includes the dates of information gathered, the source link, and whether the sponsor is currently active or if the sponsorship has seemingly ended. Based on these

factors, the role that the athlete takes in each specific sponsorship was categorized. All factors examined are presented in Table 2, annotated A-N alphabetically.

Factor notation	Factor	Input
A	Athlete	Name
B	Gender	Male / Female / Other
C	Sport	Athletes Sport
D	Sponsor	Name of company
E	Distributor of ad	Company / Athlete
F	Channel	E.g. Instagram
G	Lenght of sponsorship	Campaign / X years
H	Frequency of advertising in main channel	Low / Medium / High
I	Involvement in products	Low / Medium / High
J	Sponsored company products related to athlete	E.g. Equipment or unrelated product
K	Type of mentioning	Low / Medium / High
L	Date sourced	Date sourced
M	Link	Link of information sourced
N	Active sponsor currently?	Yes / No

Table 2.

3.2.2 In-depth interviews

Our main data collection roots in semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of nine informants representing three different stakeholder perspectives: athletes, sports agents', and corporate representatives. The purpose of the interviews was to reach a deeper understanding of the diverse roles and subroles that athletes undertake in relation to brands and to gather stakeholder insights from athletes, corporate representatives, and sports agents. The interviews limited the in-depth investigation to one sporting industry, making it a case study. The ski industry was selected as the industry of choice, with a carefully selected sample of representatives from the three stakeholder perspectives. All athletes selected for the interviews were included in the desktop study and were actively engaged in different sports within the ski industry. Similarly, the included companies were all operating within the same industry.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with questions part of an interview guide that was tailored to the stakeholder perspective represented by each interviewee. The semi-structured interview format offers flexibility and unplanned exploration (Bell et al., 2019, p.436). If a too-structured set of questions would be used, there is a risk of lost opportunity of capturing valuable insights. While all participants were informed of the interview topic, the questions themselves were not disclosed in advance to prevent the possibility of prepared responses that could influence the accuracy and authenticity of the answers. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, the native language of the interviewees, and in all cases, this was the preferred way of communication by the interviewees. All except three interviews were recorded, under permission, and all interviews were transcribed to enable repeated examination of what informants said (Bell et al., 2019, p.445). Five out of nine interviews were conducted in an offline setting, while the remaining four were conducted online due to geographic constraints (see details in Appendix 2). Following GDPR, the anonymity of all participants was strictly maintained to ensure the confidentiality of their responses and to promote candid and transparent feedback. This was done by recognizing the crucial role of confidentiality in eliciting an open and honest perspective from the respondents.

For the sample selection of interviewees, our guideline was to include athletes from diverse sections of the ski sports industry. Rooting from the athlete interaction, we got in contact with sports agencies and reached one Sports Agent and one Sports Agency Lawyer, both representing the Sports Agent stakeholder perspective in our study. Next, we got contact with company representatives, of sponsoring companies, working with handling athlete sponsorships on a daily basis. Thereby, the order of interviews was decided naturally, first the athletes, then the sports agents, and lastly company representatives. By including these three perspectives, we aimed to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the current market and view the roles we strive to examine and categorize, from different angles. All interviewees were above 18 years of age. See Figure 1 for inclusion criteria and visualization of the process.

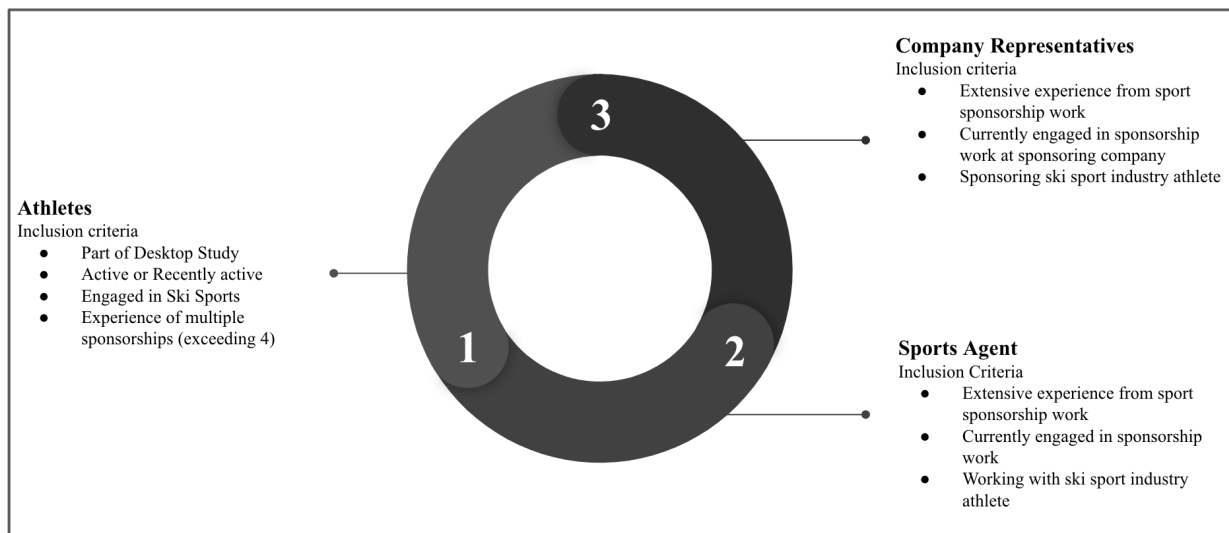


Figure 1

The questions, part of the interview guide found in Appendix 3, investigated during the interviews were aimed at understanding the different roles athletes assume in sponsorship agreements. If the interviewee was of experience in multiple roles, questions were added to contrast and differentiate the roles, striving to understand the differences by comparing. During the process, the questions were continuously evaluated, and answers were analyzed, to find underpinning data for the roles identified in the desktop study (Appendix 3). All questions asked were to some extent mentioned in all interviews for the sake of getting comparable answers and searching for themes, as well as creating equivalent experiences for the interviewees. The questions were framed differently depending on the respondents' perspective, although, concerning the same matter.

3.3 Data analysis

The two sources of data collected were analyzed with help from multiple approaches and processed in stages. The desktop study was analyzed, aimed at serving as a foundation for one of the research questions (RQ1), identifying the main roles. The interviews were then added to the findings for further analysis, providing further in-depth information and empirics by adding another layer of understanding.

To specify the criteria that were used to analyze and categorize the roles in the desktop study, see the deciding factors outlined in detail in Table 3 below. An elaborating note of some factors is however necessary. Regarding the measurement of sponsorship lengths, factor G, we define

“several years” as two or more years and consider the duration in relation to the athlete's active career. We use “limited time” collaborations, for when the collaboration has a clear start and end, typically spanning a few months. Furthermore, the scale of Low / Medium / High utilized in three of the factors (K, I, and H) need to be defined. For factor K, a result of low means that the content does not mention the collaboration evidently or is only shown through a tag. High, however, are clear and prominent mentions of the collaboration, e.g. “In paid collaboration with the company [x]”. Moving on to factor I, low is when the athlete is not involved in the product at all, and high is when the athletes have been part of e.g., the product development, for instance, has designed their own line of products. Lastly, low for factor H, is when the collaboration occurs only once in the channels observed. However, a high score means that the collaboration occurs constantly within the specified time frame. By defining the scales, we can ensure that the data collected from our results is consistent and gives a correct result.

Factor notation	Brand ambassador	Brand endorser	Co-creator	Support
G	Several years of collaboration	Limited time of collaboration	Several years of collaboration	Time of collaboration is insignificant
K	Type of mentioning is high	Type of mentioning is insignificant	Type of mentioning is insignificant	Type of mentioning is insignificant
J	The company products relation to the sport is insignificant	The company products relation to the sport is insignificant	The company product is related to the athlete's sport.	The company product is unrelated to the athlete's sport.
I	Involvement in product is low / medium	Involvement in product is low	Involvement in product is high / medium	Involvement in product is low
H	Frequency is low / medium	Frequency is high	Frequency is insignificant	Frequency is low
General	Demonstrate that they live the brand beyond merely social media posts.	Endorsers usually aren't bound to exclusivity and are meant to help give the brand a boost for short-term targets	Indicate the athlete's involvement in the product development processes, e.g. by means of possessing their own line of products.	Evident that the company's primary objective is to provide financial backing and foster goodwill.

Table 3. Categorizing framework for the desktop study.

This abductive research applied triangulation, gathering data through different methods, to reach the sought findings (Bell et al., 2019, p 519-520). Applying a thematic analysis method, themes emerged from identified similarities and differences in the empirical data, which are considered codes in the context. These codes identified in combination with the theoretical framework are what form the basis for the contribution of the research (Bell et al., 2019, p 519-520).

This approach is particularly appropriate for abductive research, such as the current. To distinguish distinct areas emerging from the empirics, the data was initially classified based on shared or comparable responses and analogies, forming themes (Bell et al., 2019, p. 519). In search of themes in transcripts, we mainly searched for repetition, similarities, and differences in the interviewees' responses.

To structure the findings and codes, all the collected data was systematically structured by the themes and roles identified in the interview transcripts and desktop observations. Specific quotes were selected and emphasized, corresponding to the research's main themes to ease the understanding of the findings and present the result.

4. Results

Our findings reveal that athletes assume multiple roles when partnering with a sponsoring company and promoting brands. The in-depth interviews provided further clarifications to the desktop study and added layers of understanding to how the roles are shaped in practice and what criteria differentiate them. We find that athletes can assume four main roles in partnership with sponsoring companies: Brand Ambassador, Endorser, Co-Creator, and Support Grantee. Two roles are further subdivided into 4 additional subroles, with factors substantially differentiating them from one another. Co-creator subroles are, Co-Worker for representation and events, Co-Worker for product development, Co-Creator in product development, and the Endorser subrole is Campaign-based Endorser. The results also include aspects of contemporary changes in the investigated market, answering the second research question.

4.1 Descriptive identification of roles

In the first part of the multi-method qualitative research, the desktop observation, the following identification of athletes' roles are the results. Athletes' sponsorship relations were observed

and investigated, and by relation, we refer to one partnership between a sponsoring entity and a sponsored entity, i.e. a sponsor and an athlete. Most athletes have several sponsors and thereby multiple relations. The sample of 30 athletes was found to have a total of 161 different sponsorship relations and of those, 156 sponsorships were featured across the athletes' channels, while 58 relationships were also/or showcased on the corresponding company channels. In other words, a total of 161 different sponsorship relations were observed through 214 observations, out of which 156 were in the athlete's channels and 58 were in the company's channels.

Total relations in the athletes channels	156
Total relations in the company's channels	58
Total unique relations	161
Total observations	214

Table 4. The number of identified sponsorship relations, i.e. partnership between an athlete and a sponsor.

Our findings in the 161 different sponsorship relations are that there are four main roles that athletes assume and four additional subroles. Tables 5 and 6 present an overview of all identified roles and they are further explained in detail in Sections 4.2 - 4.5.

Brand ambassador	Brand endorser	Co-creator	Support Grantee
Long-term collaborations with sponsor. The athlete is embodying the brand's values and culture, establishing personal connections with the company, being present at events, and having a flexible approach to the agreements' commitments. The role involves lower frequency of advertisement but high visibility of the sponsor brand, while the athlete's involvement in product development may be limited.	The collaboration between the athlete and the sponsor is limited to a specific time frame, such as a season or a short campaign period. The athlete is expected to showcase the sponsor's product in their channels and provide additional value by discussing the product. The athlete's involvement in the product development is usually low, and the type of mentioning about the sponsor by the athlete varies.	Involves a long-term collaboration between the athlete and the sponsor, with a main focus on product development. The athlete is heavily involved in designing, developing, and evaluating products. The athlete's inputs and involvement are highly valued. The frequency of sponsorship advertising content may be less frequent than other types of sponsorships, but the length of the relationship is more extended.	The key characteristics of the role include limited collaboration focused on financial support and goodwill for the athlete. The role does not require performance expectations, and the athlete's involvement in product development and sponsorship activations is minimal. The sponsorship typically involves a logo placement on the athlete's clothing, and the frequency and type of advertisement for this role are low.
Example Pole vaulter Armand Duplantis' relationship with Puma is an excellent example of the role of a brand ambassador. They have collaborated for more than 4 years and both Puma and Armand are showcasing their collaboration in their channels. Armand is wearing Puma's clothing on an everyday basis and represents an active lifestyle.	Example Biathlon athlete Hanna Öberg's collaboration with Emma The Sleep Company, consisted of three posts on Hanna's Instagram during a short period of time where she states that it is sponsored content. Öberg showcases products and describes their importance for her career. This sponsorship is not mentioned among her other sponsors in her Instagram biography.	Example Alpine skier Anna Swenn Larssons partnership with the Swedish brand Huski Wear is an example of an athlete acting the Co-creator role. Anna is contributing with sport-specific knowledge to develop one of the sponsor brands' line of ski clothes. The close relationship is presented as Anna being part of the development process and the collection wears Anna's name.	Example Biathlon athlete Sebastian Samuelsson's collaboration with Caparol Färg & Puts is an example where the athlete has the role of support grantee. Sebastian does not mention the company as a sponsor, however, Caparol Färg & Puts, mentions the sponsorship and presents publicly when Sebastian visits their office and talks about his career.

Table 5. The characteristics of the main roles and identified examples.

Endorser subrole: Campaign-based Endorser	Co-creator subrole: Co-worker for representation and events	Co-creator subrole: Co-worker for product development	Co-creator subrole: Co-creator in product development
Promotes a brand or brand product in a short time frame, often through social media channels. The role of a campaign-based brand Endorser is similar to that of an influencer in terms of their involvement and activation channels.	The athlete actively participates in the internal operations and events of the sponsoring company, serving as an internal mascot and leveraging their expertise from the sports world to inspire and motivate employees.	The sponsored athlete is utilized for their sport-specific knowledge to evaluate and develop the company's sport-related products. This role allows the athlete to contribute their relevant knowledge to product development.	The athlete actively collaborates with the sponsoring company to design and develop their own line of products. This collaboration benefits both the athlete's personal brand and the company's, as the athlete's name is prominently associated with the product.
Example Swimmer Michelle Coleman's partnership with Hövding is an example where the athlete is endorsing the brand only at campaign-base. The partnership is presented in one single post on the athlete's social media platform and does not seem to extend further than that. The sponsorship is thereby limited to a short time and is not a long-term partnership.	Example Basketball player Ludvig Håkansson representing and collaborating with his home club in Stockholm, Alvik Basket is an example where the athlete co-creates a physical event. Ludvig co-creates a training camp for young basketball players at his home arena, where he takes active part as a coach and inspirer.	Example Skier Kristofer Turdell's involvement in the brand Peak Performance collection is an example the subrole. He is involved in the product development process and as the sponsor's products is related to his sport, his product opinion is highly valued. The involvement is presented through content on both entities platforms.	Example Former tennis athlete Robin Söderling started his own label of tennisballs as he was missing one that filled his requirements. The athlete, together with professionals developed and created the first product together. The balls has been accompanied by other products and the company bears Robins' initials and his part as an athlete shares characteristics with this subrole.

Table 6. The characteristics of the four subroles and identified examples.

The identified differing factors were mainly; the relations engagement and frequency of content, the types of activities that the athletes were involved in, and what counter performance was included in the agreement, as well as the length of the sponsorship agreement. Athlete A described in an interview, how the length and engagement of the athlete's current sponsorship relations differed, and what different activities are required from her in the partnerships.

"I have partners who only want posts of products on Instagram, one local company who has supported me for a long time who doesn't want anything in particular in return, and one like [sponsor] where I am involved in creative work of the products and did my own line. (...) another sponsor, who I am close to, includes me in many things both in marketing and internally in the company."

Athlete A, comparing different sponsorship relation involvements.

The findings of the desktop study, shown in Figure 2 below, indicate that athletes most commonly take on the role of brand ambassadors in their relationship with sponsors. The role of the Endorser is also often occurring, while the roles of Co-Creator and Support are comparatively less prevalent.

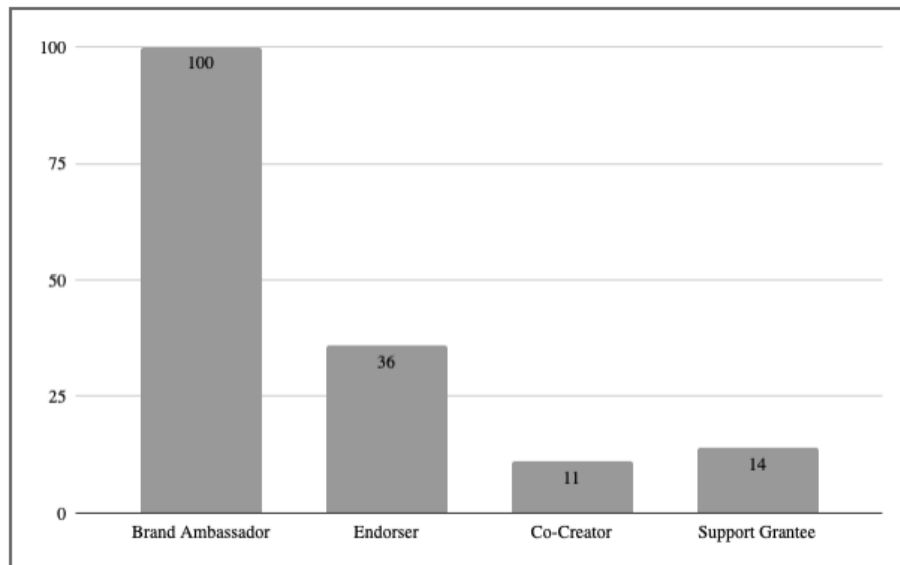


Figure 2. Desktop study results. The number of times each role was identified in a sponsorship relation.

4.2 Brand Ambassador

Through the multiple-qualitative research conducted, our observations identify Brand Ambassadors as a distinct role athletes assume in collaborations with sponsoring companies. A Brand Ambassador is an athlete who collaborates with a company for several years, typically establishing a more substantial and long-term partnership. The Sports Agency Lawyer states that the Brand Ambassador role can be explained as, *“Long-term collaborations that can span over the entire career, where you are involved as an ambassador for the brand.”*. Corporate Representative B clarifies that they work with Brand Ambassadors for the long run saying, *“We work for the long term and do not sign a contract with anyone unless we can see a long-term partnership. Our ambition is five years”*, and continue with, *“We also do not want them to just be ambassadors for us in campaigns, but to like what we do, even when they are in the ski lift or at a nightclub. We do not just pick someone because they have the right profile now, we look at the longer term, it is therefore important to get to know each other before signing a contract”*. This emphasizes our results in the desktop study where the Brand Ambassador is meant to embody the company's values and be a living representation of the brand's ethos. Their association with the brand goes beyond the promotion of products, as they are expected to be an integral part of the brand's culture and community. Corporate Representative B also says that *“How we work is based on how the basic collaboration should look, but everyone we work with, we want to have a personal connection with. They should be more than just a face*

outwardly, we want to know them on a personal level. One wants to have personal contact and communicate regularly and work mutually“.

This aligns with the thought of Athlete C’s work and goal as a Brand Ambassador, *“Really, it's about what you feel is expected of you and what you may want to do and so on. I've really built a relationship where I'm happy to help because I know I'll get a lot back if I do. But it's not that I feel like I have to help, or otherwise, I won't get anything in return. It's more like we've really established a relationship where we're happy to help each other because it's fun and it just is”.*

Athlete A continues and says that a big part of the work as a Brand Ambassador is to be present, *“They really want to showcase their sports stars, so they make sure we're invited to galas and events and provide accommodation and so on”.* Furthermore, Athlete C highlights that *“You stand up for each other and the commitments in the agreement are not requirements but more like guidelines”.*

The results of the desktop study, further confirmed by interview learnings, show that the role of a Brand Ambassador includes a lower frequency of advertisement during certain times, however, the type of mentioning of the sponsoring company is rather high. Furthermore, the desktop study showed that the relevance of the company's products to the athlete's sport is often less significant and that the athlete's involvement in the product development can be considerably low in the role of Brand Ambassador.

4.3 Endorser

The athlete role of the Endorser was also identified. An athlete is considered an Endorser if the collaboration is limited to a specific time frame, for example during a season, i.e., a time frame of typically several months within a calendar year that athletes compete in their sport. Quoting the Sports Agency Lawyer, *“The campaign endorsement is when the collaboration is active for a short period of time and involves clear advertising”.* The Sports Agent also notes *“There are shorter collaborations where sponsors pay for [my athlete] to focus on a specific campaign during a product launch or where the athlete makes shorter appearances.”* and continues *“The athlete is expected to showcase the product in your channels [x] times per year and present the product prominently. The athlete could also provide additional value by providing educational content while discussing the product”.* Athlete A explains her experience of the role saying, *“Sponsors sometimes want you to be a certain way that doesn't really align with being an*

athlete, but more like an influencer.” and continues “The [company] wanted to have all my statistics on Instagram and know exactly what they were paying for.”.

The desktop study shows that the products of a sponsor company do not have a clear pattern of how they related to the athlete’s sport. The athlete's involvement in the product development is often low and the type of mentioning about the sponsor by the athlete varies. Despite this, there are factors that identify a subrole of an Endorser which is based on the length aspect of the partnership agreement, i.e., the deciding factor is the time frame of the sponsorship.

4.3.1 Endorser: Campaign-based Endorser

The Endorser who is partnering with a sponsor, and promoting the brand or brand product during a short time is identified as a “Campaign-Based Endorser”. In these cases, the athlete is an Endorser of a brand for a short period, either in connection to a great sports event, e.g., the Olympics, or in connection to a specific campaign or launch for the sponsoring brand.

The Sports Agent mentioned several types of endorsement deals she had worked with. Involving an athlete in a sponsor's campaign, and limited to just that, is frequently requested by brands, however, not what the athletes preferably want in their experience. *“Primarily, I'm looking at a longer time horizon. With [the athlete's] case, we have discussed and are more interested in finding a reliable partner, who can follow [the athlete] for a long time.”* says the Sports Agent. Although, the Agent explains that it can be *“relevant and beneficial from a financial perspective to engage in shorter collaborations on certain occasions, like for the athlete to only lift a specific campaign or a product release or where you do, like, quick efforts”*.

What characterizes the campaign-based endorsement is the central part of social media, being the main activation channel according to several of the informants. Depending on the athlete's personal attitude towards their social media platform as a marketing distribution channel, the deal might be more or less suitable. To illustrate, Athlete D said, *“I'm not entirely comfortable advertising that way on social media, it doesn't feel like me. (...)”*.

According to Corporate Representative B, they do not work with athletes in this type of role, on the contrary, this is more similar to how they work with influencers. Explaining their work,

“Our responsibility is only for athletes, while influencers, for example, belong to the PR team's responsibility. PR and sponsorship require different types of work. PR has more Instagram campaigns, and specific focus points, while sponsorship is more long-term. However, there are a few people who cross the boundaries.” Athletes that cross the boundaries are described to have a large following base on social media and, according to Corporate Representative B, those athletes are working with sponsors more campaign-based. It can be concluded that when athletes assume the role of a Campaign-based Endorser, their agreements are extensively resembling influencer marketing agreements.

4.4 Co-Creator

The research further showed the role of being a Co-Creator in collaboration with a sponsorship company. A Co-Creator is an athlete who collaborates with a company for several years, with a main focus on product development, design, and co-creation of events. Athlete C describes it as *“In the role with [my sponsor] I feel like I somehow am working both with and for them, (...) they really use me in the marketing team and I'm involved in designing, developing, and evaluating products as well as events”*. The Sports Agency Lawyer said *“Collaborations, where a product line is developed with the athlete's name and design, are becoming more and more common. More of an ambassador for the product line than the company”*. Co-Creators are also often involved in product testing and feedback, providing valuable insights into the functionality of the products as they are experts in the field. This is noted by Corporate Representative A, *“The athletes opinion is like a professional opinion of a product”*. It is shown in the desktop study that the company's products are related to the athlete's sport, making the Co-Creator's involvement and inputs of higher value for the company. The desktop results further show that the frequency of the sponsorship advertising content may be less frequent than of other types of sponsorship relations, but the length of the relationship is more extended, often over several years of close collaborations. However, the results indicate that the type of mentioning and advertising of the company's product is often insignificant, as the athlete's involvement in the product development processes is more critical. However, the role of a Co-Creator takes many shapes in practice, and the triangulation of multiple methods in our research provided us with deeper insights into additional levels of subcategories.

4.4.1 Co-Creator: Co-worker for representation and events

An athlete who is involved in the sponsoring company's internal operations in events or representation activities is identified as a 'Co-worker for representation and events'. This can be explained by the internal marketing characteristics of the role. Events at the sponsoring company could, for instance, be a sales conference for all employees of the sponsoring company, where a sponsored athlete is invited to lecture on stage about "working towards a set goal" or another sports-related topic. However, for this athlete role, most of the sponsoring company is not operational within sports but rather wants to learn from general professional sports qualities and attributes.

Athlete D said the following about his experience of the role, *"We participated in and lectured on various things such as events and so on. Basically, the idea was that I, and the other athletes in the company's so-called "Sports Team" were like some kind of internal mascots. (...) used for internal marketing with our expertise from the sports world to inspire their employees. (...) I could, for example, be part of personnel activity such as a kickoff, where I held a physical exercise session."*

4.4.2 Co-Creator: Co-worker for product development

When a sponsored athlete is utilized for their experience and knowledge by getting involved in the sponsoring company's internal operations, mainly focusing on product development and design the athlete takes a different role from the subrole described in the latest section. This role is defined as 'Co-worker for product development' and is occurring when the athlete is utilized for their specific extensive knowledge in a sport to evaluate and develop the company's sport-related products. This could in practice be a case where the athlete is a test pilot of a coming product, still in the sample phase, leaving comments about potential improvements or wishing for specific product features. Corporate Representative A, on their use of athletes in the presented role. *"We work and spend a lot of time developing products so that they are as safe as possible (...) we work a lot with technology and come up with a lot of new innovations, ideas and then it is very important that we have people who can test and come with input who use the products on a daily basis."*

The value of this role was mainly highlighted by the sponsors in our study. However, from the athletes' perspective, some of the informants expressed gratitude and pride to be able to

contribute their relevant knowledge to the product development of the sponsor. Athlete B said *“It’s a good feeling that my knowledge can be useful”* and continued to emphasize *“I appreciate being able to improve the products for my own best performance (...) sometimes being able to get what I want in the products I use myself.”*

4.4.3 Co-Creator: Co-creator in product development

When an athlete is involved in the sponsoring company’s development of products to an even greater extent, designing and developing their own line of product(s), the role that the athlete is taking is defined as ‘Co-creator in product development’. In cases where a company is involving the sponsored athlete to this extent, both parties attain external marketing of their brands towards consumers. The athlete, for its personal brand, as their name is most commonly mentioned on, or together with, the product. The company can brand its products, co-created with the athlete, to the market, reaching the athletes’ fans as well as gaining further associations in consumer perception.

Corporate Representative A describes the work of a sponsored athlete with a collaboration line of products. *[One athlete] is very engaged and professional in the development of her own line of products (...) She came to our office as often as she could with input, was very involved in the design and was engaged from the very beginning, and cared a lot.”*

This type of sponsorship collaboration is commonly occurring in marketing for the brand to gain credibility and trustworthiness in consumer perception of their products. One of the informants, Corporate Representative B, said that *“involving athletes in developing the products is done so that they can be able to have “stories” to tell about the products. (...) That often makes the communication about the product come out as genuine and organic.”*

4.5 Support Grantee

The fourth role athletes take in sponsorship collaborations with companies that were found through the research is Support Grantee. When an athlete has the role of Support Grantee it is a limited collaboration that primarily provides financial backing and fosters goodwill for the athlete. Athlete B tells about the sponsor that has been around for 4 years *“They got to follow a professional sports career up close, but not much more. The CEO wanted to support me with financial aid, so it was pure goodwill in other words”*. The athlete continues saying *“They*

were very clear in saying that they sponsored me because they wanted to, and had no expectations of any performance from my side. Athlete A has had a similar experience from the role saying, *"I have had sponsors who have only been goodwill, for example, some local companies from home, where I have done nothing in the relationship. All they want is to financially support me and they don't want anything in return."* Both athletes A and B mentioned that the experience of a Support Grantee role was taken early in their respective careers, before gaining much fame. The Sports Agency Lawyer said that *"You often see those kinds of sponsors having a logo on athletes' clothes, but that's it"*. The desktop shows that, unlike other types of sponsorship, the products offered by the company are typically unrelated to the athlete's sport, and that the athlete's involvement in the product development is low. Athlete B states that *"I have not participated in any event or any kind of activation. The CEO only wanted to help me. It was often me who came up with things to do to activate the sponsorship, but they weren't interested"*. This confirms the desktop study's results, the frequency of the advertisements from this athlete role is found to be low and the type of mentioning is secondary.

4.6 Contemporary market changes identified

The interviewees described a changing environment in sponsorship-linked marketing and the relations between athletes and sponsor companies. The Sports Agency Lawyer said that *"Today deals are moving towards short-term. (...) Companies see larger risks with long-term commitments as there may be scandals such as doping cases etc. The risk is greater when you work longer because the athletes become more connected to the brand"*. The Sports Agent said *"Ideally, the athlete is working on long term with sponsors"*, but states that *"It is challenging to find those types of sponsorship deals today"*. The latter was also acknowledged by two of the athletes who are currently actively searching for sponsors. Another trend that the Sports Agency Lawyer identified is that *"Shorter collaborations that easily can be measured are becoming more common. (...) Companies measure more things in general, and want to see that there are clear results"*.

Moreover, another trend identified in the interview empirics is the increased use of social media in sponsorship contexts. The Sports Agency Lawyer said that *"There is more emphasis on social media in the agreements now"*, and this is agreed by more informants. Athlete A explained her experience of this trend, *"If you have an agreement that says exactly how many*

posts you have to post on Instagram, and I have 4 left only this month, that gives me stress which affects my life, and in the worst case, my sports performance". Athlete C has also get affected by this trend, "You really notice how much more focus is shifting towards social media, how the contracts are based on what you can perform on social media rather than perhaps competition results. The sponsors want you to deliver pictures and videos, to post things." and proceeds "Without saying that they are right or wrong, many sponsors claim that it is so easy today with my iPhone or GoPro that to get photos myself. They mean that you don't need a professional photographer or videographer to meet their requirements (...) They must not forget that we are also athletes and when we are out training, that is what we need to focus on, not taking pictures". The same athlete, Athlete C, however, saw opportunities and pointed out that "There are enormous opportunities if you work hard with your social media. If you are both good at competing and gathering engagement on social media, you are attractive to sponsors. Also, you get the opportunity to continue with what you do when you stop competing, as an influencer". Corporate Representative B confirms the trend "We ask for quite a lot of social media visibility when it comes to campaigns, but we always ask an open question to respect the individual's own brands and what they stand for".

Corporate Representative B mentions another tendency becoming more common, *"The athletes have started to realize that there is a lot of money to be made for people who are between the roles of influencer and athlete, and our way of working with a year-round contract and products for all the sports that the athlete performs in is not the most lucrative". The Sports Agency Lawyer communicated the same message "I have identified a trend that athletes understand their value and place higher demands on their commercial rights and compensation from sponsors". Corporate Representative B says, "We do not know what the future holds, but it is a subject we have started to talk about".*

5. Analysis

The following section of the analysis outlines a comparison of conflicts and agreements appearing in the results. The analysis is, when deemed relevant, contrasted by our theoretical framework, and also contrasted by the different stakeholder perspectives investigated, the perspective of the Athlete, Sports Agent, and Sponsoring Companies. The initial part reflects on the main contribution of the paper, athletes' roles in sponsorship engagements. In the later part, themes identified by the thematic analysis are brought up. The themes emerged from identified similarities and differences in the empirical data (Bell et al., 2019, p 519-520) concerning the recent development aspects of sport sponsorship practices due to the digitalization and commercialization of sports. The section presents important areas to consider for practitioners of all investigated stakeholder perspectives, sorted into: *The rise of social media on the sport sponsorship agenda*, and *The decrease in duration of sport sponsorship commitments*.

5.1 What the roles look like in practice

Observing the roles of athletes in sponsorship agreements in the current research, some roles are difficult to differentiate from others. When investigated in further depth, the roles are proven to often occur in combination with each other. Following Rundin and Collianders' (2021) typology of social media influencers' multifaceted roles in advertising, the roles are overlapping somewhat in practice. Drawn from the current study's empirics, an athlete often covers more than one role when collaborating with a sponsor, most often assuming a combination of two or more different roles. This is per previous research on celebrity athlete endorsement, acknowledging that great athletes tend to play many different roles, not simply being sports entertainers, due to their prominence in society (Jones & Schumann, 2000). Thus, the current study provides further evidence that athletes are utilized for various tasks and objectives in sponsorship collaborations. Athlete C describes "*In the role with [my sponsor] (...) they really use me in the marketing team and I'm involved in designing, developing, and evaluating products as well as events*", emphasizing that athletes' roles can be a combination of different roles in one contract. In Athlete C's case, the role can be categorized as both a Brand Ambassador role and a Co-Creator role, as the sponsoring company uses the athlete in several ways.

Another coexisting of roles identified is one mentioned by the Sports Agency Lawyer who states, *“Collaborations, where a product line is developed with the athlete's name and design (...) More of an ambassador for the product line than the company”*. From this example, conclusions can be drawn that the athlete takes on the role of Co-Creator due to their work with their own product line for the sponsor, but also the role of an Endorser. Endorser, as the athlete is not an ambassador for the whole company, sharing the values and being a living representation of the brand's ethos, but instead, is limited to a specific collection and time, which are characteristics of an Endorser according to this study's typology.

In contrast, the role of the Support Grantee does not have the same overlapping in practice as the other three main roles. Due to the specific criteria for the role of a Support Grantee which includes no marketing for the company in question, the overlapping is not commonly observed. We argue that the drivers for that type of sponsorship differ from others, where the sponsor in contrast to impact brand image and increase exposure, strives to impact goodwill perceptions. Creating goodwill perception is one occurring objective for sponsorship, according to Dolphin (2003), and is also mentioned as one of the identifiers for “Athlete sponsorship” in the definition of athlete endorsements by Anthony Carrillat and d'Astous (2014). Another noteworthy factor is that the Support Grantee role were brought up by athletes in the interviews seemingly concerning sponsors that had entered early in the athlete's career, before they had substantial commercial value and fame. The latter decreases the incentive to promote the athlete. Furthermore, the findings showed that the role can develop to either Brand Ambassador or more commonly Co-Creator over time. This amplification was exemplified by the Sports Agency Lawyer who said that *“A classic scenario is that they (i.e the sponsoring firm) first sponsor the athlete with money and it develops to the point where the athlete attends their customer events and presents themselves as a representative of the company”*. This example illustrates a scenario where the initial role of the athlete is Support Grantee, where the athlete gets monetary support from the sponsor who in turn, gets a logo exposure on the athlete's clothing. Then, this collaboration further develops to the athlete being involved as a Co-Creator, specifically the subrole “Co-Worker for representation and event”. This development often appears when the athlete enters an agreement with the sponsoring company in the early stages of their career. This was also acknowledged by Corporate Representative B who states that as the athlete's career takes off and the role has a tendency to change as the athlete's

commercial value becomes higher and that their strategy is “*to pick up athletes at an early age, then we can let the athletes grow into their roles*”.

Thus, the previous paragraph indicates that it is not only the main roles that are difficult to distinguish from one another; the subroles share the same characteristics as well. For instance, an athlete of the subrole “Co-Worker for representation and event” is frequently occurring in combination with other roles, e.g., Brand Ambassador. In accordance with the literature, the objectives and performances of sports sponsorships vary from one relationship to another (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022), and in reality, the roles are combined in the way that best suits the sponsorship entities.

Furthermore, both the role of ‘Co-worker for product development’ and ‘Co-Creator in product development’ tend to overlap with the role of a Brand Ambassador, as these relationships often occur after a tight sponsor and sponsee collaboration. The first mentioned subrole, ‘Co-worker for product development’, is often evolving in sponsorships where the company offers products related to the sport that the athlete is performing, and therefore the athlete uses the company’s products on a daily basis. Potentially, the company then starts to use the athlete’s extensive knowledge of a sport to develop the company’s products. This scenario is in extension pivoting a brand ambassadorship. Another noteworthy overlapping aspect concerning this subrole, it became clear in our study that the role is hard to distinguish by just examining publicly available information. It was further understood first in the in-depth interviews. As an example, an athlete that uses and promotes a sponsor's products frequently does not necessarily mention their involvement in the development of the products.

In contrast to the subrole of ‘Co-Creator in product development’, it is often clear that the athletes have developed the products and include obvious advertising. This is making the role overlap with the role of Brand Ambassador or Endorser. If an athlete develops products with a brand only as a one-off thing, most often involving non-sport-related products, the role might overlap with “Campaign-based Endorser”. However, some athletes have worked with sponsors for a really long time and get a chance to develop their own line. Initially being a Brand Ambassador, they are taking a step towards the subrole ‘Co-Creator in product development’. Either way the roles are combined in reality, collaborating with athletes is shown to have beneficial outcomes for businesses and brands (Coleman et al., 2001).

5.2 Combining roles in one sports sponsorship agreement: Brand Ambassador

The Brand Ambassador role takes many shapes in practice and the ambassadorship is expressed in multiple ways and engagements. Several of the other roles are mentioned when informants of the study describe their activations of a brand ambassadorship. As shown in research, a sponsorship is strategically leveraged by performing multiple promotional activities (O'Reilly & Lafrance Horning, 2013), indicating this is optimal for sponsorship success. An illustrative example of this can be found in Kim's (2020) article on Nike's success factors. In the article, Steve Prefontaine, a sponsored athlete, was mentioned to play a significant role in Nike's achievements. Prefontaine transitioned from being a Brand Ambassador on the running tracks to becoming a part of Nike's staff. As a true Brand Ambassador, he served as a muse and trailblazer, contributing to Nike's unique approach to inspiring people with the brand. His involvement was instrumental in Nike's great success (Kim, 2020).

In this study, the role of Brand Ambassador is the most frequently identified, in all data-gathering processes. The Sports Agent as well as the Sports Agency Lawyer, i.e. the informants with the most extensive experience from sponsorship work, expressed superiority to this role, in sport sponsorship agreements. The Sports Agent states that *“Brand ambassadorship takes in all roles identified, in one single agreement, with a 360° mindset”*, however, The Sports Agent also claims that the type of deal requires great engagement from both parties. This is further acknowledged and problematized by Athlete C, who says *“I don't think you could ever have this relationship that I have with [Brand Ambassador sponsor], with all my sponsors, it would have become a lot. [Brand Ambassador sponsor] almost feels like a friend that I have daily contact with every single day. It doesn't work if you have like 3, 4, or 5 sponsors, where you have that type of role.”* This implies that, although the role of a Brand Ambassador is desirable for athletes, it can lead to an unmanageable workload if the athlete engages in too many of those types of sponsorship agreements.

The Sports Agency Lawyer claims that when athletes get to engage in various types of tasks when collaborating with a sponsor is the best possible scenario. The Sports Agent confirms the same thing saying that *“the goal is always to find a role that is so diversified, i.e. that the athletes make different activations and impacts.”* This is congruent with what the athletes express that they wish for in a sponsorship agreement role, as well as it goes in line with how

the sponsoring representatives ideally activate their athletes in sponsorships. Contrasting the perspectives thus supports that a combination of the roles the current research has identified is best practice.

5.3 The rise of social media on the sport sponsorship agenda

All the informants of the in-depth interview study mentioned “Social Media” as part of their answers to recent changes they have experienced in work with sponsorship. Contrasting the investigated perspectives concerning this question concludes that social media has risen on the sponsorship agreement agenda, in accordance with literature (Filo et al., 2015). However, the attitude toward the change differs from the stakeholders, as they mention differentiating implications. Even though social media is the most important branding tool for athletes (Doyle et al., 2020) the majority of the athletes mention experiencing negative pressure and stress from social media requirements in contracts with sponsors. Athlete A said *“I think it can really lead to a lot of pressure for some. At least it does for me”* and continued saying that the stress, in the worst case, can impact her athletic performance. However, some athletes mentioned positive thoughts and opportunities that have come with social media. Athlete C said that *“There are enormous opportunities if you work hard with your social media. If you are both good at competing and gathering engagement on social media, you are attractive to sponsors. Also, you get the opportunity to continue with what you do when you stop competing, as an influencer”*. There is no denying the potential opportunities that arise from having a strong personal brand as it can lead to greater earnings from endorsement and sponsorship deals, and help maintain an image when athletic performances are lacking (Su et al., 2020). However, it is a growing competition as they operate in an environment where many are fighting for attention (O’Reilly & Lafrance Horning, 2013), and athletes are under immense pressure to maintain a strong social media presence. Confirming what many of the athletes have expressed during the interviews.

All informants, regardless of perspective, acknowledge that Social Media has risen on the sponsorship-linked marketing agenda in sports and changed the way of working. The Sports Agency Lawyer concluded that *“There is more emphasis on social media in the agreements”* and Corporate Representative B stated that a lot has changed in his work during the 7 years he has worked for the company with sponsored athletes, saying *“There is more focus on digital content and how to work with influencer marketing in parallel with sponsored athletes”*.

Athlete C said in the interview, *“You really notice how much more focus is shifting towards social media”* and described that sponsors' demands on the athletes often come without the prerequisites. Although the athlete expressed positive opportunities coming from the trend, indicating that social media is a potential avenue for enhancing his brand. Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) also address this topic and contend that athletes have the opportunity to create and enhance their personal brand with minimal investment by utilizing social media platforms.

By contrasting the three stakeholder's perspectives (athletes, sponsoring companies, and sports agents), the results are provided with some nuance, and the athlete's concerns can be debilitated by the sponsoring companies' process intentions. In the current sponsorship processes at both of the two companies investigated in this study, the representatives claim that athletes and influencers are managed fully separately and that the expectations and requirements of social media presence on athletes are much lower than one might think. Primarily, they express that they want the athletes to focus on their sports performance. When Corporate Representative B describes how they handle social media requirements in athletes' sponsorships, he emphasizes that while they ask for social media visibility, they do not pressure or strictly demand it from the athletes (see Results section 4.2). According to recent literature, it is crucial for companies to be represented on athletes' social media, as it is one of their significant marketing channels (Doyle et al., 2020). Schouten et al. (2019) argue that companies more often make the decision to leave their traditional celebrity endorsers for marketing purposes and instead focus on social media influencers.

The sponsoring companies, however, mentioned a concern from their perspective about the rise of social media in the sponsorship agenda. Corporate Representative B says that the athletes are starting to realize that the potential earnings from working with a larger number of sponsors, getting compensated for shorter digital marketing activations, is more lucrative than working with one “main” sponsor (see Results section 4.2). He says *“If you work with 5 different brands and more campaigns, you earn more money than with us, even though we offer security and stability”*. In addition to that concern, the representative says that *“Our value decreases if there are too many partners in the picture, for example, if a lot of sponsors are tagged in a picture, our weight and exposure become less”*. The representative, who manages sponsored athletes, says this concern is up for discussion often internally. On the same track, The Sports Agency

Lawyer also discusses the rise of social media as a factor that has impacted athletes' awareness in terms of their commercial value, saying “*Athletes (...) place higher demands on their commercial rights and compensation from sponsors*”. This shows that social media have created great marketing opportunities, both for athletes and companies, however, these opportunities come with questions that need to be further investigated by the partners to reach a fruitful sponsorship relationship for both parties.

5.4 The decrease in duration of sport sponsorship commitments

A theme observed is the trend of shorter lengths in sponsorship commitments. All informants of the research however express that the ideal sponsorships are in the longer term, arguing that with a longer commitment comes positive aspects such as increased trust and loyalty. Aligning with what Woisetschläger et al. (2017) recognized, the longer the time period that a partnership has, the more they develop a common set of brand associations that support the fit of the sponsorship and reduces the perception of attribution of calculative motives. However, several informants state that the time frame for newly entered sponsorship agreements is on the shorter side now, compared to how it has been previously. The Sports Agency Lawyer says, “*Today deals are moving towards short-term (...) The risk is greater when you work longer because the athletes become more connected to the brand*”. The greater risk that the sponsoring brands take by longer commitments with athletes is however something that is not brought up in a problematic sense by the representatives of the sponsor perspective in this study. The Sports Agent, who aims at establishing long-term sponsorship agreements for her athlete, however, expresses a concern saying that “*it is challenging to find those types of sponsorship deals today*”.

The sponsoring companies investigated in this study express that when working with athletes, they rather aim for a long relationship. As the sponsorship fit becomes stronger with time, sponsors are often more motivated to work long-term and sign these types of contracts (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). That differs from how the sponsoring companies investigated for instance work with influencers. However, the same companies have identified that athletes have a different incentive to be open for more and shorter relationships, as touched upon in the previous section. This aspect is thus considered in the athlete selection process. Corporate Representative B says “*We apply a careful selection process to sponsor an athlete, (...) We take our time without hastening anything and choose athletes who are in an early stage of their*

career. (...) *This minimizes the consequences if the person is not right and it goes wrong*". The Representative describes what they are searching for in sponsored athletes as genuine people who love the brand and share the same values, saying *"The athletes are the personality of our brand"* and thus optimally stay with the brand over a long period of time. Hence, it is important to be more careful of the selection of sponsee when working more long-term as it requires higher mutual commitment and trust between the athlete and the sponsor (Woisetschläger et al., 2017).

The Sports Agency Lawyer describes a potential underlying reason for the reduced duration of sponsorship agreements, in addition to the increased risk companies take on, to be the increased demand for measurability. The Lawyer says *"Shorter collaborations that easily can be measured are becoming more common"*. Limiting the sponsorship agreements' time makes the return on investment (ROI) and outcomes of the sponsorship easier to measure. The Lawyer elaborates on the trend noting that *"Companies measure more things in general, and want to see that there are clear results"*. According to Garza Segovia & Kennett (2021) measuring the effects of sponsorship must be considered for successful marketing and digital media brings new opportunities to measure ROI and other key performance indicators in new ways.

6. Discussion

6.1 Conclusion

The current research sought to explore the roles of athletes in sponsorship agreements and how the sponsorship market has developed in recent times. Treating the field of sports marketing and sponsorship, this qualitative research is conducted through a multi-method approach. Through the approach, the study gathers insights into athletes' roles in sponsorship collaborations and considers contemporary changes for an updated view. Firstly, the empirical findings of this study indicate that athletes assume four roles: Brand Ambassador, Endorser, Co-Creator, and Support Grantee. Two of these roles, Endorser and Co-Creator are further broken down into four additional subroles, Co-Worker for representation and events, Co-Worker for product development, Co-Creator in product development, and Campaign-Based Endorser. In practice, these roles are multifaceted and often overlap with each other: Athletes can assume a combination of two or more roles, and, commonly, roles evolve over time. The role of Support Grantee stands out from other roles by distinctively excluding any advertising

of the sponsoring company. Instead, it primarily focuses on fostering goodwill perceptions. The Brand Ambassador role is the most frequently assumed role by athletes, and it is widely regarded as superior in terms of fit for athletes. However, it is crucial to maintain a balance in the number of brand ambassadorships an athlete takes on, as the role tends to be the most demanding one.

Secondly, the study sought to explore how sports sponsorships have developed in recent times due to the digitalization and commercialization of sports, outlining the contemporary changing factors. The findings show a significant change in the rise of social media in the sponsorship agenda, which has resulted in increased pressure and stress for athletes to maintain a strong social media presence. While social media offers potential opportunities for athletes to enhance their personal brand and increase their earnings from sponsorship deals, it has also created a highly competitive environment where many are fighting for attention. Another changing factor in the sport sponsorship landscape is the shift towards shorter duration of sponsorship commitments, despite the preference for longer-term partnerships. The change has arisen partly due to the indication that longer agreements come with more risk, which requires a more careful selection of sponsored athletes as longer partnerships create stronger brand associations with the athletes. The shift in duration is also explained by companies' increased demand for measurability. Working toward clearly targeted goals and ROIs, measurements are more easily performed in shorter time-framed agreements.

Overall, the contemporary changes in sports sponsorship have presented new challenges and opportunities for both athletes and sponsors. Companies must navigate these changes carefully to ensure they maintain their marketing effectiveness and the value of their sponsorships, while athletes must balance the demands of maintaining a strong social media presence with their athletic performance. See an overview of the study's result in Figure 2.

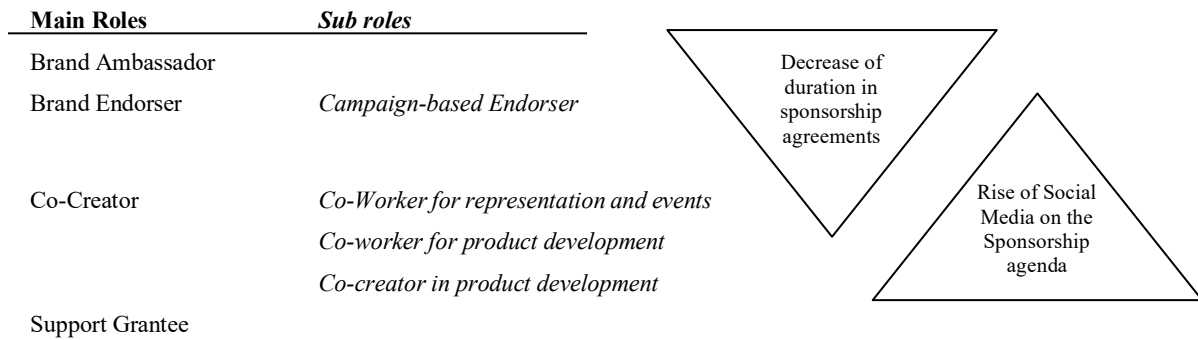


Figure 2. An overview of the study's results.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study provides three significant theoretical contributions, categorization for classifying athlete roles in sponsorship agreements, concept formation and exposition, and valuable insights into the dynamics between companies and athletes in sponsorship agreements. Thus, this study contributes to the identified shortage of research examining sponsorship processes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019), by including aspects of the sponsor and sponsored entities' relationships. Our study has created a comprehensive categorization that serves as a great foundation for future researchers to better understand and analyze athletes in sponsorship agreements. With these clearly defined roles, researchers can more effectively investigate and outline different types of sports sponsorship agreements. Thus, this study contributes to future research on sport sponsorship activations, requested by Cornwell & Kwon (2019). The presented typology enables scholars to narrow down their focus on specific aspects and athlete roles, thereby enhancing the accuracy and depth of findings, similar to Rundin & Colliander's contribution (2021) in a social media influencer context. Providing a concept formation, the study serves the purpose of contributing to the development of new theoretical concepts that can be used to better understand the current dynamics of athlete sponsorship agreements. This is particularly well-timed because of the request of a growing body of literature on the topics of sports marketing's technology adoption and the impact of new digital platforms on traditional marketing strategies (Garza Segovia & Kennett, 2021). Specifically, outlining the evolving aspects of roles athletes play in sponsorship-marketing.

6.3 Managerial Implications

The study provides valuable insights and implications for practitioners. It offers a deepened knowledge of the dynamics between companies and athletes in sponsorship agreements that

can help advertising practitioners as well as athletes and sports agents to better understand the various factors that sponsorship incorporates. These insights can be used to create more effective sponsorship strategies and improve the outcomes for all involved in these agreements. In addition, by revealing insights from different standing points, the different stakeholders can gain further understanding from other entities' perspectives. The information can be utilized by these stakeholders to improve the relationship fit and create more mutually beneficial agreements. This could ensure that a sponsoring company optimizes the value of its investments while ensuring that the athlete in question is comfortable with the terms of the agreement and is utilized in the best way.

For all practitioners, the different examples brought up to visualize the roles can serve as inspiration as well as a map of the opportunities available in future sponsorships. For practitioners with less experience, it can serve as a descriptive framework, whereas for those more experienced, it can serve as an evaluation tool or even a tool for idea generation. Either way, the typology of the roles athletes take in sport sponsorship can serve as a fundament for the mutual understanding of what the parties are committed to in a collaboration.

6.4 Limitations

Like all studies, this research consists of limitations that need to be considered when adopting the study and results. Firstly, all data collected was limited to the Swedish market, which is not representative of the status of the global sports scene. Secondly, part of the study is based on interviews to gather direct perspectives of the current sponsorship market, and by interviewing a small sample of athletes, sports agents, and company representatives, the findings risk being biased. Additionally, as our in-depth interviews were conducted as a case study within the ski sports industry, it is necessary to acknowledge that certain aspects may not be fully applicable to other sports industries. The case study approach can be considered a limitation with criticisms such as it may not be a proper scientific method. Some argue that case studies do not provide enough basis for scientific generalization, as they tend to be too situation-specific (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Nevertheless, this approach enabled obtaining a more significant understanding and gaining deeper insights into this specific industry. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the study had a limited time frame, regarded as a limitation when gathering empirical data.

6.5 Future Research

We encourage researchers to further elaborate on this study by investigating the roles athletes assume in a sports sponsorship agreement by looking into other geographical markets where the roles might differ. Moreover, we encourage studies focusing on other sports industries for case investigations, rather than the present one. Both propositions mentioned would generate a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Overall, there is an excellent opportunity for future research in this area globally, and our study provides a valuable starting point.

Furthermore, our recommendation for future research is for researchers to utilize our typology as a foundation and further develop the theoretical understanding of the roles derived from sports sponsorship agreements. For instance, researchers could explore the long-term effects of athletes' roles in sponsorship agreements on their personal brand and career, investigating whether athletes who play a more passive role in sponsorship agreements have a harder time transitioning to post-athlete careers. Another interesting question would be for researchers to do a cross-cultural comparison and examine how the typology of athlete roles in sponsorships applies in different cultural contexts. This is by, for example, investigating whether the roles that athletes play in sponsorship agreements vary between Western and Eastern cultures. Another avenue for research that arises is how these roles compare to the influencers' roles in companies' digital endorsement efforts, and how they are utilized to effectively work. By leveraging the typology presented in this study, future researchers can explore several questions in greater detail and depth.

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1: Desktop study information

Athlete	Gender	Sport	Sponsorship relations
Athlete 1	Female	Swimming	5
Athlete 2	Male	Tennis	5
Athlete 3	Female	Soccer	4
Athlete 4	Female	Soccer	5
Athlete 5	Male	Soccer	3
Athlete 6	Male	Soccer	3
Athlete 7	Male	Pole vault	7
Athlete 8	Male	Basketball	6
Athlete 9	Female	Swimming	7
Athlete 10	Male	Handball	3
Athlete 11	Male	Handball	6
Athlete 12	Female	Tennis	6
Athlete 13	Female	Golf	9
Athlete 14	Male	Freestyle	6
Athlete 15	Male	Freestyle	8
Athlete 16	Female	Track and field	5
Athlete 17	Female	Biathlon	11
Athlete 18	Male	Hockey	2
Athlete 19	Male	Biathlon	8
Athlete 20	Male	Tennis	1
Athlete 21	Male	Racing	4
Athlete 22	Male	Alpine	8
Athlete 23	Male	Free ride	6
Athlete 24	Male	Free ride	8
Athlete 25	Male	Track and field	2
Athlete 26	Female	Alpine	10
Athlete 27	Female	Alpine	5
Athlete 28	Male	Alpine	7
Athlete 29	Female	Floorball	1
Athlete 30	Male	Hockey	0
Total athletes	Gender	Different Sports	Sponsorship relations
30	F = 11, M = 19	15	161

Appendix 2: Interview information

Date	Stakeholder perspective	Setting	Recording	Length
2023-04-04	Athlete A	Offline	Yes	34:12
2023-04-04	Athlete B	Offline	Yes	32:40
2023-04-05	Athlete C	Offline	Yes	33:13
2023-04-05	Athlete D	Offline	Yes	22:58
2023-04-12	Corporate Representative A	Offline	Yes	34:42
2023-04-20	Athlete E	Phone	No	46:10
2023-04-12	Sport Agent	Online (Zoom)	Yes	36:40
2023-04-19	Corporate Representative B	Online (Microsoft Teams)	No	01:06:06
2023-04-26	Sports Agency Lawyer	Phone	No	28:00
				$\mu = 37:02$

Appendix 3: Interview guide

Interview guide
What is your perspective on how companies work with athletes in sponsorship agreements?
What is your perspective on the engagement from the stakeholders in sponsorship agreements?
In a sponsorship agreement, what is your perspective of the intended length of the collaborations, from your side and the partners?
How would you describe an athlete's role in a sponsorship agreement and different forms of it?
Which is the biggest value of the athlete for the sponsoring partner?
Which is the biggest value of the sponsoring partner for the athlete?
How would you, in general, describe how athletes and sponsors' work has changed in recent years, in the context of a sponsorship agreement?
What challenges, opportunities and risks do you see with sponsorship from your perspective?