



UNIVERSITÀ
DI PAVIA

Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Aziendali

**Corso di Laurea Magistrale in International Business
and Entrepreneurship**

**The impact of athletes as endorsers on brand
perception: an analysis through the Athlete Brand
Image model**

Relatore:

Chiar.ma Prof. Giovanna Magnani

**Tesi di Laurea
di Michele Rochlitzer**

Matr. n. 512840

Anno Accademico 2023-2024

Summary

Abstract in italiano	3
Abstract in English	4
Introduction	5
Chapter 1: History and evolution of the relationship between International Brands and the world of sports	7
1.1 The connection between brand management and sports	7
1.1.1 The history of sports marketing	9
1.2 Literature review	12
1.3 Comparison of past and present	15
1.4 Transformation of the relationship: analysis of the factors that have enabled its evolution	21
1.5 Brands' use of social media and advertising: the role of sports celebrities	23
Chapter 2: Relationship between sports celebrities and brand growth: an empirical analysis using the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI)	32
2.1. Definition of athlete branding	33
2.1.1. Image of the endorser	34
2.1.2. Sports team branding.....	35
2.2 Method of selecting the most suitable athlete for internationalization	38
2.3 The growth of brand value and increased sales	44
2.4 Analysis of a specific example: the case of Air Jordan	49
2.5 Theoretical model and hypothesis development	52
Chapter 3: Analysis of consumer brand perception and the influence of corporate brand ambassadors	55
3.1 Methodology	55
3.2 Questionnaire aimed at consumers in Italy, the UK and the U.S.	58
3.3 Interviews	66
3.4 Regression	72
Conclusion	81
Acknowledgments	82
Bibliography	84

Abstract in italiano

La presente tesi esplora l'impatto degli atleti-brand ambassador sul comportamento d'acquisto dei consumatori verso i prodotti sponsorizzati. Inizialmente è stata condotta un'analisi approfondita della letteratura per delineare lo stato attuale della relazione tra il branding, attraverso l'utilizzo di atleti, e la conseguente percezione del marchio. Successivamente si è effettuata un'analisi del modello economico "Athlete Brand Image" e delle sue tre variabili; questo ha permesso di attivare un questionario online finalizzato a raccogliere dati quantitativi per indagare il ruolo degli atleti, intesi come brand, e la loro influenza verso i comportamenti d'acquisto dei consumatori. Il questionario, distribuito via-web, ha coinvolto 300 partecipanti, rappresentativi di diverse fasce d'età, genere e provenienza geografica, permettendo una visione ampia e variegata delle percezioni degli utenti. Per arricchire l'analisi, sono state condotte due interviste semi-strutturate con i general manager di due importanti aziende: Enervit s.p.a e Louis Vuitton s.p.a. Queste interviste hanno fornito una prospettiva approfondita sul processo decisionale delle aziende circa la selezione degli atleti come ambassador del brand, evidenziando le strategie utilizzate e le sfide affrontate. Infine, è stata eseguita una regressione multipla tramite un modello riadattato basato sull'Athlete Brand Image, per analizzare i dati raccolti e determinare le variabili più influenti circa l'acquisto di prodotti sponsorizzati. I risultati indicano che le variabili Marketable lifestyle e Off-field Behaviour influenzano significativamente la percezione del marchio. Questa ricerca mette in evidenza come la valutazione dell'azienda per la scelta dell'atleta come brand ambassador deve comprendere tutto quello che egli compie dentro e fuori dalla propria disciplina sportiva.

Parole chiave: Immagine del brand dell'atleta, Percezione del brand, Marketing sportivo, Regressione multipla, Sponsorizzazione sportiva.

Abstract in English

This thesis explores the impact of athlete-brand ambassadors on consumer purchasing behavior toward sponsored products. Initially, an in-depth literature review was conducted to outline the current state of the relationship between branding, through the use of athletes, and the resulting brand perception. Next an analysis of the “Athlete Brand Image” economic model and its three variables was conducted; this enabled the activation of an online questionnaire aimed at collecting quantitative data to investigate the role of athletes, understood as brands, and their influence toward consumer purchasing behaviors. The questionnaire, distributed on the internet, involved 300 participants, representative of different age groups, gender and geographical origin, allowing a broad and varied view of user perceptions. To enrich the analysis, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with general managers of two major companies, Enervit Ltd and Louis Vuitton Ltd. These interviews provided an in-depth perspective on companies' decision-making process about the selection of athletes as brand ambassadors, highlighting the strategies used and challenges faced. Finally, a multiple regression was run using a readapted model based on the Athlete Brand Image to analyze the collected data and determine the most influential variables about the purchase of sponsored products. The results indicate that the Marketable lifestyle and Off-field Behaviour variables significantly influence brand perception. This research highlights how the company's assessment of an athlete's selection as a brand ambassador must include everything he or she accomplishes in and out of his or her sport.

Keywords: Athlete Brand Image, Brand Perception, Sports Marketing, Multiple Regression, Sports Sponsorship.

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the relationship between companies and the world of sport by analyzing the role of athletes as brand ambassadors and the influence they are able to play on consumers' purchasing intentions.

This study allows us to examine the evolution of the brand ambassador role and how it is increasingly being used by companies that decide to expand their markets globally.

The research identifies the importance of creating a closer and longer-lasting relationship between the world of sports and that of international brands.

The thesis is divided into three chapters, with the first focusing on a brief analysis of the history of the relationship between business and the world of sports, highlighting the radical changes that have taken place over the past 20 years thanks to the rise of social media. Particular attention is paid to the definition and evolution of the role of the sportsman, outlining its peculiarities and the effects that the introduction of this figure has brought to the marketplace.

The second chapter presents a detailed analysis of the most important characteristics for an athlete as a brand ambassador through the research model called "Model of Athlete Brand Image" (MABI), identified by university professors Arai Kikko et al.

Specifically, the model aims to analyze an athlete, not only for his or her athletic performance, but also for his or her behavior off the field.

Then a detailed analysis of the three main variables of the MABI model was conducted, including concrete cases of famous athletes for each of these variables. At the end of the chapter, the case Michael Jordan is examined, describing how the American athlete represents the forerunner of the modern athlete brand ambassador and how he became an icon on and off the field.

The third chapter describes the methodology of analysis of the dissertation, which includes a questionnaire, two interviews and a multiple regression; the questionnaire was administered on the internet, enabling the analysis of the replies of 300 respondents from Italy, Europe and non-European countries, identifying the characteristics that consumers look for in athletes and how these may influence the choice of purchase.

Then two semi-structured interviews are described, conducted with managers of Enervit and Louis Vuitton, which provided companies' views on the topic that confirmed the data expressed by the questionnaire.

Using the data collected and the hypotheses expressed in Chapter 2, the results were analyzed using the rigorous multiple regression methodology and revealed the values that consumers look for in an athlete and which of them most influence their purchase.

Chapter 1: History and evolution of the relationship between International Brands and the world of sports

Sports have always played an important role in social inclusion and cohesion, merging individuals through a common passion. In recent decades, however, the world of sports has experienced a significant transformation, evolving from mere competitive show to a territory of strong economic interests, specifically involving interaction between marketing dynamics and corporate identities.

The chapter aims to explore this change by analyzing the relationship between brands and the world of sports, starting from its origins and explaining its evolution over time; all the factors that have enabled this transformation will be highlighted, and specifically the function played by social media, which has become fundamental in publicizing the role of brand ambassadors held by many international sports stars.

1.1 The connection between brand management and sports

Today the relationship between brands and sports is a global reality and an integral part of the strategy implemented by companies to reach as many consumers as possible.

Sport, in its most modern sense, can be considered one of the products of an industrial society; each sporting activity feeds an industrial sector, contributing significantly to the increase in domestic production (Bonini, 2006). In particular, reference can be made to those sports in which the athlete is at center-stage and which require for their performance a series of manufactured products that make up the sportsperson's equipment.

To trace the origins of the industrial sports phenomenon in Italy, three basic stages can be considered (Belloni, 2016):

- 1) Italian industrial take-off 1896-1914: the sports industry gets organized
- 2) Between war and postwar 1914-1922: the sports industry mobilizes
- 3) Between wars 1922-1945: the sports industry diversifies

The first phase is the one that marks the age of industrial takeoff for our country from an economic point of view. These are the years from the end of the 19th century, to the eve of the First World War, and from a sports history point of view they see an early industrialization within our country.

At the same time as these developments is the first hint of sports-related industry, with characteristic features that denote its close connection with the national model of industrial development from the outset. In the years leading up to World War I, five major "production chains" linked to the same number of sports could already be identified: mountaineering, gymnastics, fencing and, above all, cycling and motor sports (motoring, motorcycling, aeronautics), which, more than any other, represented Italian capitalism. (Fabrizio, 2012)

These were flanked by other "minor" productions, many of them related to tennis, winter sports, boxing and embryonic team sports, all of which were still totally dependent on a foreign production monopoly. This was mainly English, but also German, Norwegian and Swiss for winter sports. An increasingly articulated commercial distribution network of sports-related products also began to develop, consisting of emporiums and stores that covered the entire country, although in the case of production, it was the north that was the leading player (Falcone, 1912)

The second phase is marked by World War I and the difficult post-war reconversion, which also marked a political and social crisis for Italy that would find its dramatic solution in the fall of liberal institutions and the beginning of the fascist regime. The problems of production reconversion that marked the fate of most industrial sectors in the postwar period, also affected companies related to the sports industry, which in many cases had improved precisely in the particular conjuncture of wartime mobilization. The five-year period 1914-1918 helped to consolidate in Italy, too, a first important nucleus of the sports industry, concentrated, as we have seen, in the mechanical sectors and geographically located in the industrial triangle of Milan, Turin and Genoa (Morasso, 1916).

Finally, the third period was covered by the long, twenty-year Fascist period, which ended with the country's participation in a new world conflict. As we shall see, the development of the sports industry experienced alternating and in some ways contradictory events during these years (Zanetti, 1930).

Thus, an initial phase dominated by the support of a sport, such as motor racing, which embodied the rhetoric of the regime to perfection with its values of modernity, industrial power, courage and daring, was followed by another that saw the rise of the "light" sports industry to complement the growth of certain team sports, first and foremost soccer.

This brief historical introduction provides an interpretation of the context in which the world of sports was "born" and "grew" over time, allowing the introduction of the foundations of an industry that would shortly become a relevant part of the Italian economy (Banti, 1936).

1.1.1 The history of sports marketing

The development of the concept of sports marketing has allowed the foundation to be laid between companies and the subsequent world of sports. Sports marketing has ancient origins and can in fact be traced all the way back to the Olympics in Ancient Greece where, although the prizes at stake were very small, the hometowns of the athletes were willing to invest heavily in those who represented them, providing them with equipment, coaches, and everything they needed to arrive prepared. If an athlete won at the Olympics, it would greatly increase the fame of his or her city: athletes were the predecessors of today's brand ambassadors. (Eckhardt, Bengtsson, 2010)

In 1852 in the United States, James N. Elkins, the superintendent of the Boston, Concord and Montreal Railroad, during a train journey with Dr. Whiton, professor of Yale, and Joseph Mansfield Brown, researcher of Harvard, realized that they could generate large economic profits through the organization of a major sporting event. They thus organized the first inter-university rowing challenge between Harvard and Yale, and the result was incredible: spectators, curious to see the competition, filled the city and increased train traffic and hotel occupancy, generating much revenue in the coffers of the host city (Herrick, 1948). Modern sports marketing had been officially inaugurated. Also in the United States, Peck & Snyder Sporting Goods, a tobacco company, understood the power of sports marketing and decided, for the first time in 1870, to start partnering with the top teams of the moment, creating tobacco cards with baseball league stars drawn on them, and then inserting them into cigarette packs. The goal was simple: to increase consumer loyalty by inviting fans to purchase cigarettes while simultaneously collecting "baseball cards" (Pollak, 2015).

Later, thanks to the invention of the radio there was the possibility of extending the reach of sporting events to as many people as possible, creating a great opportunity for marketers and sports clubs.

In 1921 the first baseball match was broadcast in the U.S. and in 1927 in England the first soccer match: Arsenal vs. Sheffield United. Sports marketing had taken a step forward and thanks to this invention, tens of thousands of people could tune in to listen to the event live. Such numbers appealed to all businesses interested in promoting their products. Subsequently, thanks to the introduction of TV, athletes began to become staples for their fans. In the United States, the first televised sporting event was a college football game between Columbia University and Princeton University on May 17, 1939. (Columbia University Athletics, 2009) NBC was in charge of broadcasting and, with a single camera placed on a perilous wooden stand, allowed the few more than 400 television sets in the States to watch the game live. The transition to the professional leagues was very brief indeed, in fact in the same year the American Major League was also covered by television networks, and this event helped make baseball player Babe Ruth the first athlete with a six-figure contract in professional sports.

Figure 1.1 The first baseball match broadcast in the USA 1921



Source: Baseballhalloffame.org

In its early years, sports marketing was exclusively about product placement and product sales, and it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the use of sports as a marketing tool really began to capture corporate imagination.

The most famous brands thus began to enlist athletes as ambassadors, to create associations between the brand and consumers: boxer Mohamed Ali and Adidas, NBA basketball player Chuck Taylor and Converse, or American football player Joe Green & Coca Cola are some of the most important examples. The first sports marketing agency was born precisely because of the need to support athletes in monetizing their fame.

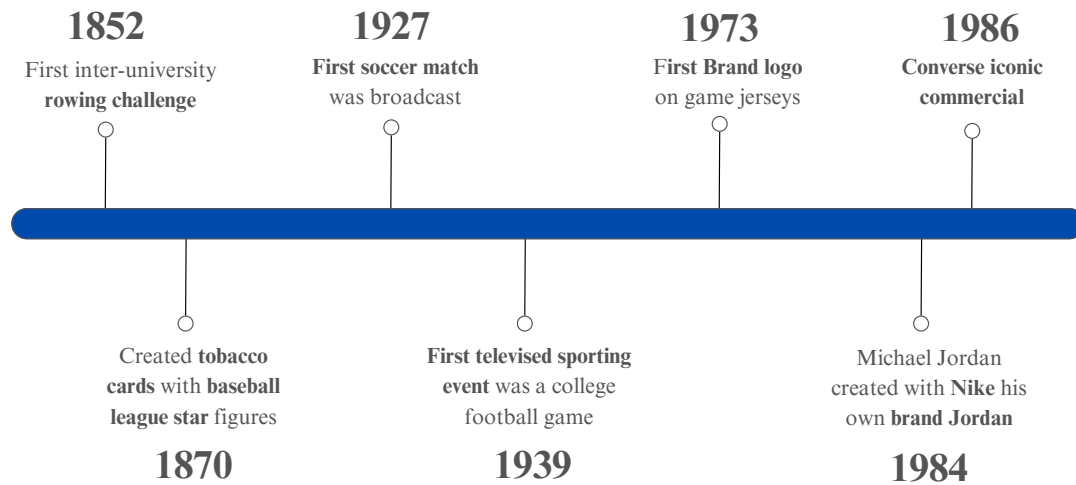
In the 1970s, Tobacco companies could no longer advertise on TV and radio and had to find alternative methods of marketing: they began sponsoring sports events such as "Virginia Slims Tennis" and the "NASCAR Winston Cup".

In 1973 the first sponsorships on game jerseys also arrived in Europe, the first team to have a Brand logo (Jagermeister) was the German soccer team the Eintracht Braunschweig: the club was paid 100,000 German marks, and soon after other teams took the same path. (Kelly, 2020)

In the 1980s, sport continued to grow, as did the salaries of the most famous sports players, for example, soccer player Diego Armando Maradona, who came to have a salary of more than \$1 million a year through contracts with Puma and Coca Cola. (Manno, 2020) Again, it was the Tobacco companies that pioneered this new mode of sports marketing: the personalization of the name of major sporting events through sponsorship by major international brands. In the 1990s, television rights, and particularly advertisements, increased the level of consumer engagement even more, refining the relationship between the sports world and international brands. (Kuyucu,2020)

Finally, in the last 20 years the rise of technology has opened up new horizons, increasing the ways in which brands can connect with, and expand, their fanbase (Abate, 2020).

Figure 1.2 History of sports marketing



Source: Edoardo Abate website

1.2 Literature review

The first chapter consists of a review of the marketing and management literature concerning the topic of international brand relationships with the world of sports, with a particular focus on the role of sports people. Bibliography sources were selected by consulting the University Catalog and Google Scholar platform, through the key words "sport-brand binomial," "sport marketing," "athlete Influence on Social media," "Model of Athlete Image," "Sport Marketing and Management," "Athlete branding via social media," "The Role Model Effect of Sports Celebrities," "Messi and Ronaldo," and "Louis Vuitton ". In particular, research papers published from 2000 to 2023 were analyzed, paying special attention to the last 10 years. The vast majority of the consulted documents belong to marketing and business management journals such as European Sport Management Quarterly, Sport Management Review, Journal of Marketing Communications and International Journal of Integrated Marketing Communications. There are also numerous reports derived from research conducted, by great experts in marketing and business management such as Hans Keller and Peter Bauer, but also

researchers and professors Arai Akikko and Stephen Ross of University- St.Paul who introduced the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) in 2014.

This chapter will illustrate the origin and evolution of the relationship between international brands and the world of sports, with particular reference to the role of sportsmen and their relationship with the public. The concept of brand is generally associated with sales, but this assessment is reductive: nowadays when we talk about international brands, we have to consider a broader reality, which involves cultural, social and, above all, economic aspects that are constantly evolving. The world of sports and professional athletes has certainly allowed brands to broaden their horizons, finding in sportsmen and women a crucial point in their relations with their customers; it was understood how this collaboration, between two distinct realities, allowed to create benefits for both parties. A large part of the literature has dealt with studying the relationship between the world of sports and the world of international brands focusing on different aspects; among the most important there was university professor Sergio Cherubini who, in his 2015 book "Sports Marketing and Management," analyzes sports marketing by dividing it into 3 phases:

1. first phase late 1950s, first contacts between companies and the sports world, birth of sponsorship.
2. second half of the 1980s, brands begin to conduct market research to learn more about the characteristics of their supporters and to carry out advertising campaigns to promote season tickets or tickets of the most popular teams; birth of Sports Marketing.
3. the first and second phases were the foundations for the development of Sports Co-marketing, which is one of the pillars of today's marketing and is aimed at integrating sponsors more closely. The moment sponsorship becomes a partnership between different players, the so-called Collaborative Marketing is born.

Economist Kevin Keller, in his 1993 article "Conceptualizing, Measuring and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity," presents a conceptual model of brand equity from the perspective of the individual consumer; he later explains sports celebrity endorsement as the correspondence between the celebrity and the brand, calling it "a positive function of

the number of nodes that the athlete and the brand share in consumer memory networks." Brand knowledge is conceptualized according to an associative memory model characterized by two components: brand awareness and brand image. Customer-based brand equity occurs when consumers are familiar with the brand and retain some favorable, strong and unique associations in memory.

With the development of technology, the effective use of social media has become an important marketing strategy for any company that wants to gain a competitive advantage. According to sociologist Erving Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, individuals attempt to strategically manage how others perceive them by selectively emphasizing elements of their career or characteristics with which they would like to be associated and for which they would like to be known. Indeed, at the heart of self-presentation theory is the idea that individuals seek to influence others' perceptions of themselves by constructing an image through the communication of both "front" and "backstage" content.

Another very important research to analyze is the one done by Jason P. Doyle, Yiran Su & Thilo Kunkel, in their 2021 article "Athlete branding via social media: examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram"; they define the Athlete Branding via Social Media Model, which simultaneously captures the impact of the content of a social media post and the marketing focus aimed at consumer engagement. The model is based on two previous studies: the first is that of Concordia University St. Paul professors Arai Akikko and Stephen Ross, who developed the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) in 2014, while the second is that based on Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory. The researchers explain how on social media, through likes and comments, users can express their liking of their favorite brand or athlete. The goal of this model was to explore how the content and orientation of athletes' Instagram posts influences consumers' engagement with a specific brand.

University professor and economist Aaron Smith, in his 2008 article "Sport sponsorship, team support and purchase intentions," argues that customers in the sports industry are those who become involved in companies' activities by watching or listening to sports programs, buying merchandise, collecting souvenirs, purchasing sporting goods such as

clothing and shoes, and browsing websites to find out all the updates on favorite events, teams or players.

In his case study, conducted on an Australian professional soccer team, respondents reported that the key path to purchase intention is associated with fan passion and sponsor perception. This research assessed the influence of team support and sponsor perception on sports consumers' purchase intentions.

As reported by U.S. economists Don Fullerton and Russel Merz in the article "The four domains of sports marketing: a conceptual framework introduction to sports marketing," there is no common definition of what exactly is meant by the term sports marketing. The dissertation attempts to fill this gap by developing a new framework based on two key dimensions: product type and level of sports integration. By classifying goods and services as sports or non-sports products and distinguishing between traditional and sponsorship-based strategies, four domains of sports marketing are identified: first, the application of general marketing practices to sports products and services; second, the marketing of other products, consumer and industrial services through sports. The concept of sports marketing is parallel to the traditional marketing of goods and services, as both seek to satisfy the needs and desires of consumers. Thus, while customers of most goods and services view value primarily as an economic valuation, the value that fans derive from attending sporting events, on the other hand, is an experience more related to the sphere of emotions.

1.3 Comparison of past and present

As pointed out in the previous section, the relationship between international brands and the world of sports has become stronger over time; at first the two worlds were seen as two different entities, later the potential for their possible collaboration was realized. The first aspect to analyze is the role that globalization and the resulting accessibility of product information has played. Today's expansion and reachability have resulted in a significant change in the impact of marketing strategies and the relationship between brands and sports. In the past, prior to globalization, large internationalization efforts were required, often tied to long-running campaigns through global events such as world

competitions and Olympics. However, the fact that these did not take place every year, made things slower and more complex.

Today, the digitalization and real-time broadcasting of sporting events, through online platforms such as social media and streaming services, allows brands to reach a global audience instantly. (Gaenssle, Budzinski, 2021) Teams, athletes, and brands can take advantage of opportunities to interact directly with fans around the world. The distribution of digital content, such as interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, and highlights of sporting events, helps to engage viewers more: digital accessibility has overcome geographic and time barriers. (Cheney et al, 2004) Fans can participate in sporting events virtually and follow their favorite teams and athletes in real time, regardless of their physical location. This has made sports more attainable and expanded the potential for brand engagement on a global scale, with sports being able to quickly reach the entire world because of today's ease of connection. The crucial point of this change has been the revolution in media and digitization over the past 30 years; social media has changed the rules, timing and assumptions of communication, radically redefining the landscape of the relationship between companies and sport.

Thanks to digitalization, companies have gained more powerful tools to connect directly with their audiences. In fact, social platforms, websites and streaming services have made it possible to create content that is personalized, engaging and instantly accessible globally. (Filo et al, 2015) Digitalization has made sporting events more interactive and engaging. In addition to traditional broadcasting, fans can now follow games in real time on social media, interact with other fans, share emotions, and discuss athletes' performances. This direct engagement gives brands the opportunity to build online communities related to their values and products, creating a deeper connection with audiences. Technology has also helped diversify marketing strategies away from traditional television advertising, allowing brands to leverage online campaigns, digital sponsorships, and content marketing in order to reach their target customers in innovative ways. Online presence is no longer optional, but essential to building and maintaining a brand reputation in an increasingly connected world. (Hollebeek, 2014) Merchandising and the acquisition of naming rights are two key pillars in the way businesses interact with the world of sports, influencing both the financial and corporate identity aspects.

This diversification not only satisfies fan demand, but also provides companies with a strategic opportunity to expand their presence in the daily lives of consumers, creating an ongoing connection beyond the playing field.

On the other hand, the acquisition of naming rights offers companies the opportunity to be passive sponsors, becoming an integral part of the identity of iconic spaces or significant sporting events. This practice is not limited to simply displaying the logo but allows businesses to embed their name in the minds of sports fans; (Gong, Li, 2017) in fact, associating a brand with a prestigious stadium or competition not only provides an important source of funding, but also creates a strong emotional connection with the audience, helping to build a long-lasting bond. It's interesting to underline that companies do not only consider the return on investment in monetary terms but aim above all to create emotional bonds with consumers.

Going into detail, the professor Sergio Cherubini explained in his book "*Sports Marketing and Management*" "that the sports marketing has not always been as we know it today, but has evolved over time; we can define this change in three phases:

Phase I - Sponsorships. Sponsorships are a contract that certifies the working relationship between companies and sports. The earliest date back to the late 1950s although the industry had approached sports even before World War II; (Abate, 2015) they evolved considerably, becoming part of marketing strategies with a structure that began to distinguish the main commercial sponsor from the technical sponsor. The earliest sponsorships were not true marketing operations aimed at making money, but in many cases, simple emotional choices on the part of entrepreneurs. Companies began to realize that through the use of a testimonial market penetration of their products was much faster and easier. Within a few years, many manufacturing companies decided to tie their brand to famous sports champions or entire teams who were able to drive product sales thanks to their fame. (Bernaiiche, 2022) A very famous example was the case of the Converse shoes company, which made a comeback on the U.S. basketball stage, capitalizing on the successes of players Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, who debuted in an iconic commercial in 1986, introducing the famous Converse Weapons shoes. (Tomasella, 2018) The example par excellence is surely that of Michael Jordan, who was not only a great basketball player, but also revolutionized the world of sports worldwide by opening the

door to great changes, including cultural changes. He earned a lot from the NBA, however, he owes most of his income to the "Jordan" brand created together with Nike in 1984 and which today generates over \$5 billion in sales annually.

As illustrated in this introductory section, sports sponsorships have become an industry in their own right, providing substantial revenue for both companies and players.

Figure 1.3 Annual revenues of major athletes in the world of sports

NO#	ATHLETE	BRAND	YEARLY	TOTAL
1	Michael Jordan	NIKE	\$60m	Share of revenue in "Nike Jordan" shoe series
2	Lebron James	NIKE	\$30m	Lifetime contract (\$30 million a year plus share in shoe sales)
3	Kevin Durant	NIKE	\$28.5m	\$285m+ over 10 year deal (2014-24)
4	Cristiano Ronaldo	NIKE	\$21.7m	\$105m+ over 5 year deal (2014-19)
5	Lionel Messi	ADIDAS	\$20m	\$140m over 7 year deal
6	Tiger Woods	NIKE	\$20m	\$100m over 5 year deal (2013-18)
7	Kobe Bryant	NIKE	\$15m	\$75m over 5 year deal (2014-19)
8	Derrick Rose	ADIDAS	\$14m	\$185m over 13 year deal (2012-25)
9	Roger Federer	NIKE	\$12m	\$120m over 10 year deal (2008-17)
10	Neymar Jr	NIKE	\$9.5m	\$105m over 11 year deal (2012-22)

Source: sito web www.totalsportek.com

Sponsorship therefore is much more than a logo on a race shirt or race car, it provides access to business and connections, and creates affinity by helping to shape consumer perception. So, it is much more than just advertising, if well designed it is a good investment that will generate user activation.

A relevant case was that of Parmalat, which invested in Formula 1 from 1976, tying itself to the great successes of the driver Niki Lauda and ensuring a greater focus for the company from then on. In Italy, Formula 1 is certainly the sector that has received the most investment. (Ollanu 2020)

Phase II - Sports Marketing: we can talk about real sports marketing from the second half of the 1980s, when people began to carry out market research to learn more about the characteristics of their supporters and to run advertising campaigns to promote season tickets to teams or major sports events. This stimulates an analysis of sports marketing and how it has changed over time, differentiating itself from what is called "traditional marketing". (Shekhar, Shah, 2023) Although sports can be considered a product and there are many similarities in the way it and other tangible products such as automobiles, pens, and engineering components are marketed, sports nevertheless have unique and distinctive characteristics, which means that its marketing differs from other forms of marketing. University professor and economist Aaron Smith, in his 2008 paper "*Sport sponsorship, team support and purchase intentions*" argues that customers in the sports industry are those who become involved within the activities of corporations by watching or listening to sports programs, buying merchandise, collecting souvenirs, purchasing sporting goods such as clothing and shoes, and browsing websites to find out all the updates on favorite events, teams or players. (Smith, 2008) Sports is a special form of business that requires an understanding of the special features of the market. As reported by U.S. economists Don Fullerton and Russel Merz in their article "*The four domains of sports marketing: a conceptual framework introduction to sports marketing*", the key features of sports marketing are: first, the application of general marketing practices to sports products and services; second, the marketing of other products, consumer and industrial services through sports. The concept of sports marketing is parallel to traditional marketing of goods and services since both seek to satisfy the needs and wants of consumers. (Fullerton, Merz, 2008) Therefore, while customers of most goods and services consider value, primarily as an economic valuation, the value that fans derive from attending sporting events, on the other hand, is an experience more related to the sphere of emotions.

The intangible, unique and experiential nature of sports makes it necessary for brands to build a differentiated experience, offering unique moments to their customers. Building a fan base, not a customer base, is the first key difference between sports marketing and the marketing of most goods and services.

Sports marketing involves people in participating in social exchanges and emotional involvement rather than rational economic exchanges. (Grönroos, 2017)

Phase III - Sports Co-marketing: a further evolution of the marketing process is what can be called collaborative marketing, or sports co-marketing: it corresponds to the moment when sponsorship becomes a partnership between different players. According to economist and university professor Sergio Cherubini, the spread of sports is fostered by the interest with which the mass media follow sports activities, acting as a sounding board for the event. It therefore becomes essential, for anyone working in the context of sports marketing, to reflect on the potential of the convergence of sports and media and to activate projects to operate advantageously in the context of a true co-marketing. (Cherubini, 2015) Essentially, co-marketing occurs when two companies collaborate, with promotional efforts, on a co-branded offer. In a co-marketing partnership, both parties promote a particular content or product and share the results of that promotion by leveraging the other partner's relationship and reach. Campaigns of this kind are designed to drive greater purchase intent and product awareness. Co-marketing helps brands build new audiences and content; the most common form of this model is implemented when two companies that have similar audiences, decide to work together on a piece of content and promote it to both audience segments. This is not the only way to realize a co-marketing campaign. (Cherubini, Canigiani, 2001) As an alternative to the approach just mentioned, two partners could agree to host an event together and split the costs or, on a smaller scale, the partners could agree to share a series of posts on their respective companies' official social media pages. The most important thing when deciding to do co-marketing is to make sure that the purpose of the project is similar for both parties. If one partner wants to generate a generic increase in sales, while another seeks to publicize tickets for a particular event, it will be difficult to find a project that meets both needs. (Giangreco, 2016)

A variety of sports examples can be considered: Inter was able to acquire Ronaldo and the phenomenon Luis Nazario from Barcelona through collaboration with Pirelli, Nike, Winterthur Assicurazioni, Banca Antonveneta and other companies. (Curino, 1998) Another case was the collaboration between AC Milan and Opel, which did not stop at just the logo on the shirt but went further: the Rossoneri used Opel centers as ticket and

merchandising outlets, and the car company penetrated the Far East market thanks to the fame and successes of the football club. (Calvelli, 2002)

Of course, there are cases in other sports as well: for example, the Treviso-based textile company Verdesport was the owner and main sponsor of the Serie A basketball team Benetton Treviso, along with Amway and Nike. (Gherardini, 2004)

Co-marketing has reached its highest expression in the convergence of sports and media: the sports newspaper the Gazzetta dello Sport organizes the Giro d'Italia, events in sailing, skiing and athletics. Co-marketing represents a significant step forward from sports marketing in that it requires more skills, tools and techniques suitable for creating unique know-how that is difficult to find elsewhere.

1.4 Transformation of the relationship: analysis of the factors that have enabled its evolution

The preceding paragraphs analyzed how the relationship between two sectors, sports and international brands, has become more and more articulated and defined over time, changing radically in many of its aspects; in this section of the dissertation, we want to analyze which factors have contributed most to this evolution and what their impact is today. Like other sectors, the sports industry has also been influenced by the "new economy": that is, the economic and financial activities related to the application of the most advanced information technologies at the production, organizational, communication and commercial levels. Thanks to these activities, new horizons have been opened to sports marketing, increasing the ways through which brands can get in touch and expand their fanbase. (Santomier, 2008) As mentioned above, new platforms, such as social media and streaming apps allow fans not only to view sports content at any time, but also to interact with their favorite athletes and demonstrate their attachment to their favorite team. The web has now become a primary channel for the distribution of large-scale offerings. Today, there is no sporting event, club or individual athlete who does not use digital tools to talk about themselves. The need for sports supply and demand to interact constantly is a key factor, and this is happening thanks to web marketing policy. (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010).

Sports marketing cannot ignore the era we are living in.

Just as in the past traditional marketing complemented the development of production, industrialization, distribution and advertising, today sports marketing must be able to understand and interpret the market of the moment by adapting policies and strategies to it.

The key players in this type of marketing are social media (sports communities and virtual communities, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).

They are to all intents and purposes the primary means that companies or clubs use to communicate, promote and support online the meeting of supply and demand (audience, spectators, fans, sportsmen, sponsor companies). (Zagnoli, 2011)

An example of a sports club that was the first to launch itself into this "social world" is Real Madrid, a multi-titled Spanish soccer team known worldwide thanks to the titles it has won and more. In fact, the club from the Spanish capital, is first in terms of level of engagement on social media in the soccer environment and has become an example to follow thanks to the resourcefulness and loyalty generated by their marketing policy. (Google trends, 2022)

As mentioned earlier, technology has led to the creation of two other phases of sports marketing: High Tech Sports Co-marketing refers to the intersection of the Internet and sports that ties in with the logic of co-marketing by helping its practice.

In fact, it can represent a network of relationships between business partners, technicians, sports organizations, new technology and media, athletes and spectators. Among the most important examples are the websites of sports clubs that allow them to provide information about the club itself, its history, statistics, polls, images and comments on competitions, chats, banners, links, etc. Added to this purpose is the sale of match tickets or merchandise ensuring greater supporter participation. (Cherubini, 2015)

High Touch Sports Co-marketing refers to a situation in which the strong impact made by the Internet and direct contact with supporters/customers of sports is exploited. There are now numerous social communities in which people post their opinions. The strong impact of technology has stimulated a certain recovery of contact with sports users on both a personal and virtual level.

This involvement is frequently expressed through communities where fans exchange opinions, advice, and experiences.

Moreover, this has stimulated the presence of gatherings of fans who come together through a common passion. (Cherubini, 2015). Another important evolutionary factor to consider is Law 485 Article 1 Section 2 of 1996, which stipulated that national sports federations decide on the rules and timing to allow clubs or associations to exercise the right to sign the first professional contract with the athlete, considering factors such as age and the specific nature of the sport practiced. In subsequent articles, it allowed for-profit sports clubs and listing on the stock exchange.

1.5 Brands' use of social media and advertising: the role of sports celebrities

The fact that today's sports celebrities use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms to communicate directly with their fans and followers provides new opportunities for developing their personal brands through specific marketing campaigns, particularly through effective endorsements that drive consumers to have a greater connection with the brand. (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin 2017).

Companies are increasingly seeking to use celebrities, and particularly sports stars, as a strategy to promote their company and the products they sell in the marketplace, improving consumer responses. Sports celebrities are more likely to capture consumers' attention and are therefore the most effective testimonials. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, are widely used by individuals to find information, for help in decision-making and purchasing activities, to connect with other users, to share content and to be entertained. (Geurin, 2017), Interactivity between brand and consumer is essential for the occurrence of brand engagement and is defined, by Sergio Cherubini in his book *Sports Marketing and Management* as "the cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity of a consumer with positive brand-related value during or in relation to focal interactions between consumer and company." The essential characteristics of social media, such as interactivity, immediacy, and intimacy, have changed the way celebrities relate to their followers, promoting closer relationships, consumers' perceived intimacy has increased by fostering relationships with their favorites (Cherubini, 2013); they have important marketing value in terms of effective endorsements because they help increase source trustworthiness.

Therefore, consumers' emotional and intuitive experiences on social media platforms allow them to increase trust in the celebrity and thus promote greater engagement with the sponsored brand. Economist Kevin Keller, in his 1993 paper "*Conceptualizing, Measuring and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity*" defines sports celebrity endorsement, the correspondence between the celebrity and the brand, as "a positive function of the number of nodes the athlete and the brand share in consumers' memory networks". In a social media context, fans' celebrity-product perception was found to positively influence their attitudes toward the sponsored product. With the development of digital technology, the effective use of social media has become an important marketing strategy for any company that wants to gain a competitive advantage. (Keller, 1993) The number of brands targeting young people (Generation Z), by using sports celebrities in social media ads, continues to increase day by day. This is because sports people are important role models for consumers and are perceived as such especially by young people. (Bilodeau, 2022)

It is important for users to create an emotional connection with the athlete to the point where his or her positive characteristics are transferred to the product and brand. For this reason, as economist Hussain S. says in the article "*Examining the effects of celebrity trust on advertising credibility, brand credibility and corporate credibility*", consumers may find advertisements made by celebrities more credible and realistic than those in traditional media because social media offer a unique communication opportunity. (Hussain et al, 2020)

Increasingly, there is a search for continuity between what the celebrity does and what he or she sponsors, even outside of the sports sphere, it is not unusual to have agreements with companies whose core business does not have a direct link to sports proper. From the corporate side, making a sports celebrity a brand spokesperson or even brand ambassador can be an attempt to give greater visibility to one's products and brand, but above all to bring a specific target consumer closer (Hatch, Schultz, 2008). Precisely by seeing the sports celebrity become a spokesperson for an international brand, consumers may be more attracted to embrace the corporate values, displayed and promoted by the sports celebrity, and naturally conclude the purchase of certain products. Although a company may not be directly related to the world of sports, by choosing a sportsman as a testimonial it can try to leverage certain elements that distinguish the

celebrity involved and that have helped build his or her character over time. An example would be the partnership between the electronics company Samsung and soccer player Zlatan Ibrahimovic, which sees the Swedish soccer player promoting the company's televisions.

For the creation of the videos, the choice was made to exploit just the "Ibrahimovic character," building a narrative that shows his ego and some of his characteristics through which he is known and recognizable. (Messina, 2018)

Among the innovations arising from the emergence of social media in sports, and more specifically in sports celebrity management, is the possibility of bringing "personal branding" strategies to life. Athletes attract considerable public interest, which can be leveraged to build a highly recognizable fanbase (Kunkel, Biscaia, 2020). Consumer perceptions are influenced by the information around them, including the athlete's management and presentation of him or herself. According to sociologist Erving Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, individuals attempt to strategically manage how others perceive them by selectively emphasizing elements of their career or characteristics with which they would like to be associated and for which they would like to be known. Indeed, at the heart of self-presentation theory is the idea that individuals seek to influence others' perceptions of themselves by constructing an image through the communication of both "front" and "backstage" content (Goffman, 1959). From the analysis conducted by university researchers (Griffith University) Jason P. Doyle, Yiran Su & Thilo Kunkel in the 2021 article "*Athlete branding via social media: examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram*" is defined as the Athlete Branding via Social Media Model, which simultaneously captures the impact of the content of a social media post and the marketing orientation aimed at consumer engagement (Doyle, Yiran, Kunkel, 2021).

On social media, through likes and comments, users can express their liking toward the brand or their favorite athlete.

The objective of this model was to explore how the content and orientation of the posts on Instagram of athletes affects consumer engagement towards a specific brand (Geurin-Eagleman, Burch 2016).

Another interesting piece of research is that of American university professors Aaron Smith and Monica Sanderson in 2015, which is based on athletes' use of Instagram and

revealed that athletes are more likely to post non-sports content (e.g., 77 % of posts contain content from their personal lives) rather than sports-related content (Smith, Sanderson, 2015). Between 2013 and 2014, Concordia University- St.Paul university professors Arai Akikko and Stephen Ross developed the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). This model outlines how athletes' brands are the way they are perceived both on the field and outside of it (Arai, Ross, 2014).

Specifically, MABI argues that consumer perceptions are influenced by feelings about:

- 1) athletic performance
- 2) attractive appearance
- 3) "marketable" lifestyle.

Chapter 2 will elaborate on the MABI model by providing a much more detailed and specific analysis of its development and application. The Instagram application is the most widely used for two main reasons: first, is a popular image-based branding platform that has been widely adopted by sports organizations, athletes, and especially brands. Instagram is the best branding tool because it has over one billion monthly users and attracts the highest engagement of all social media platforms. Second, Instagram is an important platform for athlete branding, which allows sports management researchers to do further research on the platform and its role. (Aslam, 2019) Another very important element is storytelling, which is the ability to tell stories in order to excite an audience.

The storyteller, in this case the sportsman himself, has the task of conveying messages, information and knowledge in an engaging way. Storytelling can have 3 different functions:

- 1) The public storytelling functions
- 2) The individual storytelling functions
- 3) The relational storytelling functions

Public communication occurs through the history and development of a brand over time, in order to place it within the mediated public sphere, with a clear and transparent identity through authentic and evocative content. The individual storytelling function occurs, on the other hand, when choice is made to storytell for oneself, rather than storytelling for others and when self-perception becomes the means for communication between the sportsman or brand and the consumers as a whole. (Laurell, Soderman, 2018) Finally, there is the relational function that is based on a continuum of interpersonal relationships, of accelerating the mechanisms of socialization, implementation of quality and exchange of experiences. Storytelling is considered one of the most effective and influential marketing techniques and has been extensively documented in numerous fields.

The American economists Deborah Soule and Robert Wilson through their studies identify the role of storytelling as follows (Soule, Wilson, 2002):

1. Sharing norms and values: a story acts as a means of conveying values and creating sharing.
2. Developing trust and commitment: personal stories can communicate one's ability and commitment, as well as convey openness by sharing something personal
3. Generates emotional connections: consumers react emotionally to stories, and a story that has made an impact on the consumer will be more likely to be recalled in the long run.

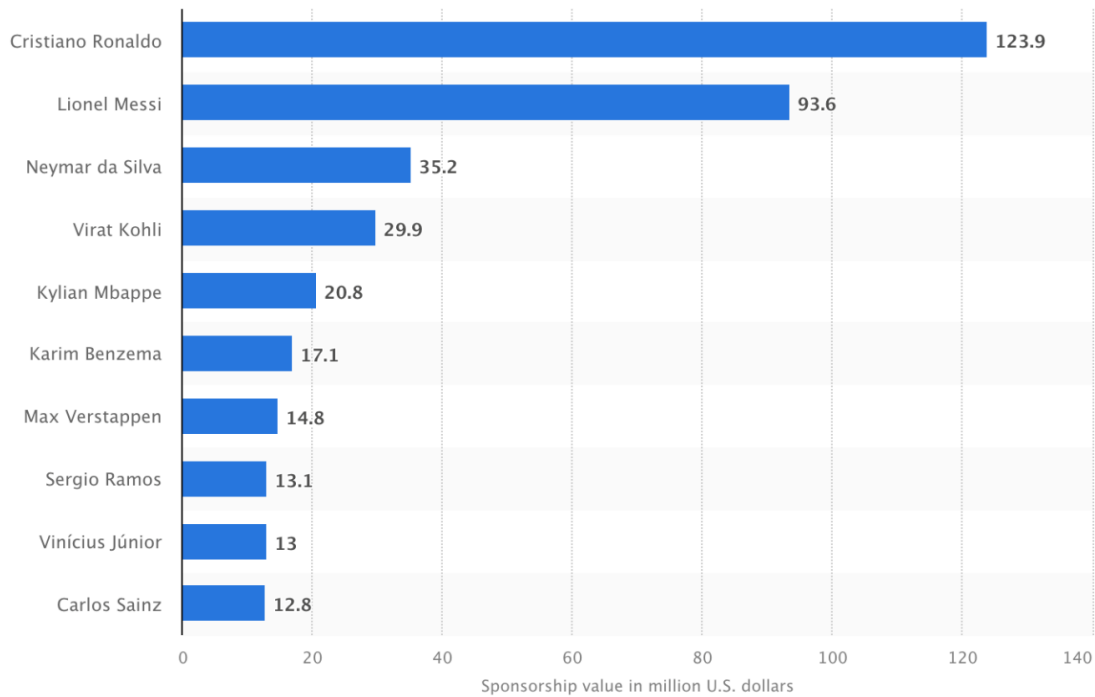
A significant example is the social media campaign by the Louis Vuitton brand, with a post featuring soccer players Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram. Described as the "photo of the year," Louis Vuitton's social media campaign united the two footballers considered the strongest in the world and it exploded on the web.

On November 19, 2022, just before the start of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a photo destined to soon go viral appeared on the French fashion house's Instagram and Twitter profiles. The snapshot captured Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi intent on playing a game of chess, on a Louis Vuitton signed briefcase.

It was a completely exceptional occasion, both for the world of soccer and the world of fashion: for the first time, two sports legends were together. The presence of Ronaldo and Messi, two of the most important and famous people in the world, and not only among

soccer fans, was not at all coincidental given that in 2022, as defined by the database of the German research center Statista, they were the two profiles with the highest sponsorship value on social media worldwide as of December 2022

Figure 1.4 Sponsorship value of most famous athletes in the world, 2022



Source: Statista Website

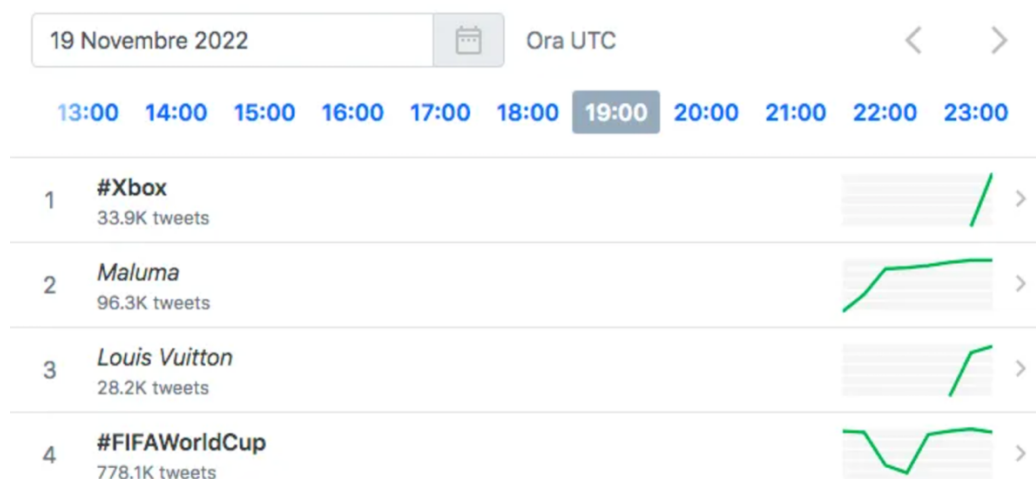
The photo had been accompanied by the description "Victory is a state of mind," which sums up the essence of the campaign and echoes the spirit of Louis Vuitton's signature travel, as the brand has been distinguished over time by its trunks and suitcases. But it is also the same bag that has held the FIFA World Cup. The shot was posted first by Louis Vuitton, collecting more than 5 million likes and almost 26 thousand comments, and then also by Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi with the same description, one in English and the other in Spanish, getting 37 million and 28 million likes respectively in just over 24 hours.

The numbers achieved are not surprising, as Cristiano Ronaldo had just become the first and only person in the world to reach the 600 million followers on Instagram, achieving the world's highest engagement rate per post.

Messi was following this trend by ranking third among the most followed sportsmen. In the photo Ronaldo and Messi, lifelong rivals, are playing chess.

Their expressions are intense, focused, each of them looking for the right move to beat the other and checkmate, the chessboard symbolizing the eternal challenge between the two-star players. However, resonating the point made earlier about storytelling, the photo, and in particular the chess position, refer to a 2017 challenge that ended in a draw, with no winner: it is the match between Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura, considered the greatest chess players of the modern chess era. Some have called it "the photo of the year," or some even "the shot of the century," and the available data amply reveal the great impact the photo generated online, making its way around the world. Suffice it to say that the post published on Ronaldo's Instagram account represents, to date, the one with the highest number of likes ever on a sportsman's page. This is a real record of social media. The photo immediately went viral, precisely because of the presence of the two players, off the field and on the eve of the start of the World Cup in Qatar. In addition, on the social media platform Twitter, on Saturday, November 19, 2022, the hashtag #LouisVuitton counted more than 28 thousand tweets at 7 p.m., only a few minutes after the release of the shot, demonstrating its worldwide popularity.

Figure 1.5 Global Twitter Trends

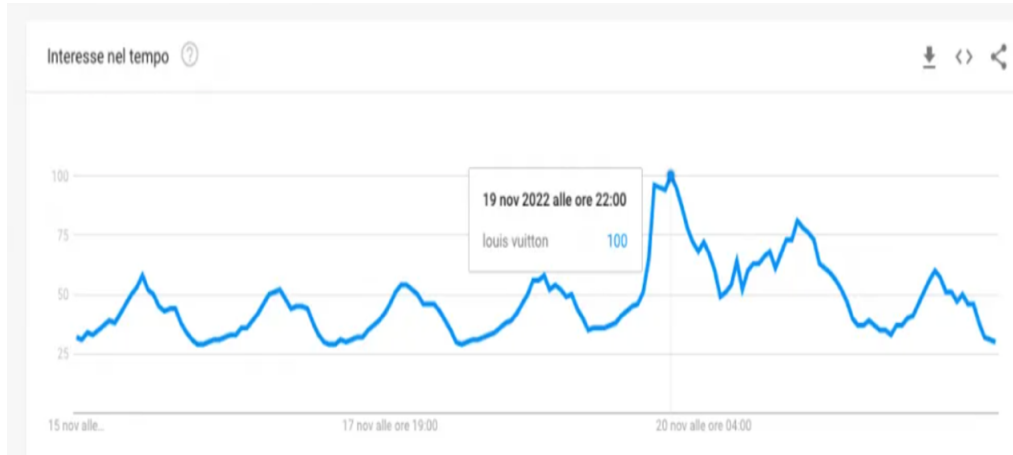


Source: Getdaytrends

Similarly, using "Louis Vuitton" as a search term on the Google Trends site showed that there was a net increase in internet searches on the same day, Saturday 19.

This data once again demonstrates the "strength" and power that a simple post can have on Instagram and its worldwide effect.

Figure 1.6 Louis Vuitton brand search, November 19, 2022



Source: Google Trends

An analysis of the queries, or search terms associated with "Louis Vuitton" can demonstrate the enormous success of Louis Vuitton's social campaign, dictated by the presence of two icons such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi; in fact, the first 10 queries (out of the total of 22) concern the two soccer phenomena: users, therefore, searched for the brand by associating their searches mainly with the words "Messi" and "Ronaldo."

Figure 1.7 Number of queries associated with soccer players Ronaldo and Messi

1	messi ronaldo louis vuitton	Impennata
2	ronaldo and messi louis vuitton	Impennata
3	messi cristiano louis vuitton	Impennata
4	louis vuitton messi	Impennata
5	ronaldo louis vuitton	Impennata

Source: Google Trends

This first chapter has provided an in-depth analysis of the role that sports people play and how the link between sports and brands has strengthened over time; the above example expresses how even just one post, published on the social profiles of Louis Vuitton and Messi and Ronaldo, served to gain enormous visibility and even record numbers for the French brand in the world of soccer, thanks to the millions of interactions involving users from all over the world. Louis Vuitton implemented the right marketing strategy to get people talking, once again, because the world of sports and fashion go hand in hand and even a soccer player can be an international "role model".

Figure 1. 8 The advertisement of Messi and Ronaldo playing chess for Louis Vuitton



Source: Vogue Italia

Louis Vuitton's advertising campaign featuring Messi and Ronaldo is an example of how luxury brands can successfully use the figures of world-class athletes to strengthen their image and reach a wide audience. This case study demonstrates the importance of an integrated marketing strategy that enhances not only the athletes' sports performance, but also their personal values and off-field behavior, key elements for effective and impactful brand communication. The campaign not only strengthened Louis Vuitton's brand equity, but also emphasized the importance of choosing testimonials who embody the brand's values, both on and off the sports field.

Chapter 2: Relationship between sports celebrities and brand growth: an empirical analysis using the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI)

Over the past 20 to 30 years, many athletes have extended their influence beyond the world of sports, turning to a range of social and entrepreneurial activities.

In 1991, in light of modern media culture, the English scholar C. Gledhill defined these athletes in the text “Stardom: Industry of desire,” as “a social sign, bearers of cultural meanings and ideological values, expressing the intimacy of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, grounded in body, fashion and personal style.” (Gledhill, 1991)

The concept of the “athlete brand” has emerged from the nature of athletes who are viewed not only as vehicles for advertising or endorsing products, but also as cultural representatives who can be sold as unique “brands.” (Gilchrist, 2005)

The management of one's brand for athletes has grown in importance over time and the positive results of successful branding have been demonstrated in various studies. Such success depends on factors such as:

- the influence on the probability of choice
- the willingness to pay a higher price
- the effectiveness of marketing communication
- the promotion of positive word of mouth

(Berry, 2000)

The value of the athlete's brand will be able to help the athlete himself at the end of his career, allowing him to leverage what he has created over time through his image and sports performance on the field (Aaker, 1996). U.S. university professor Irving Rein, along with economists Philip Kotler and Ben Shields has emphasized the advantage of viewing athletes as a true brand, stating that, “as an increasing number of opportunities are available, the athlete has the opportunity to connect with a variety of industries and to use his or her athletic career as a benchmark for other businesses” (Rein et al, 2006).

Although success is one of the main factors in the sports brand mix, the alternation between winning and losing is an inevitable condition in sports, so athletes are often

regarded as unstable products due to the potential risks of injuries or drops in performance.

Considering these “dangers,” it has been shown that athletes need strong branding strategies, during and after their sports careers, to ensure their visibility and fame over time (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006).

2.1. Definition of athlete branding

Branding is generally understood as a marketing strategy that aims to recognize and associate a brand with a specific name (Storie, 2008), although from an academic perspective it has often been discussed in terms of the development, cost, management and measurement of brand equity.

The renowned economists David Aaker and Kevin Keller have conducted extensive research on brand equity, defined as the ability of a brand to guide purchase choice, basing it, not on tangible features or actual product quality, but more on brand recognition and awareness.

Aaker's 1991 model emphasizes the contents of brand equity, which include: brand name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and associations to it.

Over time, a number of studies have referred specifically to the field of sports, attempting to define the athlete's brand: Matthew D. Shank, an American researcher and professor at Marymount University, provided an initial attempt in 1999 by arguing that athlete brand can be defined as “a name, design, symbol or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its product from the competition.” According to this definition then, all individual athletes can be considered as unique brands in that they have their own name, appearance and personality (Shank, 1999).

Subsequently, other studies that tried to give a more coherent and precise definition: Michael Thomson in his article “Human brands: Investigating antecedents to consumers' strong attachments to celebrities” published in the *Journal of Marketing* in 2006, defined a human brand as “any well-known person who is the subject of communication and marketing efforts” (Thomson, 2006).

This concept was opposed by the famous economist Keller arguing instead that “a brand is defined as such, when it has created around itself, a certain amount of awareness, reputation, fame and esteem in the market” (Keller, 1993).

Based on all these concepts, an attempt was made to arrive at an unambiguous definition by concluding that an athlete's brand corresponds to a public figure who has established his or her fame and value by using his or her name, face or other elements of his or her personal brand.

In Keller's 1993 article "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity," where he describes the relationship between branding and sports, he explains also the importance of the relationship between the customer and the company and how this creates strong, favorable, and unique associations in consumers' memories (Keller, 1993).

He further classified the different types of associations into brand attributes (i.e., product-related or non-product-related qualities) and brand benefits (i.e., functional, symbolic, and experiential benefits).

Brand attributes are "specific characteristics that distinguish a product or service and drive a consumer to its purchase or consumption" (Keller, 1993);

they have been classified into:

- 1) *product-related attributes*, i.e., the qualities that make the product unique and allow it to stand out in the marketplace
- 2) *non-product-related attributes*, i.e., the external characteristics such as information about the product's price, packaging or appearance, user-perceived image, and usage.

Confirming Keller's theory is the in-depth study by Hans Bauer, Nicola E. Sauer and Exler, Stefanie Wannow's "Brand image and fan loyalty in professional team sports: A refined model and empirical assessment," published in the Journal of Sport Management in 2008, in which choice and loyalty to a specific brand is defined as the reasoned or emotional perception that consumers attribute to specific brands and which involves the perceptions stored in a consumer's memory. (Bauer, Sauer, Exler, Wannow, 2008)

2.1.1. Image of the endorser

The management of athlete image has been repeatedly discussed in studies concerning the figure of the endorser (Choi & Rifon, 2007); a term that understands "a product or celebrity as a particular form of co-branding, that is, a public relationship between

independent brands” (Seno and Lukas, “The equity effect of product endorsement by celebrities. A conceptual framework from a co-branding perspective,” p. 123, 2007).

In 1991, researcher Ohanian examined the impact and influence of celebrities used as product endorsements on consumers' intention to purchase the sponsored goods. This source credibility model provides a fundamental theoretical basis for the establishment of athletes as brands.

2.1.2. Sports team branding

Adopting Keller's conceptualization of brand associations and research conducted in team sports, in 2001 U.S. researchers Gladden and Funk developed the team association model (TAM). The two university researchers then identified 16 brand dimensions through an extensive literature review, identifying and exemplifying 5 macro-attributes:

- 1) **product-related**: success, most famous player, coach, team management
- 2) **non-product-related**: the logo, the stadium, tradition, product delivery
- 3) **symbolic benefits**: identification with the fun, acceptance by the peer group
- 4) **experiential benefits**: escapism, nostalgia, pride of place
- 5) **attitude**: importance, knowledge, affective reaction

This study was further analyzed in 2006 by researchers Ross, S., James, J and Vargas, P., who argued that the dimensions of athletes' brand image may not correctly reflect the image that consumers have; this idea stems from the fact that Aaker and Keller's models have never been empirically tested and that the study sessions conducted by Gladden and Funk were not sufficiently thorough.

Therefore, U.S. economists identified brand image dimensions through a listing technique and rigorous psychometric analysis; the final scale identified 11 dimensions: success, history, stadium, team characteristics, logo, image concessions, socialization, rivalry, commitment, organizational attribute, and player team (Ross et al, 2006).

The different studies cited, and their specifics are summarized in the following table:

Figure 2.1 Dimensions of Brand associations in Sports Teams

	Gladden and Funk (2002)	Bauer et al. (2004)	Ross et al. (2006, 2008)
Brand associations	Attributes, Benefits, Attitudes	Attributes Benefits	Brand associations (unidimensional)
Attributes	Success Head coach Star player(s) Management Venue Logo design Product delivery Tradition	Athletic success Coach Star player(s) Management Stadium Logo Stadium atmosphere - Regional importance	Team success Nonplayer personnel - Stadium community Brand marks Concessions Team history - Organizational attributes Rivalry Team play Commitment
Benefits	Fan identification Nostalgia Pride in place Escape Peer group acceptance	Fan identification Nostalgia - Escape Interest of family and friends	- - - - - Social interaction
Attitudes	Knowledge Importance Affective reactions	- - -	- - -

Source: *The Sport Journal*

In summary, studies indicate that athletic performance, high athlete attractiveness, and positive off-field activities (specifically, confidence, amiable character, and sociability) led to increased brand equity. (Grant et al., 2011). It is also believed that athletes have the potential to become recognizable personalities outside the sporting environment through the combination of athletic performance and public activities to develop a strong brand (Walsh and Williams, 2017).

Brand image refers to a customer’s understanding of a specific brand and is reflected in his or her mind through the communications the athlete provides (Keller, 1993).

This thesis will define an athlete’s brand image, understood as consumers’ perception of the athlete’s brand attributes, based on the “Model of Athlete Brand Image” devised in 2013 by University Professors Akiko Arai, Yong Jae Ko, Stephen Ross. Drawing on Keller’s 1993 classification and the customer-focused brand equity concepts mentioned earlier, the new model links athlete brand image to the dimensions of product attributes and the athlete himself.

After a comprehensive review of the literature concerning:

- (1) the image of the sports endorser (factors for being effective)
- (2) sports team branding (dimensions of sports team brand association),

Professors Arai, Jae Ko and Ross arrive at the development of an instrument that can measure the athlete-consumer relationship consisting of three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle, and ten sub-dimensions.

Attributes and sub-attributes are made explicit in the table below:

Figure 2.2 Definitions of athlete brand image dimension

Dimension	Definition	Sub-dimension	Definition
Athletic performance	An athlete's sport performance related features	Athletic expertise	An athlete's individual achievement and athletic capability (winning, skills, proficiency in their sport)
		Competition style	An athlete's specific characteristics of his/her performance in a competition
		Sportsmanship	An athlete's virtuous behavior that people have determined is appropriate (fair play, respect for the game, integrity)
		Rivalry	An athlete's competitive relationship with other athletes
Attractive appearance	An athlete's attractive external appearance	Physical attractiveness	An athlete's physical qualities and characteristics that spectators find esthetically pleasing
		Symbol	An athlete's attractive personal style and trademark
		Body fitness	An athlete's body fitness in his/her sport
Marketable lifestyle	An athlete's off-field marketable features	Life story	An appealing, interesting off-field life story that includes a message and reflects the athlete's personal value
		Role model	An athlete's ethical behavior that society has determined is worth emulating
		Relationship effort	An athlete's positive attitude toward interaction with fans, spectators, sponsors and media

Source: Sport Management Review

It should be noted that five sub-attributes (athletic experience, rivalry, physical attractiveness, life history, and role model) are found in team contexts (Gladden and Funk, 2001); the remaining (sportsmanship, competition style, symbol, physical fitness, and

relational effort) represent athlete-specific characteristics (Vaatainen and Dickenson, 2019).

In the following pages, all the dimensions mentioned will be explained in detail.

2.2 Method of selecting the most suitable athlete for internationalization

Through the above-explained model, it is possible to identify the best athletes worldwide who are able to represent a particular brand and at the same time have all the key characteristics to create a bond with consumers/fans outside the playing field. The Model of Athlete Brand Image uses the following three macro-attributes:

- 1) Athletic performance
- 2) Attractive appearance
- 3) Marketable lifestyle

Figure 2.3 Conceptual model of athlete brand image



Source: Sport Management Review

1) *Athletic performance*

Athletic performance refers to the associations related to an athlete's sports performance and is further divided into: athletic competence, competition style, sportsmanship and rivalry.

Let us analyze them in detail:

- *Athletic competence*: relates to an athlete's sporting achievements and individual abilities (e.g., wins, skill and competence in sports).

Scholars Hovland, Janis and Kelley found that competence and trustworthiness are the main dimensions of endorser credibility.

A study on athlete endorsement reported that athletic competence is the most effective characteristic in making athletes recognizable to a target market (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005).

Researchers Gladden et al. suggested that success is probably the most important creator of brand associations and brand equity over time. However, developing brands based only on wins is very risky because defeats and injuries are inevitable. Therefore, there is more focus on the athlete's competence, a critical characteristic for endorsers.

- *Competition style*: refers to the specific characteristics of an athlete's performance in the competition itself.

The literature on spectator motivation to follow a sportsman has also found that identification with the team or player is one of the most important factors in fans behavior (Trail et al., 2003). If the athlete has a clear and unique style of play that fans can easily identify with, a strong relationship is likely to develop that will lead to brand loyalty.

- *Sportsmanship*: indicates the virtuous behavior of an athlete and is often characterized by fairness, integrity, ethical behavior, and respect for the game, opponents, and teammates (Sessions, 2004).

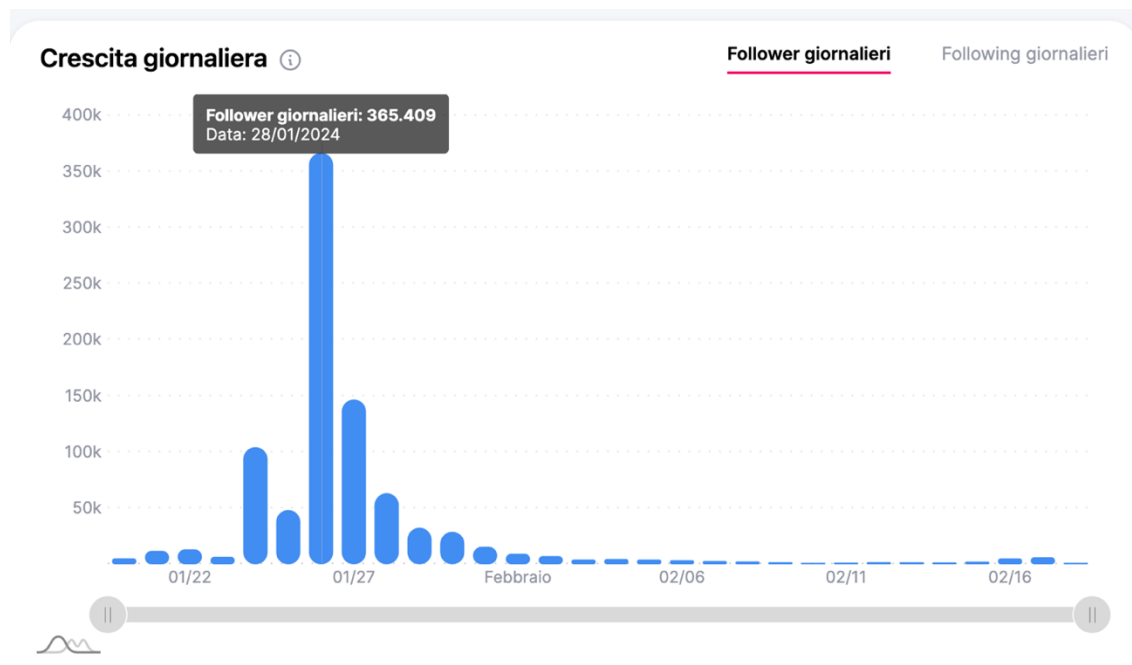
Sportsmanship can be a symbolic message for the athlete's brand and is very important when trying to attract consumer trust.

- *Rivalry*: also becomes critical for individual athlete brands because it allows fans to develop a clear understanding of what their identity is.

An example that fully encapsulates the concept of Athletic performance is Jannik Sinner's victory at the Australian Open: the tennis player won his first ATP slam on January 28, 2024, but his victory is not only sporting, in fact, this success has given a big boost to the Italian tennis player's popularity not only in Italy, but also abroad.

According to a study by notjustanalytics, an online platform for researching and studying the most followed profiles on social media, Sinner had a sharp increase in the number of followers of 43 percent and in the level of engagement that rose to 6,8 % in just 28 days (Fig.2.4).

Figure 2.4 Social increase of tennis player Jannik Sinner



Source: NotJustAnalytics.com

2) Attractive appearance

Attractive appearance refers to the outward appearance of an athlete and is defined by physical attractiveness, symbol, and physical form; these are the fundamental factors that function as “trademarks” for athletes.

- *Physical attractiveness*: can be any arbitrary, distinctive, nondescript characteristic that the public can recognize or appreciate and has become an important dimension in brand credibility (Ohanian, 1991): in particular, physically attractive athletes have been shown to be more successful than unattractive athletes in persuading consumers to purchase (Ohanian, 1991).
- *Symbol*: refers to the athlete's personal style, fashion, or any unique outward characteristic; athletes often use their personal style to express their personality or character. This dimension is as important as the team's name, logo and color (Ross et al., 2006). For example, the style of professional golfer Tiger Woods, with his red or black clothing often worn during competitions, is a point of differentiation in the golf world.
- *Physical fitness*: is identified as an independent factor as unique and essential to athletes' brands. Previous research (e.g., Lau, Cheung & Ransdell, 2008) has examined the relationship between body image and self-esteem, where an athlete's physical fitness can be seen as a symbolic message.

3) *Marketable lifestyle*

Marketable lifestyle refers to the commercial characteristics of an athlete outside the sports field and which could be indicative of his or her value and personality today, celebrities achieve their status, not only because of their outstanding performance on the field, but also because of their particular lifestyle (Choi & Rifon, 2007).

According to Andrews and Jackson's 2001 observations, extra-field indiscretions can play a key role in the view associated with a particular sports celebrity, and it is natural to assume that such extra-field attributes have a strong influence on consumers' image of the athlete, and thus on his or her brand equity.

The marketable lifestyle dimension includes the athlete's personal life history, relational commitment, and his or her role in the discipline practiced:

- *Personal life*: sports fans can assess the athletes' lifestyle that reflects their personalities and personal values.
- *Relational engagement*: refers to interactions with fans through online spaces such as blogs or chat rooms where one can have direct contact with the athlete, contributing to the development of a stronger relationship

- *Role in the discipline practiced*: refers to the ethical behavior of an athlete whom society considers a role model

These behaviors may be related to the athlete's active participation and contribution to society, compliance with social norms, and/or display of virtuous behavior. An example to summarize the concept of a Marketable lifestyle is provided by the publishing group SportsPro Media (a platform specializing in the collection and analysis of data from the world of sports), which last January published the list of “**Most Marketable Athletes of 2023**”, the list of the world's most commercially “*marketable*” athletes. The ranking was based on an overall score of 100 points, given by the sum of three variables assigned to each athlete with respect to his or her best performance on and off the field. The methodology includes three main evaluation steps. First, the entire sports system was mapped and narrowed down to 174 categories, from which a total of 993 athletes were selected for analysis. To be considered eligible for the 2023 list, an athlete had to have been active during the evaluation period between June 15, 2022 and August 20, 2023.

Next, the final list was reduced to 125 global athletes to whom the 16 qualitative and quantitative drivers could be applied; specifically, athletes were ranked according to three components:

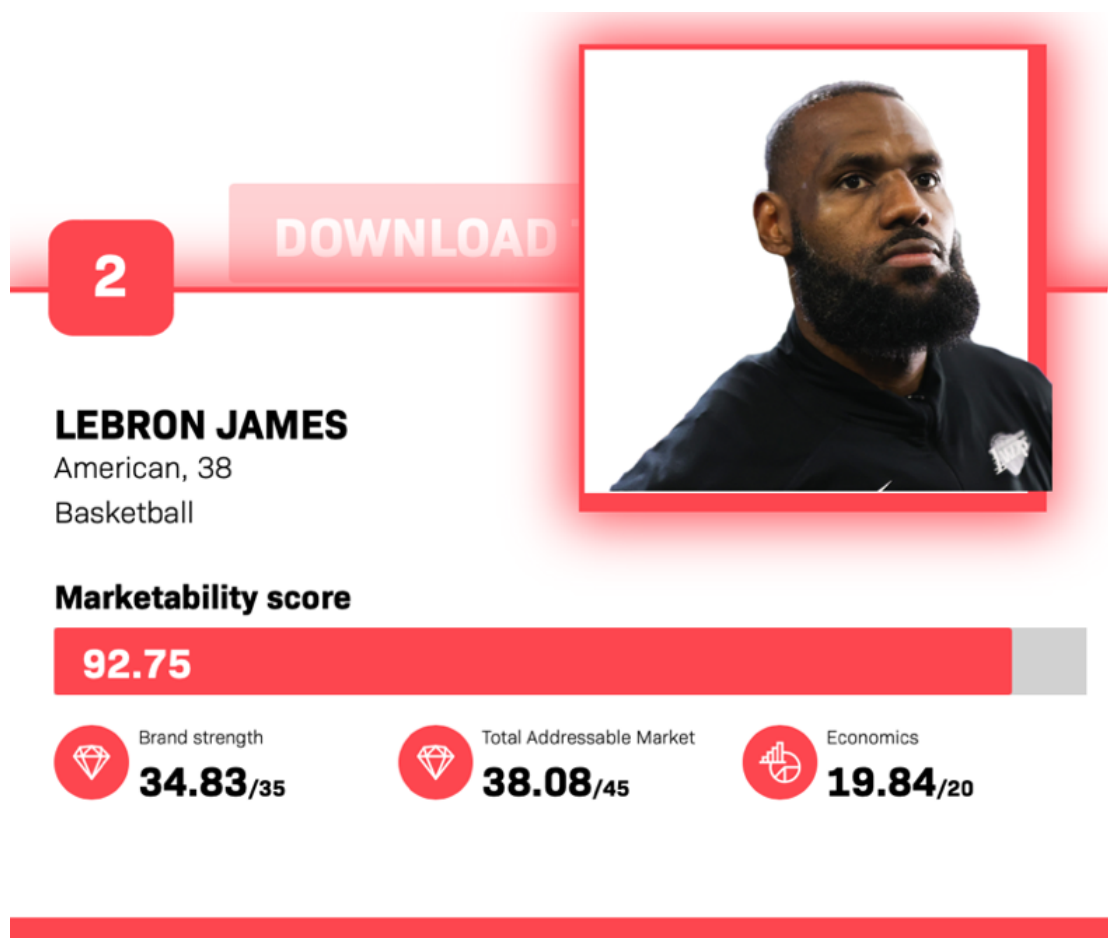
- 1) Brand strength
- 2) Total addressable market
- 3) Economy

Brand strength, which has a maximum score of 35 points, is determined by individual factors such as authenticity, risk, reputation, sports performance, and the goal and values of each athlete.

The total addressable market, with a maximum score of 45 points, includes factors such as the overall reach of the target sport, the growth of attention to the athlete, social engagement, sponsor awareness, the sport played, and the team to which the athlete belongs.

Finally, *economics*, with a maximum score of 20 points, incorporates an athlete's market value, their value in the estimation of their fans, their public support toward the environment, their physical health, their social and community engagement assessed through their actions, and their influence on fans.

Figure 2.5 NBA basketball player LeBron James



Source: 50mm Sports Pro Media

The figure shown considers NBA professional basketball player LeBron James, who ranks second with a score very close to 100.

The rating is a perfect reflection of what the yellow-purple 23 of the Los Angeles Lakers represents on the court thanks to a plethora of records broken, most recently reaching 40

thousand career points (the only player in history to achieve this), but also what he has created off the court.

The Ohio athlete has multiple “classic” sponsorships, starting with his historic partnership with Nike of which he is a brand ambassador, thanks to the “lifetime” contract signed in 2015, later also creating his own line of shoes and clothing. In addition to Nike, LeBron has contracts with: Samsung, Sprite, Dunkin' Donuts, Beats Electronics, Upper Deck, State Farm Insurance, Audemars Piguet, Kia, Intel, Blaze Pizza, and Verizon. He has also founded a content production company which produces movies, documentaries, TV series and podcasts called Springhill Company.

Moving away from basketball, in 2018 James created I Promise School, a public elementary school in Akron, Ohio, supported by the LeBron James Family Foundation, specifically targeting fragile and financially struggling children; more recently he joined the Fenway Sports Group, a company that controls the Boston Red Sox of MLB baseball but also the Pittsburgh Penguins of NHL field hockey and Liverpool in soccer's Premier League.

Everything he does and has done off court has allowed him to expand his fan base, becoming one of the best-known athletes in the world and the prototypical perfect sportsman to represent brands and associations, which manage to reach more people through his image.

His fame has also allowed him to land in the world of cinema with a starring role in the film Space Jam 2 in 2021, an occasion in which he also involved the brands he owns.

2.3 The growth of brand value and increased sales

An international company seeking to increase its value and sales in the global market can greatly benefit from having a successful sportsperson as an ambassador whose ideals or behaviors are in line with what the brand wants to communicate.

A case in point is the partnership between tennis player Roger Federer and the luxury watch company Rolex, founded in 1905 in London by Hans Wilsdorf and his brother-in-law Alfred Davis under the name “Wilsdorf & Davis” and officially registered as “Rolex” in 1908.

In 1919 it moved its headquarters to Geneva, Switzerland, where the history of an icon of luxury watchmaking began.

Rolex's philosophy is based on precision, reliability, innovation and prestige, where each watch is designed and produced with extreme attention to detail and quality craftsmanship; the brand constantly strives to innovate and use high-quality materials to create watches that represent excellence in the industry.

Rolex targets a clientele that seeks not only a high-quality watch, but also one that is compatible with refined and luxurious lifestyles; this is why it is often worn by political leaders, high-profile figures, and celebrities around the world.

Because of this idea of eliteness and class, the Swiss brand decided to target the sport of tennis, which perfectly embodies these characteristics.

The ambassador chosen by the Swiss brand was Roger Federer, one of the greatest tennis players of all time: he is the player to have won the most matches in singles Slam tournaments (369), he has won 24 Grand Slam titles, and has had the most Wimbledon tournament successes (8).

In addition, Federer is recognized worldwide not only for his extraordinary tennis skills, but also for his elegance, humility, and great social commitment.

His partnership with Rolex began in 2003, when he was already one of the best tennis players in the world.

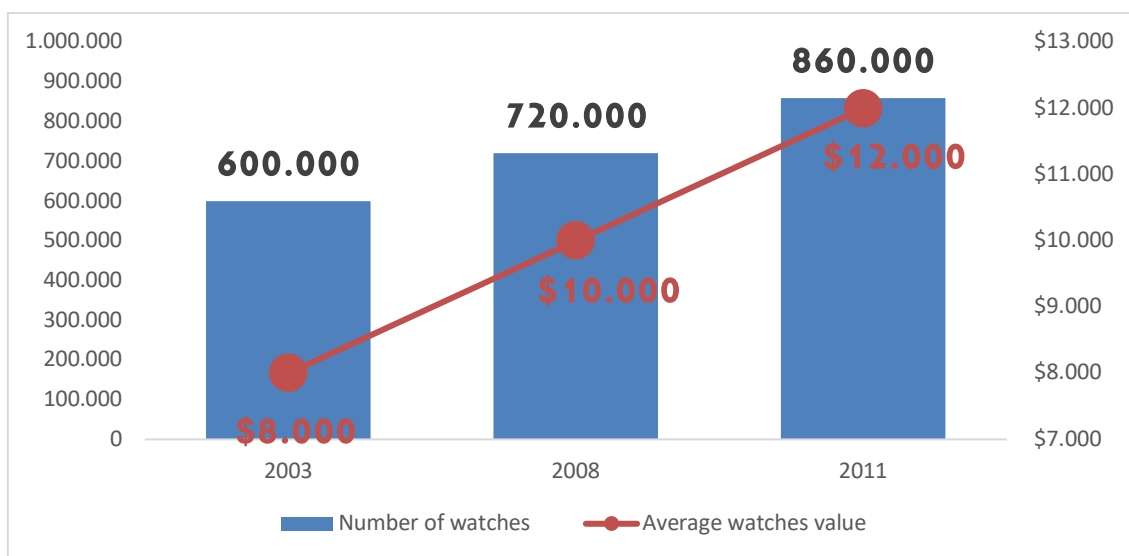
The Swiss company chose to partner with Federer to capitalize on his reputation for prestige, excellence, and style, taking him out of the agreement he had with the Maurice Lacroix brand and offering him a contract of 15 million over 10 years. What was unique was the time length of the agreement, which was due to the fact that Rolex firmly believed that the Swiss tennis player was the perfect brand ambassador and that his achievements would bring the company great prestige over time.

Their collaboration, therefore, goes beyond simple sponsorship; it is a strategic partnership aimed at leveraging the reputation of the champion by emphasizing their values of uniqueness, precision, and prestige, which are core elements of the Rolex brand reflected in the watches that are worn daily during sports competitions, participation in exclusive events, and vacations in luxury destinations.

Federer's support for various charitable causes and his lifestyle also provides the Swiss brand with worldwide visibility, which leverages the social and media attention linked to the tennis player from Basel.

A study by Statista, a research and data website, revealed a significant increase in Rolex watch sales after the partnership with Roger Federer began in 2003; prior to the partnership, annual Rolex sales were around 600,000 pieces, with an average value of about \$8,000 per watch. In subsequent years, as Federer was incorporated into the brand's team of ambassadors, sales grew steadily. Within five years, annual sales increased by 20% to 720,000 pieces sold per year, with the average value per watch rising to about \$10,000 (Statista, 2023)

Figure 2.6 Growth of Rolex after contract with Roger Federer



Source: Statista

In addition, the percentage of people who associated Rolex with the world of sports increased from 35% to 60%, and more than 70% of customers said they perceived the Swiss watch brand as having even greater prestige after the collaboration with the tennis player.

To this day, even after the tennis player's retirement in 2022, Federer and Rolex continue their partnership; Roger continues to be Rolex's brand ambassador around the world.

In 2023 Rolex reached a 30% market share and was the first company in the watch industry to reach 11 billion in revenue (+11%).

Another very important sponsorship for Federer was that with Nike, which came about when the athlete signed his first contract at the age of just 13. The Oregon-based giant immediately became the champion's first sponsor by providing him with clothing and

accessories as long as he wore them in training and competitions. As the tennis player and his successes grew, 7 years later, at Wimbledon 2008, Federer entered the court wearing a white jacket with gold piping and the initials RF embroidered on the chest. (Roşca, 2010, p. 366). The jacket worn was the result of the creation of a line of clothing, shoes and accessories signed “RF,” a brand owned by Nike that bears the tennis player's initials.

The idea of creating a brand that represented the tennis player was a success, and in the following years RF became one of the most well-known brands in the tennis and sports world, reaching an estimated market value of \$27 million.

The value of the more than 20-year sponsorship with the Nike brand was \$10 million per year (Rapaccini, 2020). Federer's tennis growth brought fame to the athlete as much as to the brands he sponsored. Nike's main advantage lay in positive consumer perception: Nike was sponsoring, but also supporting, one of the biggest stars in the sports world (Roşca, 2010).

The strong relationship between Nike and Federer was broken in 2018, when the champion decided to sign a contract with another company. The new official apparel and accessories sponsor became Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing brand. The value of the 10-year contract signed by the champion amounted to \$300 million and contained an unprecedented clause: the tennis player would continue to receive the money even if he stopped playing. The decision of the company and the athlete seems to have been based on the values that both parties share, particularly that of creating new connections between the world of tennis, the world of technology, and the world of design (Roşca, 2010).

Along with all his sponsorship contracts, the tennis player from Basel has distinguished himself by investments made in different areas, stating, however, that in the financial world he has always preferred to risk much less than he did on the tennis court.

The most striking case concerns his role in the Swiss sports/running shoe manufacturing company ON Running.

In 2019, the 3 historical owners of the company (David Allemann, Olivier Bernhard, and Caspar Coppetti) noticed, through social media and some public appearances, that Roger Federer was wearing, of his own free will, shoes of their production and therefore decided to get in touch with him with the idea of offering him a collaboration.

When the meeting took place, Federer stated that he had long been an admirer of theirs because of the incredible comfort of the shoe and also stated that every person he knew had a model of ON in their shoe rack.

The discussion then took a different direction and instead of the classic attempt to make him a brand ambassador, they proposed that he become a co-owner.

Neither side ever stated exactly how many shares were purchased by Roger Federer, but the latter declared in an interview that it was a substantial number, which, according to some estimates, corresponds to about 3 percent of the share volume (blue News, 2022).

His role within the company was not only on a financial and promotional level, but he contributed with company management to devise the perfect shoe for a tennis player, spending quite a bit of time at ON headquarters. On July 6, 2020, exactly 17 years after Federer had won his first Wimbledon title, ON launched THE ROGER Centre Court 0-Series shoe, which was worn by Federer himself in his subsequent matches and gave the Swiss brand an incredible boom in the market.

To understand the tennis player's effect on the brand, one only has to look at ON's numbers: in the last six months of 2020, the company had sales of 425 million Swiss francs (about 390 million euros), and in the first six months of 2021, sales had increased by 85 percent (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2021); moreover, in the first half of the year, the company achieved a net profit of 3.8 million francs compared to a loss of 33 million francs in the same period the previous year.

Subsequently, two more lines of shoes dedicated to Federer were launched, The Roger Pro and The Roger One.

The numbers show how the great quality and comfort of the shoe, combined with the tennis player's arrival as co-investor and brand ambassador, allowed ON to have unprecedented growth and success: in fact, on September 15, 2021 ON came to be worth \$11 billion on Wall Street (Fashion Magazine, 2021).

As of today, ON is one of the brands of the moment with sales in 2023 increasing by 47 percent to 1.79 billion francs; the significant increase in sales of products related to Roger Federer's image is particularly due to strong growth in the most important market, namely the U.S., where sales increased by 52 percent.

However, it was the Asia-Pacific region that showed the most dynamic growth, with an increase of 76 percent. ON also grew significantly in Europe, with a 29 percent rise. At the same time, profitability increased due to a greater share of direct sales (i.e., sales directly to the consumer, avoiding retail). The final result for 2023 was a net profit of 80 million francs and an increase of 38% on the previous year. (Ilsole24orefinanza, 2021)

2.4 Analysis of a specific example: the case of Air Jordan

As has been amply demonstrated, the relationship between sportspeople and brands has become critically important to both parties; to this day, there are no international companies that do not have a sports person as their ambassador.

The deal that revolutionized this relationship forever was that between undisputed modern basketball icon Michael Jordan and Nike.

The story begins in 1984 when Nike was a running shoe company and was looking for other areas to increase its business.

At that time, shares of the U.S. shoe market were divided between Converse, which held 54 percent and already had the two NBA (National Basketball Association) stars Magic Johnson and Larry Bird under contract, Adidas with 29 percent, and finally Nike with 17 percent.

The first two companies already had a large influence on the professional basketball market at that time, and the market sector extended to all fans of basketball, including the most prestigious colleges in the country; in fact, Jordan played in Converse shoes for two years at college in North Carolina, with the goal of signing with Adidas once he became a professional player.

However, thanks to the intelligence of Sonny Vaccaro, basketball scout and expert, and Rob Strasser, V.P. marketing, Nike was able to convince Michael Jordan to sign with them through their charisma and a video that directly explained the idea behind the new project: a line of shoes created especially for him and bearing his name.

The Oregon-based company was convinced that they wanted Michael as their brand ambassador because he embodied the values that the company itself wanted to represent: he was young, he was an Olympic champion, he had charisma, an extraordinary personality, and he was an outstanding athlete.

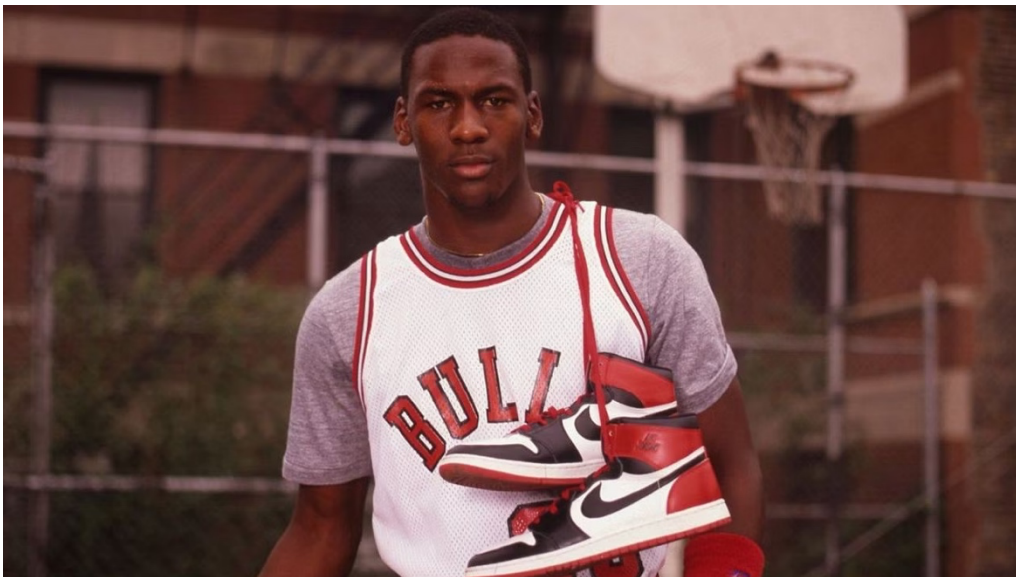
Peter Moore, Nike's principal designer, created shoes that reflected Jordan's ego and on-the-field qualities, namely the world-famous Air Jordan I.

The uniqueness of these shoes was not only their shape, which allowed them to cover the foot and ankle, but more importantly they recalled the colors of the Chicago Bulls: red and black.

The choice of colors was not accepted by the NBA, which required all players to wear white shoes and imposed a fine of \$5,000 per game for anyone who violated that rule. The fact that Nike ignored this directive gave even more prominence to the innovative choice of having a shoe that represented a unique player and would change the game of basketball forever.

Jordan signed a 5-year contract with a total value of \$2.5 million, but more importantly he got an unprecedented clause that guaranteed him 5 percent on every shoe, and subsequently on every item signed "Air Jordan," sold in the world.

Figure 2. 7 Michael Jordan and his first "Air Jordan I"



Source: Nike.com

Nike's initial forecast was to sell about 100,000 pairs of shoes in the first year with a value of \$20 million, but, thanks to young Michael and his boundless talent, they managed to sell 450,000 pairs of shoes in just one month generating \$162 million in sales at the end of the year.

The turning point in Nike-Jordan was 1987, when Peter Moore and Rob Strasser, the designers of both Air Jordan shoe, decided to leave Nike to start their own sneaker company called Van Grack. They hoped to “steal” Michael Jordan from Nike and build their new line of shoes around the figure of the American basketball player.

To safeguard itself, Nike turned to Tinker Hatfield, a talented American designer who decided to actively involve Jordan in the shoe design for the first time.

On September 9, 1997, Michael Jordan and Nike introduced the Jordan brand (originally called “Brand Jordan”) as a unique line unlike any other.

Today, Nike is the world's most valuable brand in sportswear valued at about \$12 billion in 2023, with the Jordan Brand grossing about \$5.1 billion, of which \$256 million went directly to Michael Jordan as part of the agreement on the rights to products sold under his name

Figure 2.8 Michael Jordan and his shoes line



Source: Nike.com

This example shows the power and great opportunity that brands have at their disposal by leveraging world-class athletes. In fact, after the great success of Jordan, Nike decided to continue with this path and decided over time to expand the number of players who not

only became brand ambassadors, but also signed lifetime contracts with the Oregon brand; these include Cristiano Ronaldo, Serena Williams, Lebron James, Roger Federer, and Kevin Durant.

2.5 Theoretical model and hypothesis development

In light of the above, we will now analyze the Athlete Brand Model, aimed at evaluating the influence that athletes/brands have toward consumers and how this may affect the purchase of sponsored products.

A “simplified” model consisting of 4 macro-variables is proposed:

- 1) marketable lifestyle,
- 2) Ability to communicate,
- 3) Off-field behavior
- 4) Athletic performance

This model is used by companies to select the most suitable athlete to represent the sponsored brand and product and to engage consumers more.

Compared to the existing variables in MABI, two others (Ability to communicate, Off-field behavior) are included that are considered equally important by consumers, as we will have the opportunity to evaluate later through the analysis of a questionnaire submitted online by 300 respondents and from the interviews conducted with two.

While the existing MABI categories are directly related to the athlete and his or her athletic performance, Ability to communicate and Off-field behavior are aspects that expand the role of athletes because as today's consumers are more informed, they want a more direct relationship with the company, the athlete and the values they convey. The positive influence of the values put forth by the athlete, both on and off the field, plays a crucial role in the selection of brand ambassadors. These values not only reflect a desirable and marketable lifestyle, but also contribute to strengthening the brand image, making the athlete an ideal choice for the company.

The connection between the athlete's principles and those of the brand creates a synergy that not only attracts consumers, but also builds their loyalty, generating an emotional bond that goes beyond a simple purchase. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, an

athlete's ability to embody desired values and lifestyle is a strategic advantage for brands that aim to stand out and authentically connect with their audience.

To test the above, our model is based on the following hypotheses:

H1: The values the athlete proposes on and off the field positively influence the brand's choice of brand ambassador.

The values that the athlete puts forth both on and off the field exert a significant influence on the choice of brand ambassadors. First, brands look for individuals who embody corporate values and can positively and authentically represent the brand image. Because of their visibility and ability to inspire, athletes become ideal figures to fill this role.

Athletes who demonstrate consistency between their personal values and those of the brand are preferred, as they can create an authentic connection with the audience and promote the brand in a credible and positive way.

H2: Athletes' off-field behavior influences consumers' propensity to purchase.

Companies must always carefully consider athletes' off-field behavior, as this deeply affects the brand's image. Athletes' ethical and responsible behavior in daily life strengthens the credibility and integrity of the brand, creating a stronger and more authentic connection with the public. Athletes who show dedication, respect, and positive values become role models not only in sports, but also in everyday life. This consistency between athletes' personal values and those of the brand conveys trust to consumers and encourages them to support associated products. In addition, a focus on off-field behavior helps companies prevent potential image crises and maintain a solid reputation over the long term.

H3: An athlete's inability to communicate corporate values negatively affects consumers' propensity to purchase

An athlete's inability to effectively communicate corporate values can have a negative impact on consumers' propensity to buy. When an athlete fails to clearly convey brand

messages and values, it creates a disconnect that can undermine consumer trust and reduce the effectiveness of advertising campaigns.

Failure to communicate corporate values can lead to misunderstandings and misperceptions of the brand, decreasing the engagement and attractiveness of promoted products. Therefore, it is critical that athletes are able to embody and transmit brand values in a clear and compelling way to ensure an authentic and lasting connection with the audience.

H4: Consumers' perception of product quality is positively influenced by the sports performance of their sponsors.

Consumers' perception of product quality is positively influenced by the sports performance of their sponsors. When an athlete excels in his or her field, consumers tend to associate this excellence with the products he or she promotes, perceiving them as superior in terms of quality and performance.

In the next chapter, the above hypotheses were tested through a multiple regression study where the independent variable of the model “Consumers ‘propensity to purchase influenced by athletes’ brand sponsorship” was considered as well as the independent variables “Marketable lifestyle, Attractive appearance, Off-field behavior, and Athlete performance”; the goal is to study the relationship between these variables and how significant each item is.

Chapter 3: Analysis of consumer brand perception and the influence of corporate brand ambassadors

The following section will highlight the methodology used and detail the criteria for selecting participants, the data collection instruments, the responses derived from the interviews and questionnaire, and finally the analysis techniques used to interpret the data collected.

3.1 Methodology

In order to collect and analyze the data necessary for conducting the present study (investigating how sports brand ambassadors influence consumer behavior and purchase over time), a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

The methodology was divided into two main phases:

1. Administration, to a heterogeneous sample of 300 people, of a questionnaire via the web and shared on major social platforms,
2. conducting two semi-structured interviews with: the marketing director of the energy products company Enervit and the general manager for Europe of the French brand Louis Vuitton

The questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data on a range of economic and behavioral variables. This instrument made it possible to extend the analysis to a larger sample, ensuring that the results could be generalized and possible correlations between the variables under consideration could be identified. The structure of the questionnaire followed a standard format to facilitate subsequent statistical analysis.

The semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the economic dynamics and specific challenges faced by businesses globally.

Interviewees were selected based on their experience and knowledge of the industry, thus ensuring an informed and relevant perspective.

Interview questions were designed to explore key themes that emerged from the literature review and the model considered, while adapting to the responses and insights provided by the interviewees.

By combining the qualitative depth of the interviews with the breadth of the quantitative questionnaire, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional view of the Athlete Brand Image model.

The following paragraphs will describe in detail the criteria for selecting participants, the data collection instruments, the responses derived from the interviews and questionnaire, and finally the analysis techniques used to interpret the data collected.

After outlining the objectives of the research, the sample on which to conduct the survey and the sample size were determined.

For the first aspect, it was necessary to keep in mind that the objective of the thesis is the study of how the figure of top sports athletes, linked to an international brand, can qualitatively and quantitatively influence the behavior of consumers/sports fans. Specifically, it aims to investigate whether the athlete drives the customer to a greater propensity to purchase and an even stronger and longer-lasting creation of loyalty.

In the sample of respondents, not only regular customers were taken into account, but also fans of teams or players who, through a simple collaboration or marketing effort, become linked to brands sponsored by their favorites. If individual supporters had not been analyzed, this would have resulted in the exclusion of people useful in providing reliable information for the purpose of the research, i.e., those who, although familiar with the industry and brand of interest, are not direct consumers. In a completely conventional manner, all subjects over the age of 16 were therefore considered eligible to be members of the sample. What turns out to be most relevant is that, in almost all research published by the most authoritative specialist journals (e.g. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, etc.), and used for this type of research, a sample is made up of a heterogeneous group, where the number of respondents varies.

In order to obtain the data for the established sample, as mentioned before, a quantitative data collection method was selected and carried out through an online survey with distribution of a questionnaire administered on the web.

More specifically, the link for filling out the digital form was shared in multiple WhatsApp and Instagram groups.

This resulted in a sample of 300 respondents, also called an unrestricted sample, from various countries around the world (Italy, US, UK ...) making it even more interesting to assess different approaches to the subject. The questionnaire consists of structured questions, for which the multiple-choice and scale type were used. The title of the questionnaire is “How athletes influence consumers' perceptions of brands” and consists of 18 questions, preceded by an introduction.

The model was launched on the web on April 10, 2024, remained active until May 10, 2024, that is, until 300 responses were reached.

The introduction contains the request to fill out the submitted web-form, the necessary instructions linked to it, the relevant estimated time for its completion, and finally a thank you to the respondent for his or her cooperation. The purpose of the survey was expressed in the introduction.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection instruments, a pre-test was conducted on a sample of 30 participants, selected similarly to the final sample, to identify any comprehension problems and make necessary adjustments.

Quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire were analyzed using Excel software; descriptive analyses provided an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample and responses to the questionnaire topics. Correlation analyses were performed to explore the relationships between the independent variables (Marketable lifestyle, Off-field Behavior, Athlete performance, Ability to communicate) and the dependent variable (Consumers' propensity to purchase). Finally, a multiple regression was performed to identify the relative impact of each independent variable on consumers' propensity to purchase.

Following strict ethical standards was critical to the conduct of this research:

- Informed Consent: In the case of the online questionnaire, a consent statement was included at the beginning of the test, explaining the purpose of the study, voluntariness of participation, and anonymity of responses. For interviews, consent was obtained verbally and recorded at the beginning of each session.
- Confidentiality: Confidentiality of participants was ensured through anonymously collected data. Personal data were not linked to questionnaire responses or interview transcripts.

In order to have an additional approach to the subject, two semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen the understanding of the economic dynamics and specific challenges faced by global companies in using sports brand ambassadors; they were conducted online after the closing of the questionnaire on May 10, 2024, this was done to leverage the data collected from the previous analyses and identify suitable questions to ask the respondents. This approach provided valuable insights into how leading companies in their respective industries use sports brand ambassadors to influence consumer behavior and enhance brand image; in summary, these semi-structured interviews highlighted the importance of the careful choice of athletes, the consistency and authenticity of the communication message, and the opportunities and challenges in collaborating with global sports brand ambassadors.

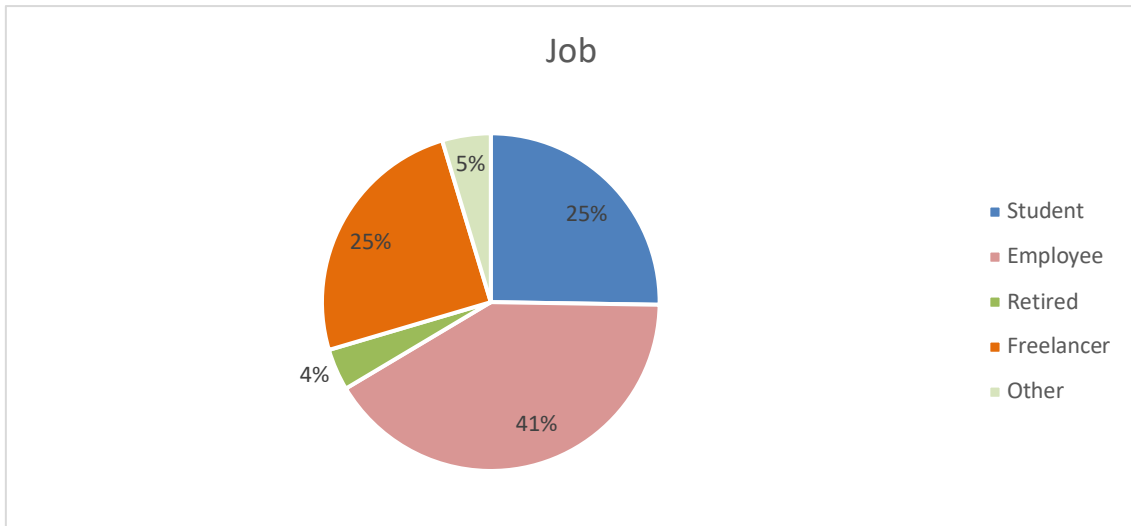
Findings

3.2 Questionnaire aimed at consumers in Italy, the UK and the U.S.

The tool used for data collection was Google Forms. Conducting the questionnaire online allowed me to take advantage of its many positive aspects and in this specific case, it was also possible to mitigate some of its limitations. In detail, it allowed for quick data collection by automatically entering the responses into a database. One of the negative factors was the potential uncertainty of the person filling out the questionnaire. This was stemmed by placing it on social media strictly dedicated to the contacts it was intended to reach. The strengths of this software when designing and collecting data are mainly related to the automatic data entry and the continuous data analysis; the latter proved to be very important in understanding little by little how the main relationships between the variables being surveyed would emerge, and to sense what other analyses would be useful for the purpose of testing the research hypotheses, so that the results could be constructed. In the first section, it was necessary to ask for some sociodemographic information of the respondents; in particular, the following were asked: gender, age, profession, and country of origin through multiple choice questions.

In numerical terms, 68 percent of those surveyed were male and 32 percent were female, with 34 percent of respondents aged 50-65 years, followed by the 16-24 age group with 28 percent. The professions of the respondents obtained the percentages represented in the following table:

Figure 3.1 Job variable



Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

The country-of-origin question proved to be very important because the purpose was to obtain responses from people with different cultural backgrounds; in addition to Italy with 80 percent, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and other European countries are present in smaller percentages. Next, a series of questions were included that aimed to understand which qualities of a professional athlete most influence loyalty and purchase behavior toward a sponsored brand. Specifically, through multiple-choice questions, an attempt was made to understand which characteristics of an athlete, taken from the Athlete Brand Image model, were considered the most important to consumers and especially which sport was able to highlight them the most.

The questions, which were asked in the remaining part of the questionnaire, were specifically aimed at understanding and testing the Athlete Brand Image model. Starting with the basics of the model, questions were asked about which attributes of an athlete were considered by consumers to be most effective in promoting a product.

The responses highlighted:

1) the values the athlete puts forth on and off the field such as loyalty, sportsmanship, respect, etc....

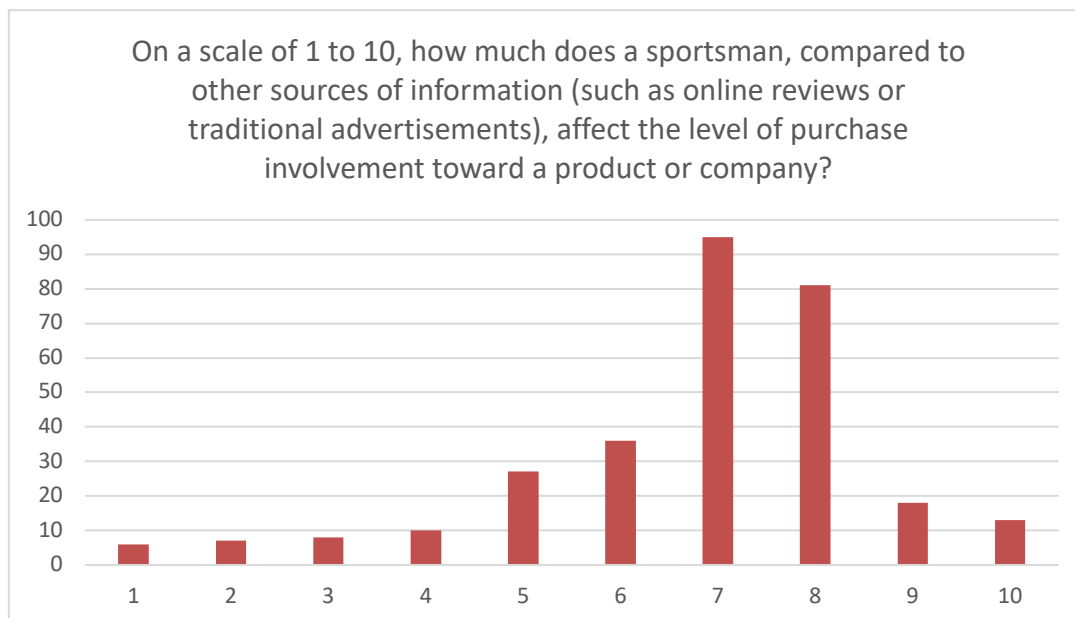
2) the athlete's performance

3) the dedication and commitment to their sport.

These responses reflect exactly what the model wants to express through its three macro-attributes: Athletic performance, Attractive appearance, Marketable lifestyle.

It was thus highlighted that it is not only important what is done on the field, but more importantly what an athlete's behavior is outside the sporting world and how they represent the sponsored brand and the values that the company wants to convey.

Figure 3.2 Athletes affect the level of purchase



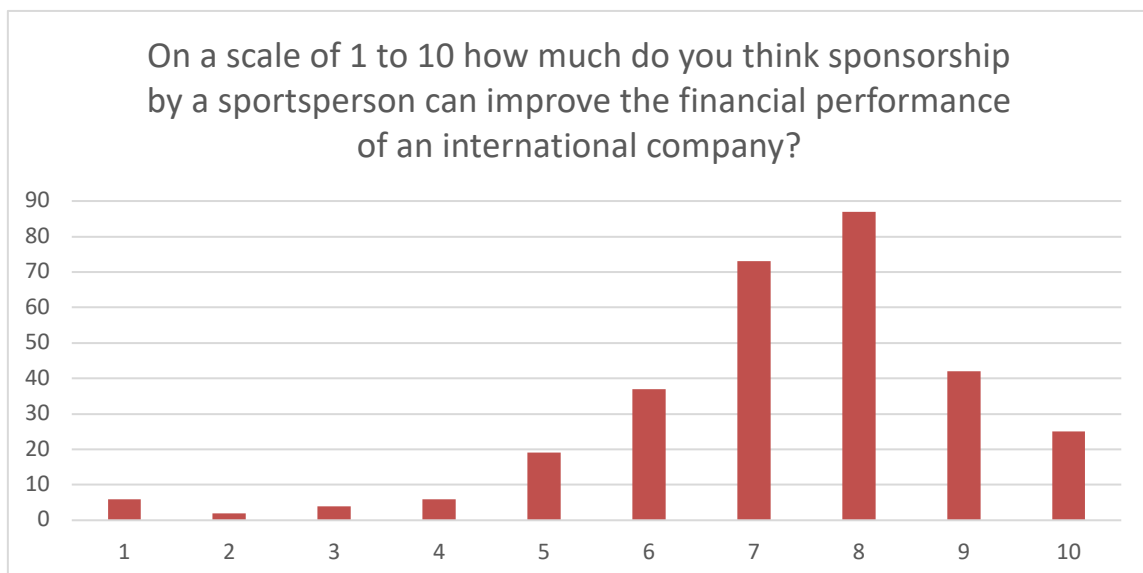
Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

The graph shows how important, on a scale of 1 to 10, it is considered to be to have an athlete capable of influencing consumer engagement; the responses highlight that the level of engagement is on the values of 7 and 8 and that people are more likely to make purchases if they recognize unique and positive qualities in the endorser.

As defined above by the questionnaire responses, the off-field behavior of athletes becomes crucial, and through their social channels, participation in exclusive events, or

statements to the press, they can influence consumers' perception of the brand; this happens because world-class athletes often also become ambassadors of values, behaviors, or gestures that are then considered as ideals. For this reason, it is very important to choose an all-round suitable athlete to represent a company. As can be seen from the questionnaire, 85 percent of respondents consider it essential to evaluate an athlete's off-field behaviors, trying to understand whether he or she can properly publicize brand values. However, this aspect concerns consumers, but more importantly it concerns companies that can have important economic returns through proper choices.

Figure 3.3 Athletes can improve the financial performance



Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

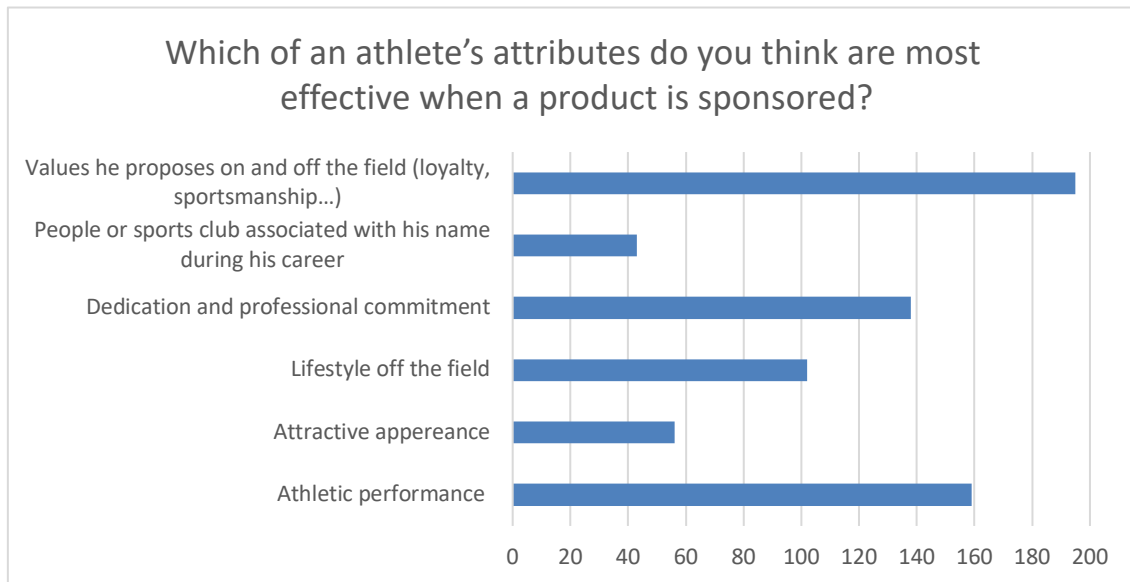
The responses clearly highlight, with a level of 8, that consumers also consider the choice of athlete important, again on a scale of 1 to 10, and that this can affect a company's financial performance.

As analyzed in the second chapter, after choosing tennis player Roger Federer as its brand ambassador, Rolex had a sharp increase in the number and price of watches sold.

This was not only because of the outstanding performance on the court with numerous victories and records broken, but more importantly because of the behavior that the tennis player had in his daily life and during sporting events.

All aspects concerning a sportsman, whether on or off the playing field, have their own relevance and allow the athlete to create more of a following around his image and fame.

Figure 3.4 Athlete's attributes



Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

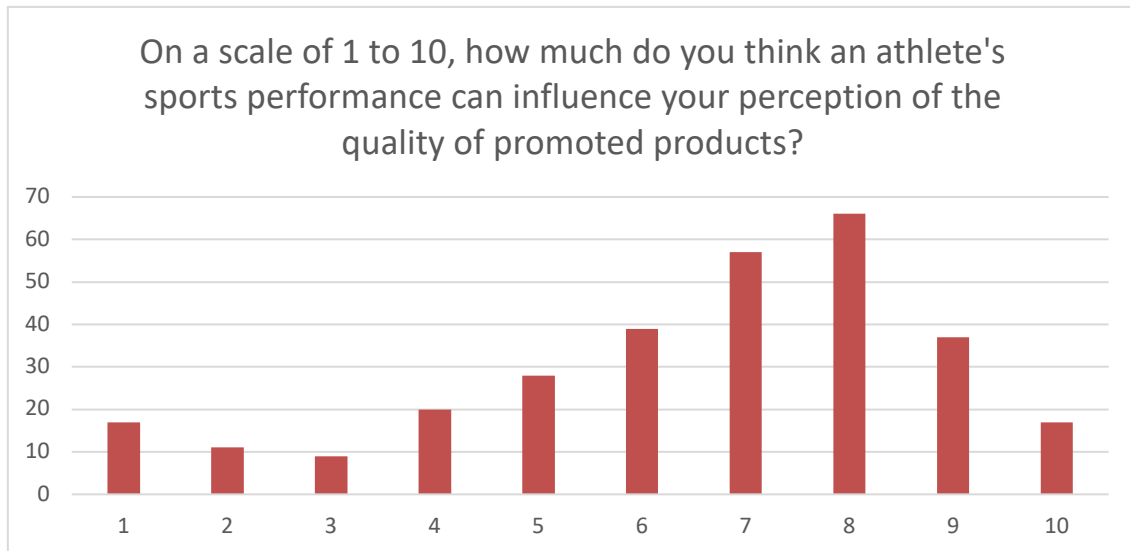
The questionnaire made it clear that the aspect considered most relevant was related to the values proposed by the sportsman, such as loyalty and fairness. In line with one of the hypotheses, an attempt was made to understand how these aspects influence consumer behavior toward the sponsored brand. Compared to previous models or theories, Athlete Brand Image aims to broaden the perspective, going beyond athletic performance alone, while maintaining its importance.

This approach seeks to identify new aspects considered important by consumers. Finally, dedication and passion, attributes already mentioned, allow for a greater appreciation of the athlete not only as a sportsperson, but also as a human being. Consumers take into consideration many aspects of an athlete, but those listed above can most influence their perception toward a specific brand or product;

an athlete's performance can change consumers' perceptions about the quality of a sponsored product and thus their subsequent propensity to purchase.

As shown in the graph below, consumers are shown to be highly conditioned by sports performance, which goes a long way toward affecting their evaluation of the quality of a product.

Figure 3.5 Athlete's performance can influence the quality perception



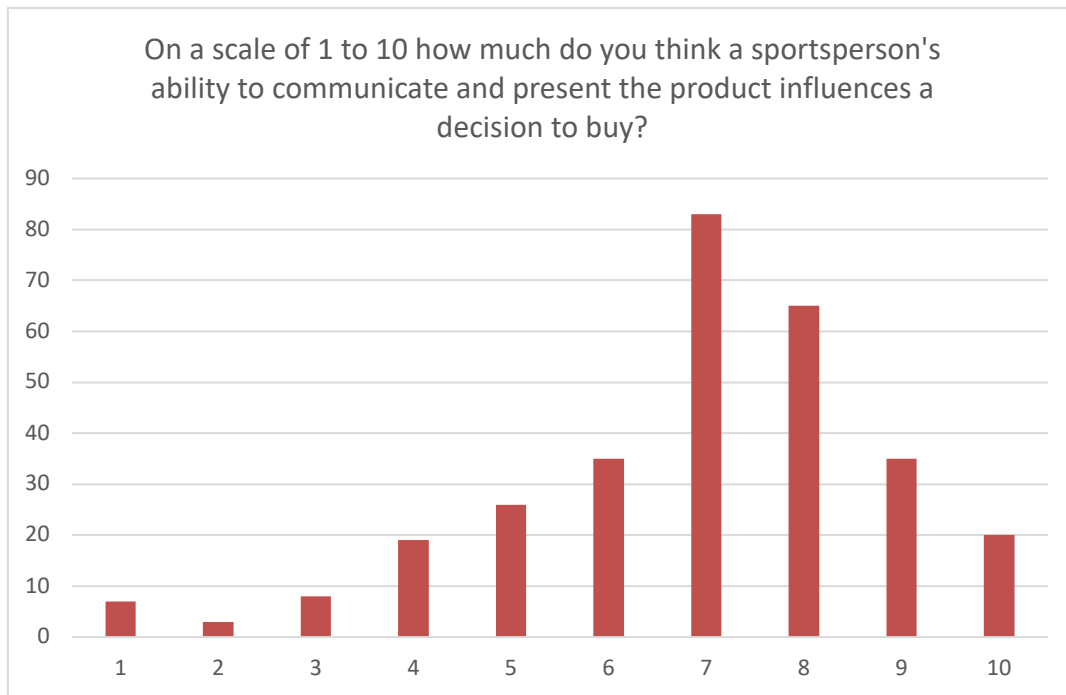
Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

Therefore, companies must take into consideration aspects that go beyond sports performance and merits, because today's consumers are more informed, more curious about everything behind a brand and how it relates to current issues. For these reasons, the sportsman who is selected must reflect the values and message that the company wants to convey, which will have to evaluate aspects that deviate from the field before selecting who will represent it globally. As discovered through the questionnaire, 85 percent of the 300 respondents believe that a brand should always consider the behavior outside the field of play and the lifestyle maintained by the athlete. From a business point of view, during the interview with the marketing director of Enervit this aspect emerged as well as how important the role of an athlete is, not only in representing the company in sporting events, but also in engaging new consumers to buy a product.

Indeed, it is possible that misbehavior that is not in keeping with the values the brand expresses or that breaks laws can have negative effects and create economic and image damage to a brand.

This once again demonstrates the importance of consciously choosing one's ambassadors and what they might represent. Another very important aspect is the athlete's ability to know how to represent and promote the brand he or she sponsors, succeeding in making consumers more involved in the product and the values the brand expresses.

Figure 3.6 Athlete's ability to communicate

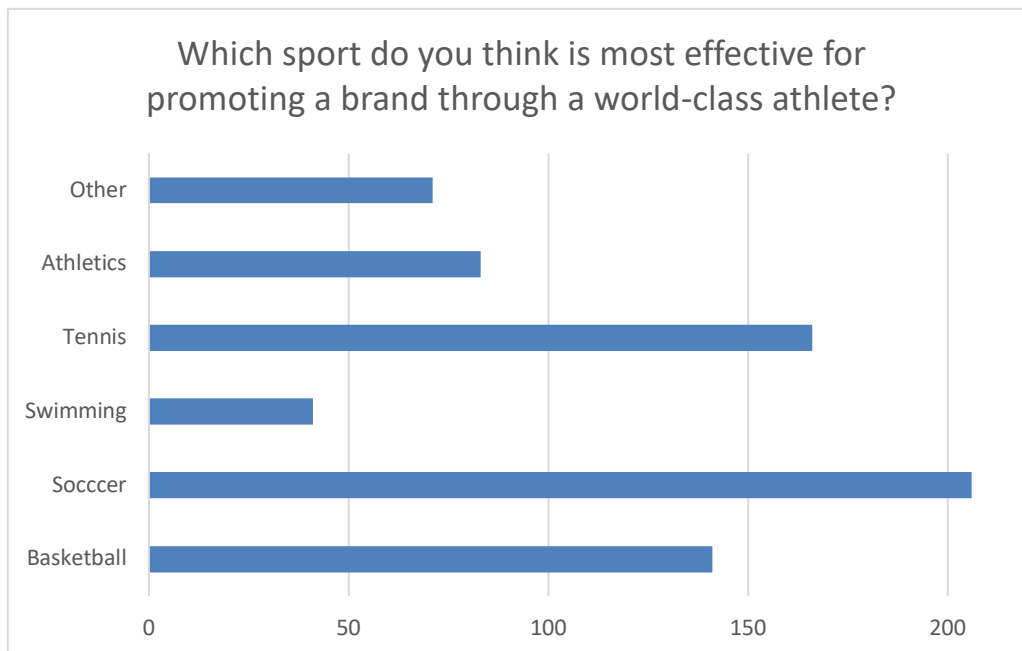


Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

sportsmen who can tell the brand values, the products and how to use them; the peculiarity is that they are not always selected professionals, rather they are often regular consumers who sponsor the brand by participating in events of various categories.

A final aspect to consider, highlighted very well by the questionnaire, is that not all sports manage to have the same impact on consumers through ambassadors.

Figure 3.7 Sports that is the most effective for promoting a brand



Source: Questionnaire submitted from April 10, 2024 to May 10, 2024

Consumers, too, clearly recognize that not all sports are equally influential: as was easy to predict, soccer, perhaps the world's best-known sport, is in first place with more than 200 people believing it to be the most influential; just think of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo's advertisement with the Louis Vuitton brand and how it was immediately identified as one of the most iconic collaborations ever.

Tennis, which ranks second, also represents an excellent opportunity for companies to represent themselves through a successful sportsman who embodies values which are very different from those of other sports.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the relationship between Roger Federer and Rolex worked primarily because of the values that both parties shared, allowing important growth for both the brand and the athlete.

Finally, basketball also represents a sport that allows many athletes to sponsor global brands; as an example, just think of NBA player LeBron James who became global brand ambassador for Louis Vuitton and Nike (with whom he signed a lifetime contract).

3.3 Interviews

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, to give more emphasis and to confirm many aspects that emerged from the questionnaire responses, interviews were conducted with two prominent figures in the industry. Specifically, Paolo Calabresi, marketing director of the energy products company Enervit, and the general manager of Louis Vuitton in the Mediterranean region (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Greece, Turkey, and Israel) were interviewed. These interviews served to get a perspective of the companies and to get direct and concrete feedback from people who deal on a daily basis with world-class athletes who then become global ambassadors for the brands, becoming reference figures for consumers.

The Italian energy products and drinks company Enervit, has built many collaborations with successful sportsmen and teams in different disciplines over time; as stated by marketing director P. Calabresi *“Enervit seeks sponsorships that can give an economic and image return to the company; however, over the years there have been rare collaborations made for non-canonical reasons”*. The brand has always distinguished itself through co-operations with great sports champions, particularly in endurance disciplines, but also with very important soccer teams such as Milan and Monza. The partnership with the Milan team began during the years of Arrigo Sacchi and Fabio Capello, with the company remaining for years as one of the main sponsors.

This strong link with Milan, and especially with CEO Adriano Galliani and President Silvio Berlusconi, later allowed Enervit to follow Monza calcio from Serie C to Serie A over a five-year period with a very interesting path that increased brand awareness while following a team working to reach the top league.

“We decide to activate a sponsorship in a sports discipline that can be interesting because we know we have a lot of consumers in that world and that, the team or the athlete of reference, can carry out different activities that bring visibility and credibility to the company” Calabresi goes on to say, *“Thanks to the experience gained over the years, we know our consumers very well: where they are and what they do, but above all what products they need most; for example, Enervit operates a lot in the world of endurance sports (cycling, triathlon, running and endurance swimming), which are sports activities that are practiced for an average period of time above two hours, which pushes athletes to give great importance to proper and balanced supplementation.”*

What the marketing director says is a key concept for any company that relies on sportsmen or athletes in general, because it highlights that the brand is very aware of its image and especially the image of those who represent it, understanding very well how to reach its customers in the most effective way. During the interview, it emerged that Enervit tries to activate as many sponsorships as possible by always looking for the most suitable sports field; for example, if the company has to choose between cycling and tennis, it will definitely choose the former, as there would be more chances that cyclists would decide to use the products for a longer period of time. In terms of consumption, it would take 1000 tennis players to balance with 100 cyclists.

Another key aspect is the values that the company wants to convey to consumers, and athletes are the most effective means of doing this; this is because in the sports sectors that generate the most profit, companies that are not directly related to the world of sports but start selling fitness-related products for a short-term economic return are also entering the market. Enervit, on the other hand, wants to differentiate itself by its own values and wants to avoid comparisons with global multinationals such as Redbull, as the dispute would only be over prices and the Como-based company could not afford to be competitive. For this reason, Calabresi stresses, *“The goal must be to communicate sports through an authentic narrative, with the presence of sportsmen, to show that our product has added value compared to competitors.”*

Louis Vuitton's general manager also stresses how important it is to be able to adapt to the demands of the market and consumers while still keeping its values fixed: *“If we take into consideration a group of people between the ages of 16 and 25 who follow the brand because they are linked to a sportsman they admire a lot, most of them today do not have the spending capacity to be a high-level customer, but that is not the important thing, what matters is that these people will possess this capacity when they are 30/35 or 40/45 years old and are directly connected with the brand.”* Therefore, it is important for LV to start their relationship with the brand as early as possible, facilitating their interaction in the future.

The efforts of the company to connect to their future customers are crucial because they are not short-term actions, but long-term actions to ensure the sustainability and future of the brand.

Until now, there has always been talk of sportsmen and women sponsoring the brand, without putting much emphasis on how they are chosen and what characteristics are required; the starting goal is not to sell specific products, such as T-shirts or bags, but to try to establish a connection with the largest number of people.

The manager of the French brand explains how the company has been collaborating for years with various sportsmen for “LV heritage campaigns,” focused on expressing the values shared by the company and the athletes. These include the latest collaboration with Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal called “Core Values” and accompanied by the phrase “There are journeys that become legends”; the image portrays Federer wearing the classic Monogram Christopher backpack and Nadal with the Monogram Eclipse version. Together, the two athletes interpret the values that resonate in every Louis Vuitton design and Core Values campaign: a journey in the unmistakable Italian Dolomites that transcends physical limitations, a commitment to excellence, and the determination that drives one to embark on such a journey.

Figure 3.8 Louis Vuitton Advertising



Source: Vogue.it

Louis Vuitton's general manager explains what the goal of these advertising campaigns is: *“The values the brand wants to express are very strong, and finding people who embody them is a challenge, because you are not looking for the most popular soccer or tennis player of the moment; instead, you want to connect with athletes like Messi, Ronaldo, Federer or Nadal, figures with established careers and proven records. These athletes are more than just sportspeople: they are true brands that represent hard work, dedication, and excellence. They are role models, especially for young people.”* The younger generation often looks to the stars of the moment, however, there is a generational gap, and more mature people who have followed various athletes over time do not just look at who is playing and winning now but consider more who has had a lasting social impact. Finding players who influence society is much more difficult than finding a talented athlete.

Their impact extends far beyond the field, influencing the community in a deep way. In the interview, Enervit's marketing director explains how the company selects athletes in disciplines that are deemed suitable and interesting. Subsequently, the focus is on athletes who truly believe in the product and feel the need to collaborate closely with the company, as they consider nutrition aspects to be fundamental.

In his interview Calabresi specifies why Enervit focuses more on endurance sports than on the world of soccer: *“soccer players in general, except for exceptional cases such as Cristiano Ronaldo, are very insensitive athletes to nutrition, they do not pay much attention to this aspect as it does not have a great impact on their Sunday performance; On the contrary, endurance disciplines, which force athletes to do a lot of hard work every day, make it possible to immediately realize deviations on nutrition with a much lower performance level, thus forcing athletes to keep a proper diet and lifestyle.”*

Figure 3.9 Alex Zanardi competing with sponsor Enervit



Source: Enervit.com

As an additional tool to differentiate itself from competitors, and show full cooperation with the sportsman, for more than 50 years Enervit has been using an independent office called “Enervit Equipe”; it is made up of biologists, nutritionists, doctors, university professors and athletic trainers who work independently studying the world and the literature of nutrition, to try to innovate and keep up to date with what is happening in the world of supplementation. This service is very useful because it provides support to sponsored athletes and team nutritionists, ensuring proper use of energy products.

As expressed by Calabresi, the opportunity to give top athletes the chance to develop specific products together with their staff becomes an added value and allows for a truer and longer collaboration with the athlete; especially thanks to the collaborations and the use of energy drinks, it is possible to put products on the market that can become suitable even for amateur athletes who, wanting to emulate their idol, buy and use sponsored products.

In the interview, Enervit's marketing director stresses how important it is to evaluate an athlete who can become the company's image with a sponsorship also for what he or she accomplishes off the field, reiterating, *“For us, the image of the athlete with whom we bond is very important, especially how he or she behaves off the field; although it is not our first evaluation, it still remains an essential aspect.”*

Calabresi talks specifically about when the energy drink company had a contract with former boxer Clemente Russo to sponsor a new product line dedicated to sports that require less prolonged aerobic exertion and with the aim of being used by non-professionals as well. Shortly after the collaboration began, the athlete decided to participate in the career-ending TV show “Il grande fratello” to increase his visibility. However, within the show his offensive behavior and words toward women meant he was immediately kicked out of the program. For the Enervit company, it was a serious image loss that negatively affected not only the sale of products, but also the company's reputation with its consumers.

The marketing director of Enervit points out *“At that time, he represented our fitness line, there was his face on the packaging, on our products, on the displays and on the website so for us that exit at that time was a huge damage, so we immediately terminated the contract”*; *“In all contracts there are clauses that refer to this kind of behavior off the field, such as related to doping, through buyouts depending on unsportsmanlike behavior. We evaluate the prototypical good guy because if the behavior off the field is bad, the public will dislike him and that will reflect on the company as well.”*

Another aspect that is considered very important is curiosity, which is the engine of knowledge in all spheres. Even in the world of sports, those who are extremely curious want to know how everything in their discipline works: from the rules, to their opponents, to the equipment they use, to the materials their shoes are made of, to the nutrition that enables them to perform better. Sports champions are all very curious, and this allows them to gain that small advantage that makes the difference between victory and defeat, which in many disciplines is decided by a few points, seconds, hundredths.

One example is Italian tennis player Jannik Sinner, who expressed a lot of curiosity about the company and the products it sells during a meeting with Paolo Calabresi.

The marketing director expressed his admiration this way: *“I was amazed to see a sportsman who, despite having million-euro sponsors and being able to easily walk away without saying a word, chooses instead to stop and talk to us asking multiple questions because he knows that we could give him something more that he does not yet have today; he is a guy who is focused on his career and the future, not on where he wants to be tomorrow morning.”*

All this is to demonstrate the importance of athletic performance on the field and behavior off the field, but many other aspects and qualities are also considered that ultimately prove to be those that allow differentiation from competitors. For this reason, Enervit is looking for athletes who demonstrate impeccable behavior, who are curious and, most importantly, who are satisfied with their relationship with the brand and who tell the story when interviewed. Should they talk to other athletes about their relationship with Enervit, it will be important how the company, through its products, was able to solve problems by helping them in their discipline.

As a final aspect, Paolo Calabresi explains how the use of ambassadors and reference figures is crucial to be able to reach more consumers and push them to buy products; in the interview he clarifies, *“We have figures that we call ambassadors and we often look for athletes who are the reference in that discipline, even if they are not the strongest or the best, but they have to be very skilled at being able to communicate the values and the sponsored product. The reference athletes are very communicative on the social sphere because they share how they train, what they do and what they eat, becoming reference points for many consumers; that's why we activate them in any case because we believe they can be key figures for the community.”* So, you can see how important it is that the athlete understands the corporate values and is able to convey them in daily life but also on the playing field.

3.4 Regression

A multiple regression analysis, based on the responses obtained from the questionnaire and the analyses that emerged during the interviews of Enervit and LV managers, was used to study the propensity to purchase sponsored products by athletes. Regression analysis is a statistical technique useful for analyzing a sample: within the data set, one independent variable (in this case the propensity to purchase sponsored products on a scale of 1 to 10) and several dependent variables are chosen, the objective being to estimate the relationship, if any, between them. The regression was carried out using the Excel application and made it possible to create a specific analysis table for each item, highlighting its individual peculiarities.

The multiple regression analysis presented aims to identify the determinant variables in the success of an athlete as an ambassador for a brand. The results obtained may be useful for companies, such as Enervit or Louis Vuitton, in selecting athletes who best represent their brand.

Table 1 P-values

Value P-value	Result
P-value > 0,05	Low Significance
0.01 < P-value ≤ 0.05	Significance
P-value ≤ 0,01	High Significance

As the table shows, one of the most important values to evaluate is the P-value, or the degree of significance of the sample. In an analysis of data samples, it determines the probability of obtaining results that are equal to or less likely than those observed during the test, assuming the null hypothesis (or conjecture) to be true.

In the multiple regression used, “consumers' propensity to purchase” was taken as the independent variable and the following dependent variables:

1. **Marketable lifestyle**
2. **Off-field Behaviour**
3. **Athlete performance**
4. **Ability to communicate**

Table 2 Multiple regression description

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Stat t	Significance value	Below 95%	Above 95%
Intercept	4,8236	1,5184	3,1767	0,0246	0,9204	8,7268
Marketable lifestyle	0,2280	0,0782	2,9153	0,0332	0,0270	0,4291
Off-field Behaviour	-0,1925	0,0648	-2,9714	0,0311	-0,3591	-0,0260
Athlete performance	-0,2167	0,1205	-1,7981	0,1321	-0,5264	0,0931
Ability to communicate	0,2036	0,0962	2,1172	0,0878	-0,0436	0,4509

1. Marketable lifestyle

- **Coefficient: 0.2280**
- **Significance value (p-value): 0.0332**
- **95% confidence interval: [0.0270, 0.4291]**

This result is statistically significant with a p-value of 0.0332, indicating that an athlete with a more marketable lifestyle is perceived as a better brand representative. A marketable lifestyle is positively associated with the athlete's success as a brand ambassador. An increase of one-unit results in an increase of 0.2280 units in success as a sponsor, holding other variables constant.

2. Off-field Behaviour

- **Coefficient: -0.1925**
- **Significance value (p-value): 0.0311**
- **95% confidence interval: [-0.3591, -0.0260]**

This result is statistically significant in that it has a p-value of 0.0311, suggesting that athletes with inappropriate off-field behavior can damage brand image and, consequently, their value as a sponsor. A one-unit increase in inappropriate off-field behavior results in a 0.1925 unit decrease in success as a sponsor, holding other variables constant.

3. Athlete performance

- **Coefficient: -0.2167**
- **Significance value (p-value): 0.1321**
- **95% confidence interval: [-0.5264, 0.0931]**

Athlete performance has a negative coefficient, but it is not statistically significant because the p-value level is above 5%. This suggests that, within the model, pure athletic performance is not a significant predictor of success as a sponsor. Although one might think that athletic performance is critical, the data suggest that other factors play a more important role in sponsorship.

4. *Ability to communicate*

- **Coefficient: 0.2036**
- **Significance value (p-value): 0.0878**
- **95% confidence interval: [-0.0436, 0.4509]**

The ability to communicate has a positive coefficient, and although it is not significant at the 5% level, it is close to the 0.05 significance level ($p \approx 0.088$).

This indicates that the ability to communicate has a good influence about the athlete's success as an ambassador, so an improvement in the athlete's ability to communicate could increase his or her perceived value as a brand representative.

The following table summarizes the main results of the multiple regression

Table 3 Regression statistics

<i>Regression statistics</i>	
R multiple	0,921624614
R squared	0,849391929
R squared adjusted	0,728905472
Standard error	1,576398798
Observations	10

R multiple (0.9216): the R multiple, or multiple correlation coefficient, represents the correlation between the observed values and the predicted values of the dependent variable. A value of 0.9216 indicates a strong positive correlation, suggesting that the regression model is able to capture a significant amount about the mutability of the dependent variable.

R squared (0.8494): the R^2 , or coefficient of determination, indicates the proportion of the variance of the independent variable explained by the dependent variables in the model. A value of R^2 of about 0.849 implies that about 84.9 percent of the variance of the dependent variable can be predicted by the independent variable in the model. This suggests that the model is very effective in explaining the variability of the data.

Adjusted R squared (0.7289): adjusted R^2 is a modified version of R^2 that takes into account the number of predictors in the model. A value of 0.7289 indicates that after accounting for the number of variables, 72.89% of the independent variable is explained by the dependent variables.

The difference between R^2 (84.94%) and adjusted R^2 (72.89%) suggests that some of the dependent variables may not be significantly useful in improving the model and that its complexity could be reduced.

Standard error (1.5764): the standard error of the estimate represents the standard deviation of the residuals, that is, the differences between the observed and predicted values. A standard error of 1.5764 indicates that, on average, the model's predictions deviate by about 1.5764 units from the observed values of the dependent variable. This provides an indication of the accuracy of the model's predictions.

Number of observations (10): The number of observations refers to the total number of data used in the regression analysis.

Table 4 Analysis of variance

Analysis of Variance	<i>GDL</i>	<i>SQ</i>	<i>MQ</i>	<i>F</i>	F significance
Regression	4	70,07483415	17,5187085	7,049688006	0,027495354
Residual	5	12,42516585	2,48503317	/	/
Total	9	82,5		/	/

The F-significance of 0.0275 indicates that the overall pattern is significant at the 5% level. The F-statistic of 7.049688006, with a significance F of 0.0275, indicates that the overall model is statistically significant at this level. This means that the null hypothesis that all independent variables have no effect on the dependent variable can be rejected.

This suggests that at least one of the independent variables is a good predictor of the dependent variable.

Although the specific coefficients of the independent variables are not provided, we can infer that variables such as “Marketable lifestyle” and “Off-field Behavior” contribute significantly to the explanation of variability in the dependent variable.

The coefficient of determination is calculated as:

$$R^2 = \frac{70,07483415}{82,5} \approx 0,849$$

This value indicates that about 84.9% of the dependent variables can be predicted by the independent variable in the model. Such a high R^2 suggests a well-fitted model. Through an economic analysis of the data obtained from multiple regression, it was possible to assess the impact of several variables on consumers' purchase intention toward sponsored products. The results provided valuable insights into the relationship between athletes' characteristics and companies' branding strategies. It was found that an attractive marketable lifestyle, represented by the marketable lifestyle variable, positively influences the choice of brand ambassador.

As covered extensively in the first chapter, a key aspect that enabled this influence was the introduction of social media; thanks to its development over the past 20 years, the relationship between athletes and their supporters has changed dramatically; social media has revolutionized the society of our time significantly by changing the way we interact with people, and this has also changed the way brands reach out to their consumers. Moreover, nowadays a sportsman has to pay close attention to what he accomplishes and says in public, as, thanks to new media, everything is shared globally in real time. The present dissertation considered several studies, especially the 2021 study by Jason P. Doyle, Yiran Su & Thilo Kunkel, "Athlete branding via social media: examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram," in this study it is explained how important brands consider athletes' use of social media to sponsor a product or brand. The feeling of unapproachability that used to invest these champions in the past has become less and less pronounced, partly because social media has opened up new

possibilities for the sports celebrity, such as showing private dimensions, such as family life. Fans in this way can learn insider information about the athletes they follow, information that they would be unlikely to learn from mainstream media, and furthermore with social media they can interact directly with their favorites, commenting on posts and stories, participating in live events, etc. Thus, the use of platforms such as Instagram, Meta or X, allows consumers to be directly involved in the lives of athletes, decreasing the "distance" between the parties; likewise, through their social profiles, sportsmen can promote products, show and tell partnerships, carry out marketing campaigns becoming able to influence the propensity of their followers to purchase a particular product. This suggests that companies tend to select athletes who embody values and lifestyles affiliated to those of the target audience. The role of sportsmen understood as brand ambassadors not only provides commercial benefits for companies, but also has a significant social impact, further improving the company's reputation and creating a deeper connection with the public. In addition, it has been shown that athletes' off-field behavior, represented by the variable "Off-field Behavior," has a significant impact in the eyes of consumers, who value athletes who convey positive values both during and after their sports careers. This indicates that companies are particularly attentive to the reputation and public image of athletes, avoiding those who engage in controversial or negative behavior. This aspect is central to the thesis model presented, which aims to highlight aspects that had not been considered in previous studies. In Goffman's models of 1959, Keller's of 1993, but also Model of Athlete Brand Images' of 2014, off-field behavior was not considered as a central variable, but only as something of secondary importance. Thanks to the questionnaire and especially the multiple regression, it was intended to show how today's consumers, as well as companies, can no longer consider a sportsman only for his athletic performance, in fact, off-field behavior must be evaluated as one of the most important peculiarities for an athlete who must try to create and maintain an all-around self-image. However, companies' strategies must be well planned and targeted to ensure maximum impact. One effective approach is to choose brand ambassadors that reflect the values and image of the company itself. This alignment ensures an authentic connection with the audience and maximizes impact on the consumer. However, while the ability to communicate corporate values, represented by the variable "Ability to communicate," appears to have a positive effect on consumers'

purchase intention, it is instead marginal and found to be less significant at the 95 percent confidence level. This suggests that although effective communication of corporate values may help improve brand image, other factors may be more crucial in influencing consumer behavior. Athlete sports performance, represented by the variable “Athlete Performance,” does not seem to significantly influence consumers' purchase intention toward sponsored products. This result may indicate that although athlete performance is a major contributor to athlete image and visibility, it is not a major factor in influencing consumer purchase of sponsored products. The data exhibited, through multiple regression, confirm the four hypotheses discussed at the beginning of the chapter, highlighting that the Athlete Performance variable is not statistically significant within the model. Sports performance has always been used to measure the impact of a professional player, limited to assessing the increase in fame and visibility; as demonstrated by the initial hypothesis the athlete can no longer be measured only by what he or she does on the field, but must have a more complex evaluation that takes into consideration other variables distant from the discipline practiced. The model created for the thesis study aims to highlight all the aspects that make an athlete the perfect means to reach a larger number of users. As also expressed by LV's general manager, today's consumers are much more informed, demand more from their favorites, and firmly believe in values that become indispensable for any brand. Multiple regression allows us to confirm the hypotheses of the proposed model, showing how Marketable lifestyle and Off-field Behavior are the basis of an economic evaluation made by consumers and brands; in fact, as expressed through examples by the general managers of Enervit or Louis Vuitton, today's companies consider these two variables of particular importance when choosing their ambassadors. The thesis model created aimed to study how and in what way these variables influenced consumer behavior; thanks to the contribution of the numbers obtained from multiple regression what emerged was how certain aspects of an athlete, which until a few years ago were considered marginal, have now become the qualities most valued and demanded by consumers. In summary, in view of the findings of this thesis, the relationship between the world of sports and that of international brands has profoundly transformed over time to become a powerful strategy that offers numerous benefits for companies. From improved brand visibility to fiscal benefits to social impact, the opportunities are endless.

Planning and implementing a partnership between the company and the athlete chosen to represent it can lead to significant results, making this strategy a valuable investment for any company. Companies' investment in brand ambassadors is not just a marketing tactic, but has become a real opportunity to convey their values by interacting with the public and creating a long-term relationship.

Conclusion

This thesis dissertation examined the role of sportsmen understood as brand ambassadors and their influence on the purchasing behaviors of consumers and sports fans. Starting from theoretical studies in the academic literature, the existing relationship between the world of sports and the world of international brands was summarized. The analysis revealed the growing importance of these two spheres and how the figure of the sports ambassador has grown with the fundamental role of creating and maintaining relationships between customers and the brand.

The goal of the model developed in the thesis was to identify which athlete characteristics have a real impact on consumer choices toward a particular brand. Starting from the basics of MABI, through the factors: Athlete Performance, Attractive Appearance and Marketable Lifestyle, a model was created that sought to understand other variables that deviate from mere athletic performance.

Four hypotheses were formulated from which the following variables were derived:

- 1) Marketable lifestyle**
- 2) Off-field Behavior**
- 3) Athlete performance**
- 4) Ability to communicate**

The goal was to have a broader view of the role of the athlete by highlighting not only their athlete performance, but also all that they do and communicate outside of their discipline.

An online questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews with managers from the companies Enervit and Louis Vuitton were used to explore these aspects.

The results of the quantitative research showed that today's consumers are very sensitive to the values that the athlete and the brand express in the sponsored products and how the figure of the sportsman is evaluated on all fronts, highlighting all those aspects that are not directly related to the sport practiced, but still influence consumer opinion.

The interviews reinforced the corporate perspective in choosing their brand ambassadors and how the athletes' fame is leveraged to create a long-term relationship between the brand and consumers.

Through the use of multiple regression, the variables in the model were analyzed providing a more precise analysis; the results showed that while athletic performance is still the basis of sponsorship, it is not one of the most significant variables in the influence athletes have toward consumers who purchase sponsored products.

This outcome is very important to the study because, following the basis from the MABI model and that which emerged from the general managers of Enervit and Louis Vuitton, it can be concluded that what athletes do outside the playing field is considered by companies and consumers to be of equal, if not even greater importance than athletic performance. Indeed, companies need athletes who can express, through behavior or words, the company's values and who can create a lasting bond with consumers. This dissertation can be a starting point for future studies that aim to investigate "*The impact of athletes as endorsers on brand perception: an analysis through the Athlete Brand Image model*" and seek to use the model in companies that work with the world of sports. The questionnaire on which the results of this thesis are based, involved a sample of 300 people, mainly Italians. Possible subsequent elaborations could expand the target sample or investigate the phenomenon by focusing exclusively on a defined country. A further possibility would be to study whether athletes' characteristics change in team contexts and whether they can influence other group members.

Alternatively, a broader assessment of athletes' brands could be conducted and how the life cycle of the sponsored product could help develop an effective strategy studied. The model should be examined with a specific market segment in mind, as consumers often have different perceptions, so it becomes crucial to develop distinct images that can appeal to a specific customer segment.

In conclusion, it can be said that the choice of sports brand ambassadors is not only related to the athletes' achievements in terms of wins or losses, but it is instead predominantly related to how they represent the values of a specific brand.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who supported me and were close to me during this period of study. I thank my thesis advisor, Prof. Giovanna Magnani, who developed this thesis with me, allowing me to improve the level of my personal knowledge and technical skills; during her course she brought me closer to the subject, allowing me to investigate an area of great interest to me.

I thank my parents for concrete and continuous help in my personal growth in and out of university allowing me to do even a period abroad and my girlfriend Marialaura who supported me in the easiest moments and in the most difficult ones, helping me and encouraging me to always give my best and allowed me to achieve very important goals. I thank my group of friends Pablo Crew with whom I grew up and with whom I experienced many adventures between dinners and parties; I also thank my MIBE classmates with whom I shared two wonderful years full of emotions, memories and many parties that will remain unforgettable. Finally I also want to thank Antonio for his helpfulness and valuable advice.

Bibliography

- 1) Aaron C. T. Smith, B. Graetz, H. Westerbeek, (2008) “*Sport sponsorship, team support and purchase intentions*”, , Business, Sociology, Journal of Marketing Communications.
- 2) Aaron von Felbert and Christoph Breuer, (2020) “*How the type of sports-related endorser influences consumer’s purchase intention*”; International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship.
- 3) Abate, E., (2020) “*Sport Marketing: origini ed evoluzione*”,
- 4) Abeza, G., O’Reilly, N., & Seguin, B. (2017). “*Social media in relationship marketing: The perspective of professional sport managers in the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL*”. Communication & Sport, 7(1), 80–109.
- 5) Aaker, D. (1996). “*Building strong brands*”. New York: Free Press.
- 6) Anagnostopoulos, C., Parganas, P., Chadwick, S., & Fenton, A. (2018), “*Branding in pictures: Using Instagram as a brand management tool in professional team sport organizations*”, European Sport Management Quarterly, 18(4), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2017.1410202>
- 7) Arai, A., Ko, Y. J., & Kaplanidou, K. (2013), “*Athlete brand image: Scale development and model test*”, European Sport Management Quarterly, 13(4), 383–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2013.811609>
- 8) Arai, A., Ko, Y. J., & Ross, S. (2014), “*Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image*”, Sport Management Review, 17(2), 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.04.003>
- 9) Aslam, S, (2019) “*Instagram by the numbers: Stats, demographics & fun facts. Retrieved November 25*”, from <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics>
- 10) Banti A., (febbraio 1936), *L’importanza dello spettacolo sportivo*, in *Lo sport fascista*, a. IX, n. 2, pp. 31-33.
- 11) Bauer, H., Sauer, N., & Exler, S. (2008). Brand image and fan loyalty in professional team sport: A refined model and empirical assessment. Journal of Sport Management, 22, 205–226.

- 12) Belloni, E. (2016), “*La nascita dell’industria sportiva in Italia. Una prima periodizzazione*”, rivista di diritto sportivo (2), 179-204.
- 13) Beraniche E., (2022), “*Brief history of sponsorship*”
- 14) Berry, L. (2000). Cultivating service brand equity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28, 128–137.
- 15) Bilodeau M., (1 December 2022), “*How Gen Z is transforming sports marketing*”
- 16) Bonini, F., (2006), “*Le istituzioni sportive italiane: storia e politica*” Torino,
- 17) Braunstein, J., & Zhang, J. (2005). Dimensions of athletic star power associated with generation Y sports consumption. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 6, 242–267.
- 18) Bush, A. J., Martin, C. A. and Bush, V. D. (2004), “*Sports celebrity influence on the behavioral intentions of generation Y*”, *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44(1), 108-117.
- 19) Calvelli A., (2002), “*Long-term sponsorship*”, Sports easy
- 20) Cheney et al., (2004) “*Organizational Communication in an Age of Globalization: Issues, reflections and practices*”, Waveland Pr Inc, Mississippi,
- 21) Cherubini, S., (2015) “*Marketing e management dello sport. Analisi, strategie, azioni*”, Franco Angeli, Milano
- 22) Cherubini, S., Canigiani M., (2001) “*Il marketing sportivo: analisi, strategie, strumenti*”, Milano: F. Angeli; 2001
- 23) Choi, S. M., & Rifon, N. J. (2007). “*Who is the celebrity in advertising? Understanding dimensions of celebrity images*”. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40, 304–324.
- 24) Columbia University Athletics, (2009); “*Columbia vs Princeton: first televised sporting event marks 70th anniversary*”, New York,
- 25) Cunningham, N. and Bright, L. (2012), “*The tweet is in your court: Measuring attitude towards athlete endorsements in social media*”, *International Journal of Integrated Marketing Communications*, 4(2), 73-87.
- 26) Curino L., (May 1998)” *Inter Nike, un contratto oltre Ronaldo*”, La gazzetta dello Sport

- 27) Daniels, E. (2009). Sex objects, athletes, and sexy athletes: How media representations of women athletes can impact adolescent girls and college women. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24, 399–422.
- 28) Eckhardt, G.M. and Bengtsson, A. (2010), “*A brief history of branding in China*”, *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 210-21.
- 29) Erdem, T., & Swait, J. (2004). “*Brand credibility, brand consideration, and choice*”. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, 191–198.
- 30) F. Giorgino, M. F. Mazzù, (2018) “*Brand Telling*”, Egea, Milano
- 31) Fabrizio F., (2012) “*Fuoco di bellezza. La formazione del sistema sportivo nazionale italiano (1861-1914)*” Milano, p. 102-105.
- 32) Falcone, T., (dicembre 1911-gennaio 1912) “*Sull’uso bellico dell’aeroplano*, in *L’Industria Sportiva. Automobilismo-Ciclismo-Aviazione-Turismo*, a. III, n. 11, p. 33-35.
- 33) Filo, K., Lock, D., & Karg, A. (2015). “*Sport and social media research: A review*” *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), 166–181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.11.001>
- 34) Francois A. Carrillat, Jasmina Ilic, (2019) “*The Celebrity Capital Life Cycle: a framework for future research directions on celebrity endorsement*”; *Journal of Advertising* 48(1):1-11
- 35) Fullerton e Merz, (2018) “*The four domains of sports marketing: A conceptual framework*”. *The four domains of sports marketing: A conceptual framework*. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 17(2), 90–108.
- 36) Geurin-Eagleman, A. N., & Burch, L. M. (2016), “*Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes’ visual self-presentation on Instagram*”, *Sport Management Review*
- 37) Geurin, A.N. (2017), “*Elite female athletes’ perceptions of new media use relating to their careers: a qualitative analysis*”, *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 345-359.
- 38) Gherardini M, (2004) “*The benetton club organization*”, Fiba Basketball
- 39) Gilchrist, P. (2005). “*Local heroes or global stars*”. L. Allison (Ed.), *The global politics of sport: The role of global institutions in sport* (pp. 107–126). London,

- England: Routledge.
- 40) Giangreco E., (2016) *“Il marketing e la comunicazione nello sport. Lo scenario dell'entertainment business”*, FrancoAngeli
 - 41) Gladden, J. M., & Funk, D. C. (2001). *“Understanding brand loyalty in professional sport: Examining the link between brand associations and brand loyalty”*. International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship, 3, 67–95.
 - 42) Gledhill, C. (1991). *“Stardom: Industry of desire”* London, England: Routledge, p.xiii
 - 43) Goffman's, E., (1959) *“Self-presentation theory”*,
 - 44) Grant, N., Heere, B. and Dickson, G. (2011), *“New sports teams and the development of the brand community”*, European Sport Management Quarterly, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 35-54.
 - 45) Grönroos, C. (2017). *“Relationship marketing readiness: Theoretical background and measurement directions”*. Journal of Services Marketing, 31(3), 218–225. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-02-2017-0056>
 - 46) Hayes, M., Filo, K., Geurin, A., & Riot, C. (2020), *“An exploration of the distractions inherent to social media use among athletes”*, Sport Management Review, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2019.12.006>
 - 47) Hatch & Schultz, (2008) *“Taking Brand Initiative: How Companies Can Align Strategy, Culture, and identity through corporate branding”*, Jossey-Bass Inc, San Francisco.
 - 48) Herrick, R., (1948), *“Red Top-Reminiscences of Harvard rowing (First ed.)”* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. P. 71
 - 49) Hollebeek, L., Glynn, M. and Brodie, R. (2014), *“Consumer brand engagement in social media: conceptualization, scale development and validation”*, Journal of Interactive Marketing, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 149-165.
 - 50) Hussain S, Melewar T.C., Priporas C.V., Foroundi P., (March 2020), *“Journal of Business Research”*, Volume 109, pp.472-488
 - 51) Jason P. Doyle, Yiran Su & Thilo Kunkel, (2021) *“Athlete branding via social media: examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram”*, European Sport Management Quarterly
 - 52) Kaplan, A.M. and Haenlein, M. (2010), *“Users of the world, unite! the challenges*

- and opportunities of social media*”, Business Horizons, Vol. 53 No. 1, pp. 59-68.
- 53) Kelly J., (2020) “*How JÄGERMEISTER changed the world of corporate shirt sponsorships*”, These Football Times
- 54) Kevin Lane Keller, (1993) “*Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity*”, Journal of Marketing
- 55) Kim, J., Morris, J., & Swait, J. (2008). “*Antecedents of true brand loyalty*”. Journal of Advertising, 37(2), 99–117.
- 56) Kunkel, T., & Biscaia, R. (2020), “*Sport brands – brand relationships and consumer behavior*”, Sport Marketing Quarterly, 29(1), 3–16
- 57) Kuyucu, M. M., (January 2020), “*Television and Advertising: The History of tv advertising from and industrial look*”, social mentality and researcher thinkers journal 6(29):258-269
- 58) Laurell C., Soderman S., 2018, “*Sports, storytelling and social media: a review and conceptualization*”, International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship
- 59) Low, G. S., & Lamb, C. W., Jr. (2000). “*The measurement and dimensionality of brand associations*”. The Journal of Product and Brand Management, 9, 350–368.
- 60) Manno F., (November 2020), “*Maradona vestì (quasi) sempre Puma. Addio al Boca anche per "colpa" della Nike*”, 90minuti
- 61) Messina S., (2018),” *Zlatan Ibrahimovic ambassador di Samsung*”, Sport Business Management
- 62) Morasso, M., (27 December 1916), “*Le novità dell’industria automobilistica nel 1916. Verso il primato, in “Motori, cicli e sports*”, a. VIII, n.47bis, pp.7-8
- 63) Ohanian, R. (1991). “*The impact of celebrity spokespersons’ perceived image in consumers’ intention to purchase*”. Journal of Advertising Research, 31, 46–54.
- 64) Pollak, M., (March 20, 2015), “*A history of the first mass-produced baseball card*”, The New York Times
- 65) Raggio, R., & Leone, R. (2009). “*Chasing brand value: Fully leveraging brand equity to maximize brand value*”. Journal of Brand Management, 16, 248–263.
- 66) Rapaccini, G. (2020). “*Roger Federer si riappropria del suo logo*”, Forbes
- 67) Richelieu, A., & Pons, F. (2006). “*Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Football Club Barcelona: How two legendary sports teams built their brand equity*”.

- International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship, 7, 231–250.
- 68) Rein, I., Kotler, P., & Shields, B. (2006). “*A sporting chance at branding*”. *Brand Strategy*, 30–31.
- 69) Rein, I. J., Kotler, P., & Shields, B. (2006). “*The elusive fan: Reinventing sports in a crowded marketplace*” New York: McGraw-Hill.
- 70) Roşca, V. (2010) “*Celebrity and endorsement in advertising*” *ResearchGate*
- 71) Ross, S., James, J., & Vargas, P. (2006). “*Development of a scale to measure team brand associations in professional sport*”. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20, 260–279.
- 72) Santomier J., (2008), “*New media, branding and global sports sponsorship*”, *international Journal of Sports*
- 73) Seno, D., & Lukas, B. (2007). “*The equity effect of product endorsement by celebrities. A conceptual framework from a co-branding perspective*”. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41, 121–134.
- 74) Sessions, W. (2004). “*Sportsmanship as honor*”. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 31, 47–59.
- 75) Shank, M. (1999). “*Sports marketing: A strategic perspective (2nd ed.)*”. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p. 239
- 76) Shekhar S. K., Shah M. A., (2023) “*Sports Marketing and Conceptual Evolution: A Bibliometric Analysis*” *SAGE Open*, Volume 13, Issue 3,
- 77) Smith, L. R., & Sanderson, J. (2015), “*I’m going to Instagram it! An analysis of athlete self-presentation on Instagram*”, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(2), 342–358.
- 78) Sole, D. & Wilson, R. (2002) “*Storytelling in Organizations: The power and traps of using stories to share knowledge in organizations*”,
- 79) Statista
- 80) Storie, J. (2008, July 7). “*Professional athletes, sports: The ultimate branding.*” Fort Worth Business Press.
- 81) Thomson, M. (2006). “*Human brands: Investigating antecedents to consumers’ strong attachments to celebrities*”. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(3), 104–119.
- 82) Tomasella V., (2018), “*La storia delle sneakers: Converse Weapon*”, Outpump, <https://www.outpump.com/la-storia-delle-sneakers-converse-weapon/>

- 83) Tuten, Solomon (2014) “*Social media marketing. Post-consumo, innovazione collaborative e valore condiviso*”, EmergingSeries Journal (ES Journal)
- 84) Vaatainen, M. and Dickenson, P. (2019), “*Re-examining the effects of athlete brand image (ABI) on psychological commitment: an empirical investigation using structural equation modelling (SEM) and fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA)*”, European Sport Management Quarterly, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 244-264.
- 85) Walsh, P. and Williams, A. (2017), “*To extend or not extend a human brand: an analysis of perceived fit and attitudes toward athlete brand extensions*”, Journal of Sport Management, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 44-60.
- 86) Zagnoli P., 2011, “*Sport marketing e nuovi media*”, Franco Angeli, Milano
- 87) Zanetti, R.T., (gennaio 1930) “*Evoluzione dello sport automobilistico italiano*”, lo sport fascista, a. III, n. 1, pp. 19-22

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The first baseball match broadcast in the USA 1921	10
Figure 1.2 History of sports marketing.....	12
Figure 1.3 Annual revenues of major athletes in the world of sports.....	18
Figure 1.4 Sponsorship value of most famous athletes in the world, 2022.....	28
Figure 1.5 Global Twitter Trends	29
Figure 1.6 Louis Vuitton brand search, November 19, 2022	30
Figure 1.7 Number of queries associated with soccer players Ronaldo and Messi.....	30
Figure 1. 8 The advertisement of Messi and Ronaldo playing chess for Louis Vuitton	31
Figure 2.1 Dimensions of Brand associations in Sports Teams	36
Figure 2.2 Definitions of athlete brand image dimension	37
Figure 2.3 Conceptual model of athlete brand image.....	38
Figure 2.4 Social increase of tennis player Jannik Sinner.....	40
Figure 2.5 NBA basketball player LeBron James.....	43
Figure 2.6 Growth of Rolex after contract with Roger Federer	46
Figure 2. 7 Michael Jordan and his first “Air Jordan I”	50
Figure 2.8 Michael Jordan and his shoes line.....	51
Figure 3.1 Job variable	59
Figure 3.2 Athletes affect the level of purchase	60
Figure 3.3 Athletes can improve the financial performance	61
Figure 3.4 Athlete’s attributes	62
Figure 3.5 Athlete’s performance can influence the quality perception.....	63
Figure 3.6 Athlete’s ability to communicate	64
Figure 3.7 Sports that is the most effective for promoting a brand.....	65
Figure 3.8 Louis Vuitton Advertising.....	68
Figure 3.9 Alex Zanardi competing with sponsor Enervit	70

List of Tables

Table 1 P-values	73
Table 2 Multiple regression description	73
Table 3 Regression statistics.....	75
Table 4 Analysis of variance	76