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How Elite Athletes' Brand Narratives Influence Consumer Perceptions of Sponsoring Brands: A Qualitative Consumer Behaviour Study in Formula 1 and Professional Tennis

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Zusammenfassung

In dieser Masterarbeit wird untersucht, wie Sportfans Marken-Narrative von Eliteathletinnen und Eliteathleten interpretieren und wie diese Interpretationen mit der Wahrnehmung von Sponsorenmarken verknüpft werden. Die Arbeit ist theoretisch in den Konzepten Markenimage und Markenassoziationen, Athlete Branding, narrativer Verarbeitung, sponsorenbezogenem Bedeutungs- und Imagetransfer sowie Konsumentenwahrnehmung verankert. Der empirische Schwerpunkt liegt auf zwei kommerziell sichtbaren Sportkontexten: Formel 1 und professionellem Tennis. Die Arbeit ist qualitativ und interpretativ ausgerichtet und basiert auf zwölf halbstrukturierten Online-Interviews mit engagierten Sportfans. Sechs Interviews wurden mit Formel-1-Fans durchgeführt und sechs mit Tennisfans. Jede teilnehmende Person berichtete über eine selbst ausgewählte Eliteathletin bzw. einen selbst ausgewählten Eliteathleten, die bzw. den sie besonders aufmerksam verfolgt und in Bezug auf öffentliches Image, narrative Bedeutungen und Sponsoring-Beziehungen fundiert beschreiben konnte.

Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass Sportlerinnen und Sportler von Fans nicht ausschließlich über ihre sportliche Leistung oder einzelne Persönlichkeitsmerkmale wahrgenommen werden. Vielmehr interpretieren Fans sie als vielschichtige öffentliche Figuren, deren Image durch sportliche Leistung, Persönlichkeit, Werte, Emotionen, Lebensstil, öffentliches Verhalten, mediale Sichtbarkeit und symbolische Bedeutungen geprägt ist. Sponsoring-Beziehungen wurden als besonders überzeugend wahrgenommen, wenn es den Fans möglich war, die Marke sinnvoll in das bestehende Narrativ der Athletin bzw. des Athleten einzuordnen. Sponsor-Fit entstand daher nicht nur durch Produktkategorie oder sportlichen Bezug, sondern auch durch narrative Kohärenz, zum Beispiel durch Werte, Lebensstil, nationale Identität, Stil, Authentizität oder den jeweiligen Sportkontext.

Die Studie liefert außerdem Hinweise darauf, dass Sichtbarkeit allein nicht ausreicht, um zu einem tieferen Bedeutungstransfer zu führen. Sponsorenmarken konnten zwar erinnert oder erkannt werden, wurden jedoch nicht immer als bedeutsam für die sponsorbezogene Markenwahrnehmung beschrieben. Bedeutung entstand vor allem dann, wenn die Beziehung zwischen Athletin bzw. Athlet und Sponsor für Fans glaubwürdig, authentisch oder relevant war. Darüber hinaus war ein umgekehrter Transfer erkennbar: Sponsorenassoziationen konnten auf die Athletin bzw. den Athleten zurückbezogen werden und die wahrgenommene Kohärenz des öffentlichen Images entweder stärken oder schwächen. Insgesamt trägt die Arbeit zur Forschung zu Athlete Branding, Sportsponsoring und Konsumentenverhalten bei, indem sie zeigt, dass

Bedeutungstransfer im Athletensponsoring ein interpretativer, kontextabhängiger und potenziell bidirektionaler Prozess ist.

Abstract

This master's thesis explores how sport fans interpret elite athletes' brand narratives and how these interpretations become connected to perceptions of sponsoring brands. The study is theoretically grounded in brand image and brand associations, athlete branding, narrative processing, sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer, and consumer perception. The empirical focus is on two commercially visible sport contexts: Formula 1 and professional tennis. The study follows a qualitative, interpretivist research design and is based on twelve semi-structured online interviews with engaged sport fans. Six interviews were conducted with Formula 1 fans and six with professional tennis fans. Each participant discussed one self-selected elite athlete whom they followed closely and felt able to describe in relation to public image, narrative meanings and sponsor relationships.

The findings suggest that fans do not interpret athletes only through performance or isolated personality traits. Instead, they construct layered athlete narratives that combine sporting achievements, personality, values, emotional expression, lifestyle, public behaviour, media visibility and symbolic meanings. Sponsorship relationships were perceived as more convincing when fans could meaningfully place the sponsor brand within the athlete's existing narrative. Sponsor fit therefore did not depend only on product category similarity or direct sport relevance, but on narrative coherence.

The study further suggests that sponsor visibility does not automatically lead to deeper meaning transfer. Fans were often able to recall sponsor brands, but visibility alone did not necessarily shape sponsor-related brand perceptions. Sponsor meanings became more relevant when the athlete-sponsor connection appeared credible, authentic or emotionally meaningful. The findings also identify reverse transfer, which means that sponsor associations can reflect back on the athlete and either strengthen or weaken the perceived coherence of the athlete's public image. Overall, the thesis contributes to research on athlete branding, sport sponsorship and consumer behaviour by showing that meaning transfer in elite athlete sponsorship is conditional, interpretive, context-sensitive and potentially bidirectional.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Context

The study of the relationship between brands, consumers and symbolic meaning has emerged as an important area of research in elite sport. In the commercialization of sports, athletes are no longer viewed as just a competitor whose worth is based on his or her athletic ability. They are also public figures around which consumers develop impressions, emotional bonds, symbolic connections, and commercially important meanings. Elite athletes can be seen as human brands, as their image, personality, values and stories are meaningful to their fan audiences and commercially relevant to their sponsoring brands (Thomson, 2006; Arai et al., 2014).

This is particularly noticeable in sports, where individual athletes are given a lot of media attention and have close relationships with the brands that sponsor them. Two such contexts are Formula 1 and professional tennis. The top athletes in both sports are evaluated not only by their athletic skills, but also by their public behavior, lifestyle, values, media presence, emotional appeal, and brand associations. At the same time, the commercial and organisational structures of the two sports differ. Teams, technological partnerships and global sponsors are the hallmarks of the Formula 1 world. Meanwhile, the professional tennis world is more personal and focuses on the career of each player and his or her own sponsorship deals. Therefore, both of these sports can be used as empirical platforms for studying how fans understand meanings and how these meanings can be associated with sponsoring brands.

The relevance of Formula 1 and professional tennis is also supported by recent audience and fan engagement indicators. Formula 1 and Motorsport Network describe the 2025 Global F1 Fan Survey as a recurring study designed to track how fan engagement is evolving across the sport globally. Formula 1 also reported that its global fanbase reached 827 million in 2025.

Professional tennis similarly demonstrates substantial audience visibility. The ATP reported record social and digital audience growth in 2024, including a 48% increase in social media reach to 2.9 billion, while the WTA reported a cumulative global broadcast and streaming audience of 1.1 billion for the 2024 season. These indicators support the selection of Formula 1 and professional tennis as commercially relevant contexts in which athlete visibility, fan interpretation and sponsorship communication are especially salient (Formula 1, 2025a, 2025b; ATP Tour, 2024; WTA, 2025).

This topic is important from the branding point of view, since the perception of a brand is formed not only through communication, on the part of the brand, but also through associations that are stored in the consumer's memory. Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity perspective highlights that brand image consists of brand associations held by consumers. Sport sponsorship can thus be seen as more than a visibility tool. It can establish associative links between a

sponsor brand and the meanings of a sponsored entity. This logic has been explored in sponsorship research in terms of meaning transfer, secondary brand associations, and image transfer (McCracken, 1989; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005).

Narratives play an important role in this process. Consumers tend to make sense of people and brands not only through isolated attributes, but through story-like structures that connect events, motives, values and outcomes over time (Escalas, 2004). In elite sports, athletes' stories can reinforce positive associations with sponsors when the relationship between the athlete and the brand seems appropriate and authentic. At the same time, they can also create risks if the athlete's history, values, or public image seem incompatible with the sponsor's brand.

In this context, this thesis investigates the effect of the brand narratives of elite athletes on the perception of the brands they sponsor in the fields of Formula 1 and professional tennis. The word influence is used in a qualitative and interpretive way. The goal of this thesis is not to measure causal effects, purchase intention or sales outcomes. Rather, it examines the ways in which sport fans talk about athlete image and athlete narratives, their recollections and interpretations of athletes' relationships with sponsors, and the ways in which meanings associated with the athletes become linked with the sponsors' brands.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Existing research provides important foundations for understanding athlete branding, sponsorship, and consumer perception. Athletes are viewed as human brands whose public image may include performance-related, lifestyle, emotional, and symbolic associations. Research in the field of sponsorship has also shown that meanings associated with athletes can be linked to sponsored brands through meaning transfer, image transfer and secondary brand associations. However, such meaning transfer should not be considered as automatic. Consumers are not passive recipients of advertising messages. They notice, interpret, and evaluate brand cues in relation to their previous experiences, feelings, involvement, and social environment. This is particularly the case with sports fans, who follow athletes for a long time. Therefore, the role of fan interpretation can be significant in the relevance of athlete-related values in the perception of the sponsored brands.

The thesis addresses this gap by exploring how sport fans interpret meanings of elite athletes' brand narratives and how these meanings are connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions. Formula 1 and professional tennis are used as two elite sport contexts that provide a broader empirical setting for examining this process. A more detailed theoretical discussion of the research gap is provided in Section 2.7.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

The thesis aims to explore how sport fans interpret brand narratives related to elite athletes in Formula 1 and professional tennis and how this interpretation becomes connected to their brand perception related to sponsors. It seeks to understand how respondents choose to talk about the athlete, which elements are considered relevant by respondents when discussing an elite sport athlete, how they recall and evaluate athlete-sponsor relationships and how the above meanings shape their brand perceptions of associated sponsor brands.

The main research question is:

How do elite athletes' brand narratives influence consumer perceptions of sponsoring brands in Formula 1 and professional tennis?

To answer this main research question, the thesis addresses the following sub-questions:

RQ1: How do sport fans describe the image and brand narratives of elite athletes in Formula 1 and professional tennis?

RQ2: Which athlete-related meanings, values and narrative elements do fans consider most salient?

RQ3: How do fans recall and interpret sponsorship relationships connected to their focal athlete?

RQ4: How do fans connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor-related brand perceptions?

RQ5: How do sport-contextual features of Formula 1 and professional tennis appear in fan accounts and help contextualise interpretations of athlete-sponsor relationships?

1.4 Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The thesis is devoted to individual elite athletes in Formula 1 and professional tennis. In Formula 1, this refers to current or recent drivers competing in the Formula 1 World Championship. In professional tennis, this refers to current or recent players participating in the ATP or WTA tours. The study focuses on athletes who are known to the public, have a prominent media presence, and have notable sponsorship relationships.

Empirical research focuses on the interpretations of sports fans. The study does not measure sponsorship effectiveness, purchase intentions, sales results, or return on investment. A complete analysis of information about athletes in the media or social media is beyond the scope of this study.

Formula 1 and professional tennis are included in the study as two empirical contexts, as both are commercially significant sports in which individual athletes play an important role in shaping fans' opinions and in attracting sponsors' attention. The inclusion of both contexts allows for a broader range of fan interpretations and the relationship between athletes and sponsors. The sports context is taken into account in cases where it seems relevant to participants' accounts and

serves to support contextual interpretation rather than to create systematic differences between Formula 1 and professional tennis.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the research background, problem statement, research gap, research aim, research questions and scope of the study.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background. It discusses core branding concepts such as brand image, brand identity, brand personality and brand associations. It then examines athletes as human brands, athlete brand image, athlete brand narratives, sport sponsorship, meaning transfer, image transfer, consumer perception and sport fans as interpretive audiences. The chapter concludes by integrating these theoretical streams and identifying the research gap addressed by the thesis.

Chapter 3 develops the conceptual framework of the study. It explains how the central concepts from the theoretical background are connected and how they guide the empirical investigation.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology. It explains the qualitative, interpretivist and theory-informed research design, the empirical setting, sampling strategy, recruitment process, interview procedure, interview guide development, data analysis approach, quality issues in qualitative research and ethical considerations. The chapter also explains how Formula 1 and professional tennis are used as two elite sport contexts for context-sensitive interpretation.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the findings of the interview study. The findings are analysed thematically, focusing on how fans construct athlete-related meanings and how these meanings become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

Chapter 6 summarises the main findings, discusses theoretical and practical contributions, acknowledges limitations and outlines directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for analysis of how elite athletes' brand narratives may influence consumer perceptions of sponsoring brands in Formula 1 and professional tennis. It first clarifies core branding concepts, including brand image, brand identity, brand personality and brand associations. It then discusses athletes as human brands and explains why elite athletes can function as meaning-bearing brand entities in commercialised sport. The chapter further examines sport sponsorship, meaning transfer, secondary brand associations and image transfer as mechanisms through which athlete-related meanings may

become connected with sponsor brand meanings. Consumer perception is understood not as passive reception of sponsorship communication, but as an active process of information processing and interpretation. Finally, sport fans are conceptualised as the interpretive audience of the study, with attention to fan identity, emotional attachment, community interaction and symbolic meaning-making.

This chapter is not only a review of the literature; it also develops the sensitising concepts that guide the empirical study. Since the thesis follows a qualitative design, the literature is not used to derive hypotheses for statistical testing. Instead, it provides conceptual foundations for the interview guide, the initial coding logic and the interpretation of how fans connect athlete-related narratives with sponsor-related brand meanings.

2.1 Core Branding Concepts: Brand Image, Brand Identity, Brand Personality and Brand Associations

To analyse sponsor-related brand perceptions systematically, this thesis distinguishes between brand image, brand identity, brand personality and brand associations. These concepts are included because the study does not examine sponsorship as a behavioural outcome, such as purchase intention or sales, but as an interpretive process through which fans form, recall and connect brand-related meanings. The distinction is necessary for clarifying what kind of brand meaning is investigated, from whose perspective it is understood and how it can be accessed empirically in qualitative interviews.

Brand image represents the consumer side of branding. In Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model, brand image is conceptualised as consumers' perceptions of a brand, as reflected by the brand associations held in memory. This is important for the present thesis because brand image is a receiver-based construct. Brand image is not identical to a brand's intended message; rather, it concerns what consumers associate with the brand when they think about it. In this sense, brand image is memory-based, associative and perception-oriented.

More recent brand image research confirms the centrality of consumer associations for understanding brand image. Plumeyer et al. (2019), in their systematic review of brand image measurement, show that brand image has been studied through a wide range of measurement techniques and that many approaches aim to capture the associations consumers hold about brands. Their review also demonstrates that brand image research often builds on the foundational work of Keller and Aaker, but has developed into a broader and methodologically diverse field. This is relevant for the present thesis because it supports the use of brand associations as an empirical access point for analysing sponsor-related brand perceptions. Since the thesis is qualitative, it does not measure brand image through scales, but examines how

participants articulate sponsor-related associations, meanings and impressions in their own words.

Brand associations are the memory-based units through which brand image becomes observable in consumer accounts. They may include attributes, benefits, attitudes, users, usage contexts, symbolic meanings, or links to people, celebrities, athletes, events, teams and sport properties (Keller, 1993). Their contribution to brand equity depends on their strength, favourability and uniqueness. For this thesis, brand associations are especially important because sponsor brands may be influenced not only by their own communication and product experience, but also by meanings consumers attribute to the athletes with whom they are linked. In other words, athlete sponsorship can be analysed as a process in which athlete-related associations may become connected to sponsor-related brand associations.

Brand identity, by contrast, belongs primarily to the sender or managerial side of branding. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as a set of unique associations that the brand strategist seeks to create or maintain. Similarly, Kapferer (2012) understands brand identity as the brand's self-definition, internal coherence and intended expression. Brand identity is therefore about intended meaning, whereas brand image is about perceived meaning. This distinction is important because the empirical focus of this thesis is not how a sponsor brand or athlete strategically defines itself. Instead, the study examines the meanings fans attribute to athletes and the extent to which these meanings shape perceptions of sponsors.

However, brand identity should not be understood only as a fixed managerial statement. More recent sport branding research emphasises that brand identity can be dynamic, socially negotiated and shaped by stakeholder interaction. Mühlbacher et al. (2022) show that sport brand identity may be reinforced, ignored or destabilised through fan discourse and stakeholder sense-making. This perspective is relevant for the present thesis because elite athlete brands also circulate in social environments where fans, media, sponsors and sport communities interpret and negotiate meanings. Although the study focuses mainly on perceived image rather than intended identity, brand identity remains relevant because sponsor relationships may act as symbolic cues through which fans evaluate whether an athlete's public image appears coherent, authentic or commercially managed.

Brand personality is a more specific concept within this broader branding vocabulary. Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as the set of human personality traits associated with a brand. It can therefore be understood as one possible component of brand image, while brand associations refer more broadly to the different memory-based connections consumers hold about a brand. Brand personality may involve traits such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997). In sport contexts, brands, teams and athletes are often perceived

in human, emotional and symbolic terms. Carlson et al. (2009) show that brand personality in sport can influence prestige, distinctiveness, identification and consumer behaviour.

Recent research also shows that brand personality remains an active and context-sensitive area of branding research. Wang et al. (2025), in a meta-analytical review, argue that brand personality is a symbolic differentiation tool and synthesise studies on its antecedents across a large body of research. Their findings indicate that brand personality is shaped by consumer-related, brand-related, relationship-related and contextual factors. This is relevant for athlete sponsorship because fans may attribute human-like traits not only to athletes, but also to sponsor brands that are associated with them. A sponsor linked to a disciplined, authentic, glamorous or rebellious athlete may therefore be interpreted through personality-related meanings, but only if fans perceive the connection as meaningful and coherent.

The relationship between these concepts can be summarised as follows. Brand identity refers to intended meaning from the perspective of brand management, whereas brand image refers to perceived meaning from the consumer perspective. Brand associations are the memory-based units through which brand image can be empirically accessed. Brand personality is one specific type of brand association, namely the attribution of human-like traits to a brand. In the context of this thesis, these distinctions are necessary because elite athletes are interpreted as human brands, while sponsor brands are examined through the associations that fans articulate in relation to those athletes. Therefore, brand associations provide the empirical access point for analysing sponsor-related brand perceptions in the interviews.

This distinction helps to avoid conceptual confusion, because sponsorship research often discusses image transfer without clearly separating brand identity, brand image, brand personality and broader brand associations. For the purposes of this thesis, the central object of analysis is not the sponsor's intended brand identity, but the sponsor-related brand image as interpreted by fans. More specifically, the empirical analysis focuses on whether and how athlete-related meanings, including image associations, personality traits, values and narrative elements, become connected to sponsor-related brand associations.

2.2 Athletes as Human Brands and Athlete Brand Image

An athlete can be conceptualised as a human brand because he or she is a public figure around whom marketable associations, meanings and consumer relationships are constructed. Unlike product brands, human brands are based on real people who perform, communicate, build reputations, attract media attention and interact with audiences. Thomson (2006) suggests that consumers can develop strong emotional attachments to human brands, while subsequent human

branding literature emphasises credibility, stakeholder involvement and the construction of meaning through social interaction.

This is especially relevant in elite sport, where athletes are evaluated not only as performers but also as symbolic figures. These can correspond to athletic success, discipline, resilience, glamour, authenticity, activism, national identity, controversy. These kind of meanings are not created by athletes themselves, but by interactions between fans, media, sponsors, teams and wider sport communities. Athlete celebrity should not be treated as a static or fully controllable identity, but as a dynamic meaning system.

The concept of meaning co-creation is central to this view. Human branding research emphasises that the identities and meanings attributed to human brands are created through interaction among different stakeholders rather than by the branded person alone. Centeno and Wang (2017) define human brand identity as a stakeholder-based process involving the branded person, consumer-fans and business actors. Importantly, the athlete meaning is not only created by the athlete itself but also by the fans, media discourse, sponsors and the digital presence (Anderski et al., 2023). Athlete brands are therefore not monolithic; they are context-specific, heterogeneous and dynamic.

One of the most important models in athlete-branding research is the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) developed by Arai et al. (2014). The model distinguishes three main dimensions of athlete brand image: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. It extends earlier understandings of athlete image that focused mainly on sport performance. While performance-related associations continue to be significant, fans can also view athletes through appearance, lifestyle, value associations, public conduct and off-field identity. Recent research also highlights the role of social media in making athlete brand image more visible and multidimensional. Doyle et al. (2022) show that athletes' Instagram self-presentation includes not only performance-related content, but also appearance, lifestyle and off-stage elements. It allows athletes to present a broader public image beyond competition results. Zheng and Xu (2024) show that a favourable athlete brand image can influence consumption-related outcomes through emotional attachment and active interaction with athlete content on social media.

Panthen et al. (2025) also emphasise that athlete brands should be understood as heterogeneous and context-dependent. These studies are important for the present thesis because they support the assumption that fans encounter athletes as complex meaning-bearing public figures rather than as purely sporting performers.

For this thesis, athlete image is therefore understood as the broader set of associations fans attach to an athlete, including performance, personality, values, lifestyle, public conduct, appearance and symbolic meanings. However, these associations do not remain isolated. Fans may organise

them into broader athlete narratives, which connect image-related meanings into stories of success, struggle, authenticity, rivalry, controversy or personal development. This connection between athlete image and athlete narrative is developed in the following section.

2.3 Athlete Brand Narratives

Athlete image and athlete brand narrative are related but not identical. Athlete image refers to the collection of meanings and associations connected with an athlete, whereas athlete brand narrative refers to the story-like structuring of those meanings over time. Narrative theory is important because consumers often make sense of brands, events and people through temporally and causally organised stories rather than through isolated attributes. Narrative processing refers to the manner in which events, goals, actions and outcomes are linked in a cause-and-effect logic (Escalas, 2004). Mills and John (2025) also define brand stories by the elements of plot, character and purpose. From the point of view of this thesis, this means that athlete narrative is not just a list of characteristics, but an interpreted story that develops over time. The narrative perspective is relevant because brand meanings are not only stored as isolated associations, but can also be organised into story-like structures. In marketing research, brand storytelling is discussed as a way of connecting characters, events, emotions and meanings into a coherent structure. Lundqvist et al. (2013) show that storytelling can shape consumer brand experience by making brand meanings more emotionally and experientially accessible. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) further argue that a recognisable brand persona can support an emotionally coherent brand story. This is particularly relevant for athlete branding because elite athletes are person-like brands whose public persona, emotional style and biographical development are central to how fans interpret them. In addition, narrative transportation research suggests that stories can influence consumers through attention, imagery, emotion and immersion rather than through purely analytical processing (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014). In the context of elite sport, athlete narratives may therefore become meaningful because fans connect public events, performances, conflicts, values and turning points into a coherent story around the athlete. However, consumer research that is done in an interpretive manner also reveals that consumers build their own narratives in their interactions with products, services and brands. Woodside et al. (2008) suggest that consumers impute imagery to brands by giving them roles, actions and relationships. This is highly relevant for sport fans, who do not merely absorb media messages passively. Fan cultures can also create, repeat and reinterpret athlete stories through everyday discussion and collective meaning-making.

For the purposes of this thesis, an athlete brand narrative refers to a story-like arrangement of athlete-related meanings that consumers interpret in temporal and causal terms. Such narratives may include events over time, roles or characters, values, turning points, recurring themes and

implied purpose. Empirically identifiable narrative elements include struggles, comebacks, rivalries, achievements, failures, personality traits, value statements, public behaviour, authenticity cues, controversies and sponsor-related associations.

This definition deliberately prioritises consumer interpretation rather than managerial storytelling intentions. Accordingly, the study is not limited to official athlete-branding campaigns. It focuses on how fans engage with the publicly visible story of an athlete, which may be formed through interviews, documentaries, social media, performance narratives, competition, sponsorship campaigns, scandal, activism, press coverage and fan discussion. This perspective is especially relevant in Formula 1 and professional tennis, where stories about athletes are constructed across multiple communication spaces rather than through one unified message.

Sport-specific narrative research also supports this view. Ronkainen et al. (2016) argue that athletic identity can be understood through narrative and discursive perspectives, which treat identity as culturally constructed rather than fixed or purely role-based. For the present thesis, this means that athlete narratives are not only managerial branding devices. They are also socially available stories through which fans interpret what an athlete represents, how the athlete has developed and why particular sponsor relationships appear coherent or problematic.

However, athlete narratives are not necessarily beneficial for sponsors. Narratives of resilience, excellence or authenticity may strengthen favourable meanings associated with an athlete and, potentially, with the sponsor. By contrast, narratives involving controversy, moral transgression or polarising activism may create reputational risk. Schmidt et al. (2018) show that athlete activism, depending on its type and perceived effort, can affect a sponsor's brand image and purchase intentions. Lohneiss and Hill (2014) also find that processing athlete transgressions can influence brand image, while effects on purchase intent are more complex. These studies suggest that athlete narratives may carry positive, negative or ambivalent meanings, depending on how consumers interpret the athlete, the issue, the sponsor relationship and the broader context.

2.4 Sport Sponsorship, Meaning Transfer and Image Transfer

Sport sponsorship can be understood as a marketing communication activity in which a sponsor acquires the right to associate itself with the profile and image of a particular event, activity or sport property and to use this association for commercial communication purposes (Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999). In sponsorship, the sponsored activity functions not only as a visibility platform, but also as a carrier of image and symbolic meaning. Meenaghan and Shipley (1999) argue that sponsorship differs from advertising because the medium and the message are not separate; rather, imagery is delivered through association with particular activities and events. In this thesis, athlete sponsorship is therefore treated not merely as financial support or logo

exposure, but as a marketing communication mechanism that creates associative links between elite athletes and sponsor brands.

This is consistent with sponsorship-linked marketing research, which understands sponsorship as a communication tool that links a sponsor brand to a sponsored entity and can affect consumer awareness, image and brand-related responses (Cornwell et al., 2005). This view provides the basis for conceptualising athlete sponsorship as a symbolic association that may link athlete-related meanings to sponsor brands, rather than merely as logo exposure or commercial visibility. Earlier sponsorship research also emphasised that consumer effects of sponsorship were often examined through awareness and recall, while image and meaning-transfer processes required further conceptual and empirical development (Meenaghan, 1999). This is relevant for the present thesis because the study does not focus only on whether fans notice sponsor brands, but on how they interpret athlete-sponsor associations and whether these associations become meaningful for sponsor-related brand perceptions.

From a consumer-based branding perspective, sponsorship can affect brand outcomes in at least two ways. First, it can create or strengthen brand awareness by repeatedly exposing consumers to the sponsor brand. Second, it can affect brand image through the associations consumers make with the sponsor. The second mechanism is especially relevant to this thesis because the study does not examine sponsorship effectiveness, financial return or immediate purchase behaviour, but focuses instead on sponsor-related perceptions and brand associations.

Meaning transfer theory provides a fundamental explanation of how such associations can emerge. According to McCracken (1989), celebrities possess culturally assigned meanings, and endorsement can transfer these meanings from the celebrity to the product or brand. In sport sponsorship, an elite athlete can therefore be viewed as a bearer of symbolic meanings, such as excellence, resilience, discipline, glamour, rebellion, prestige, authenticity, social responsibility, controversy or moral character. When an athlete is consistently associated with a sponsor, some of these meanings may become connected to the sponsor brand.

A complementary cognitive explanation is provided by Keller's (1993) concept of secondary brand associations. A brand can acquire associations not only through direct product experience or firm-controlled communication, but also through links with other people, places, events or organisations. In athlete sponsorship, the athlete's image and narrative meanings may therefore create secondary associations for the sponsor brand. This process should not be treated as automatic, however. Consumers must notice the linkage, interpret it as meaningful and integrate it into their brand knowledge.

The idea of image transfer is elaborated in the literature of sport sponsorship. Gwinner (1997) suggests that sponsorship can generate and convey event image to a sponsoring brand. Gwinner

and Eaton (1999) also demonstrate that event sponsorship can be used to create a brand image and that image transfer is related to the perceived similarity or fit between the sponsor and the event. These studies demonstrate that sponsorship can influence not only recognition, but also the symbolic associations consumers attach to the sponsor.

This image-transfer logic has been extended in later research. Chiu and Pyun (2020) find that congruence between a sponsor and a sport event can influence event emotions, attitudes toward the event, attitudes toward the sponsor and purchase intention. Gross and Wiedmann (2015) show that brand attitudes and personality meanings can transfer not only from the sponsored property to the sponsor, but also between co-sponsors connected to the same event. Alonso Dos Santos et al. (2021) extend the image-transfer model by examining perceived sponsorship leverage, perceived product quality and fan involvement. Their findings are useful for this thesis because they show that sponsorship effects depend not only on the presence of a sponsor-property link, but also on how consumers perceive and process additional sponsorship activation. Affective responses also matter in sport sponsorship. Boronczyk and Breuer (2020) show that sponsor brand attitudes can be shaped by feelings related to the sponsor brand, the sponsored event and concurrent sponsors. Their study is particularly relevant because sport sponsorship is often processed in emotional environments where the audience's primary attention is directed at the sport rather than at the sponsor message. For the present thesis, this supports the assumption that sponsor-related brand perceptions may be shaped not only by cognitive fit, but also by emotional and symbolic associations connected to the sport context, the athlete and surrounding sponsors.

Athlete-related endorsement research provides a more individualised extension of this logic. Rai et al. (2021) examine sports celebrity personality, endorser-brand congruence, brand credibility and brand image transfer. Their findings suggest that sports celebrity personality can be linked to endorsed brand perceptions through congruence and image transfer. Although their study focuses on purchase intention, it is relevant here because it demonstrates that athlete-related personality meanings and perceived congruence can affect how consumers evaluate associated brands.

Similarly, Koo (2022) applies human brand extension logic to athlete celebrities and shows that athlete-product fit and image transfer influence attitudes toward athlete celebrity human brand extensions. This is important for the present thesis because elite athletes are not only linked to sport-related brands. They may also be associated with fashion, luxury, food, travel, technology or lifestyle brands. Koo's study therefore supports the idea that athlete-related meanings can extend into non-sport brand contexts when consumers perceive a meaningful fit between the athlete and the associated product or brand.

In the case of athlete sponsorship, meaning transfer can also be negative or problematic. Yoon and Shin (2017) demonstrate that negative publicity around a sports star can influence consumer evaluations of both the athlete and the sponsor. Um (2013) shows that attribution matters: if consumers blame the person rather than the situation, sponsor evaluations can be more negatively affected. Zhou and Whitla (2013) also show that the moral reputation of a celebrity influences consumer reactions to negative celebrity news. These studies indicate that the meanings associated with athletes may be positive, negative or ambivalent, depending on how consumers interpret the athlete, the sponsor relationship and the broader context.

For the present thesis, sport sponsorship literature provides the theoretical link between athlete narratives and sponsor brand perceptions. Athlete sponsorship is defined as a symbolic association through which athlete-related meanings may become connected to sponsor brands as secondary brand associations. Existing research shows that image transfer is shaped by fit, congruence, involvement, affective responses, brand credibility and prior associations. However, this thesis differs from much existing sponsorship research in two important ways. First, individual elite athletes, rather than teams or events, are treated as the primary meaning-bearing sport property. Second, the study uses a qualitative approach to explore how fans themselves articulate and interpret these associations, rather than testing predetermined causal relationships.

2.5 Consumer Perception and Information Processing

Consumer perception is central to this thesis because athlete sponsorship does not influence sponsor-related brand perceptions simply by being visible. Fans first need to encounter athlete- and sponsor-related cues, notice them and interpret them in relation to existing knowledge, associations and meanings. For this reason, consumer perception is understood here as an active process rather than as a passive reaction to sponsorship exposure. This perspective is particularly important in sport sponsorship, where sponsor brands are often embedded in events, athlete appearances, equipment, media coverage, social media content and fan discussions.

Consumer information-processing research provides a useful basis for this perspective. MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) argue that consumers' processing of brand information depends on motivation, opportunity and ability. MacInnis et al. (1991) further develop this logic by showing that consumers process brand information more deeply when they are motivated, have the opportunity to engage with the information and possess the ability to understand it. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) also emphasise the role of consumer knowledge in shaping comprehension, elaboration and recall. Applied to athlete sponsorship, this means that fans with higher involvement and stronger sport-related knowledge may notice and interpret sponsor cues

differently from casual viewers. They may also connect sponsor brands more easily to athlete image, athlete narratives and sport-contextual meanings.

In this thesis, consumer perception is therefore divided into three analytical phases: exposure, attention and interpretation. Exposure refers to situations in which fans encounter athlete- or sponsor-related cues. These cues may include sponsor logos, campaign images, branded equipment, apparel, racing suits, helmets, social media posts, interviews, broadcast images or event-related sponsor visibility. Exposure is a necessary starting point, but it does not automatically lead to deeper perception or meaning-making.

Attention refers to whether these cues are noticed and selected for further processing. This distinction is important because sport sponsorship differs from conventional advertising. Sponsor messages are usually not the main object of attention; they are embedded in the sport, athlete or media environment. Boronczyk and Breuer (2020) argue that in sport event sponsorship, consumers' attention is often directed toward the event itself, while sponsor messages, such as signage or logos on athletes' clothing, receive less direct attention. Therefore, repeated exposure to sponsor cues does not necessarily mean that fans actively process or remember them. In Formula 1, for example, sponsor brands may be visually present on cars, racing suits, helmets and team content, but this does not automatically make them personally meaningful to fans. In professional tennis, sponsor visibility may be more directly attached to the athlete through clothing, rackets, bags or personal campaigns, but it still requires attention before it can become meaningful.

Attention is also shaped by fan involvement and contextual knowledge. Alonso Dos Santos et al. (2021) show that fan involvement moderates sponsorship-related image-transfer processes. This is relevant because highly involved fans may be more likely to recognise sponsor cues, understand their sport-specific relevance and connect them to broader athlete or brand associations. In the context of this thesis, engaged Formula 1 and tennis fans are therefore not treated as passive receivers of sponsor exposure. They are understood as knowledgeable interpreters who may use sport-specific knowledge, athlete familiarity and emotional attachment when making sense of sponsor relationships.

Interpretation goes beyond noticing a sponsor cue. It refers to the process through which fans connect athlete- and sponsor-related cues to existing meanings in memory. Sponsorship information-processing research suggests that consumers evaluate sponsor relationships through available cognitive and affective resources. Deitz et al. (2012) propose a resource-matching approach and show that consumer responses to sponsorship information depend on how consumers process sponsor fit, sponsor motives and identification with the sponsored property. This is important for the present thesis because fans may interpret athlete-sponsor relationships

through perceived authenticity, emotional attachment, prior knowledge and assumptions about commercial motives.

Interpretation also includes recognising the commercial nature of sponsorship communication. Recent meta-analytic research on persuasion knowledge shows that consumers use knowledge about persuasion tactics, marketer motives and commercial intent when responding to marketplace communication, but that persuasion knowledge does not automatically produce uniformly negative responses (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). In athlete sponsorship, this means that fans may interpret sponsor relationships not only as brand associations, but also as commercial partnerships. A sponsorship may therefore be perceived as authentic, strategically fitting, forced, irrelevant or inconsistent with the athlete's public image.

Digital media further intensify this interpretive process. Athlete narratives and sponsor cues are not encountered only during competitions. They also circulate through social media posts, campaign content, interviews, documentaries, fan accounts and online discussions. Achen and Blank (2024) conceptualise professional sport social media engagement as including psychological dimensions, not only visible online behaviours. This is relevant for the present thesis because fans may encounter and interpret athlete-sponsor relationships across multiple digital touchpoints. Social media can make sponsor cues more visible, but it can also make them more open to fan evaluation, discussion and criticism.

Overall, consumer perception in this thesis is treated as a selective and interpretive process. Exposure explains how fans encounter athlete-sponsor cues. Attention explains whether these cues become noticeable and relevant enough to be processed. Interpretation explains how fans connect these cues to athlete image, athlete narratives, sponsor associations and broader sport-contextual meanings. This perspective supports the empirical focus of the thesis: the study does not ask whether sponsorship exposure automatically changes brand attitudes, but how fans describe, evaluate and make sense of athlete-sponsor relationships in their own accounts.

2.6 Sport Fans as Interpretive Audiences

Sport fans are the population of interest in this study because athlete sponsorship is interpreted most meaningfully by consumers who repeatedly follow, discuss and emotionally engage with sport. A sport fan can be understood as an enthusiastic devotee of a sport-related consumption object, where this object may be a sport, league, team or individual athlete (Hunt et al., 1999). This definition is particularly suitable for the present thesis because the focal object of fandom is not necessarily a team or event, but often an individual Formula 1 driver or professional tennis player. Recent sport media research also distinguishes fans from spectators by emphasising that fandom involves learning and accepting the values, norms, language and cultural knowledge of a fan community, rather than simply watching a sport event (Shah & Williams, 2025).

Fan research shows that the depth of an individual's relationship with sport objects can vary. Funk and James (2001) describe four stages of this continuum: awareness, attraction, attachment and allegiance. This model is useful because it shows that sport consumption is not dichotomous. A person may simply be aware of a sport, become attracted to it, develop attachment, or form strong loyalty.

This distinction is relevant because deeper psychological connection may influence perception. Fans with greater attachment and allegiance are likely to have more elaborate knowledge structures and stronger emotional involvement. They may therefore be better able to interpret athlete stories and athlete-sponsor relationships than casual viewers. Gladden and Funk (2001) further show that sport consumers form brand associations with sport entities and that these associations are related to sport consumer loyalty. Their study is valuable because it applies Keller's logic of brand association to professional sport and shows that sport brand meaning is multidimensional.

Bee and Kahle (2006) also describe sport consumer relationships as compliance, identification and internalization. Compliance is a less deep relationship in which an external reward is used. Identification is linked to self-image and belonging. The internalization process is when sport-related meanings correspond with consumers' values and are therefore more likely to promote long-term relationships. This framework is helpful in the present thesis because values, identity and moral positioning are often communicated through the athlete's narrative. Athlete stories can be more emotionally and symbolically engaging if fans believe that the athlete's values are congruent with their own.

Fan typology research further supports the need to treat fans as heterogeneous consumers. Hunt et al. (1999) distinguish between temporary, local, devoted, fanatical and dysfunctional fans, showing that fan behaviour differs according to the source and intensity of motivation. This is relevant because sponsor-related interpretation may vary depending on whether the athlete is only a temporary object of interest or a more enduring part of the fan's self-concept. Samra and Wos (2014) similarly argue that sport consumers differ in their passion, loyalty, media consumption and emotional commitment. For this thesis, this means that fans are not assumed to interpret athlete narratives and sponsors in the same way. Rather, their interpretations are shaped by different levels of involvement, emotional attachment and sport-related knowledge.

Fan interpretation is also socially embedded. Fans rarely make sense of athletes and sponsors entirely on their own; their interpretations are shaped through conversations, social media, messaging platforms, fan forums and informal exchanges with other fans. Customer-to-customer interactions in sport fan contexts may create hedonic, social, symbolic and utilitarian value (Uhrich et al., 2024). Sport fandom can also be understood through interaction rituals involving

emotion, symbols and solidarity (Cottingham, 2012). In addition, Behrens and Uhrich (2020) show that prototypical fan behaviour can influence how fans evaluate other members of a wider fan community and perceive groupness.

These studies are significant since athlete narratives do not circulate only through official media or sponsor communication. They are discussed, reinforced, challenged and reinterpreted by fan communities. A Formula 1 driver's rivalry, a tennis player's comeback, an athlete's activist campaign or a sponsor partnership can acquire meaning partly through how fans talk about and evaluate it. Fans are therefore not simply receivers of sponsorship communication, but interpretive consumers situated within social and symbolic sport environments.

This social dimension is also reflected in research on fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour. Dionísio et al. (2008) show that fan affiliation is shaped by social recognition, socialisation and symbolism. Their study is particularly relevant for sponsorship research because it indicates that devoted fans may recognise brands associated with the sport object, but this recognition does not automatically translate into sponsor preference. This distinction is important for the present thesis because sponsor recall and sponsor meaning are not treated as identical. Fans may know that a sponsor is linked to an athlete, while still evaluating the sponsor as meaningful, irrelevant, authentic or mismatched.

The perspective of brand community research is complementary. Brand community can be understood as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). These communities share a sense of community, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. While Formula 1 and tennis fandom are not the same as classic brand communities, the same logic can be used to explain that fan interpretation can be collective, not just individual. Fans create common language, symbolic boundaries, collective memories and moral judgments that can influence the interpretation of athlete stories and the associations with sponsors.

This process is intensified by social media. According to Abeza et al. (2019), professional sport organisations use social media for relationship marketing, fan interaction, updates, sponsorship communication, public relations and customer service. Doyle et al. (2022) also show how social media can support athlete branding and consumer engagement. For this thesis, social media is important not only as a communication channel, but as a space in which athlete stories are made visible, circulated and collectively interpreted.

The role of mediated storytelling is especially visible in contemporary Formula 1 fandom. Shah and Williams (2025) show that Formula 1: Drive to Survive influenced fandom by facilitating learning, strengthening social connections and using dramatization. Their findings suggest that

media content can introduce viewers to drivers, teams, rivalries and sport-specific meanings, while also deepening the connection of existing fans. This is relevant for the present thesis because Formula 1 fans often encounter athlete narratives not only through races, but also through documentaries, team media, social media clips and fan discussions. Such media-shaped narratives may influence how fans interpret drivers, their values and the sponsors connected to them.

For the purposes of this thesis, sport fans are operationally defined as individuals who follow either Formula 1 or ATP/WTA professional tennis at least once per week during the active season, report meaningful interest in at least one elite athlete in their focal sport, are able to reflect on athlete-related impressions or narratives, and can recall at least one linkage between an athlete and a sponsor from their sport media consumption. This operational definition does not imply that all participants have the same level of attachment or fan identity. Rather, it ensures that participants have sufficient exposure, involvement and background knowledge to discuss athlete narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions in a meaningful way.

2.7 Theoretical Integration and Research Gap

The literature reviewed in this chapter indicates that athlete stories may become relevant to sponsor perceptions through an interpretive process of meaning-making. First, elite athletes can be understood as human brands that carry performance-related, personality-related, lifestyle-related, emotional and value-related meanings. Second, these meanings can be organised into athlete brand narratives, such as stories of struggle, success, authenticity, competition, resilience, activism, controversy or moral reputation. Third, sponsorship links athletes to brands and can allow athlete-related meanings to become associated with sponsor brands as secondary brand associations. Fourth, this process is not automatic; it depends on consumer perception, including exposure, attention, interpretation, expertise and prior associations. Finally, sport fans are particularly relevant because they may have higher involvement, deeper knowledge and stronger psychological and social attachment to athletes and sport contexts.

Existing research provides a foundation for each element of this logic, but several gaps remain. Athlete-branding research has developed strong conceptualisations of athlete image and social media self-presentation, yet sponsor brand perceptions have received comparatively less attention than fan engagement, emotional attachment and behavioural outcomes. Similarly, research on meaning transfer and image transfer in sponsorship has often focused on events, teams and other sport properties, while less work has examined individual athlete narratives.

The results of research on negative advertising and athlete misconduct indicate that values associated with athletes can have an impact on sponsor ratings, but these studies tend to be experimental and rely on a predetermined scandal or attitude. Consumer perception and information-processing research explains why consumers do not process all marketing stimuli equally, but it has not been extensively connected to athlete sponsorship and fan interpretation. Finally, sport fan research shows that identity, community and emotion matter, but these elements are not always incorporated into sponsorship meaning-transfer models.

This thesis addresses these gaps by bringing these streams of literature together. It explores how sport fans interpret the brand narratives of elite athletes and how these fan interpretations relate to sponsor-related brand associations in Formula 1 and professional tennis. The study contributes qualitative conceptual depth to the topic of narrative-based meaning transfer in athlete sponsorship. It does not seek to validate a causal model or test hypotheses. Rather, it examines how fans make sense of athletes, which narrative elements they consider salient, and whether and how they connect these meanings to sponsoring brands across two sport contexts.

This theoretical background leads to the analytical framework of the empirical study. The framework should be understood as a conceptual model, not as a statistically testable causal model. It structures the central phenomena studied in the empirical research: elite athletes as human brands, athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation, sport sponsorship, image transfer, secondary brand associations and sponsor-related brand perceptions. These concepts inform the interview design, coding process and cross-context comparison of Formula 1 and professional tennis.

3. Conceptual Framework: Analytical Framework of the Empirical Study

The conceptual framework of this thesis underlies the empirical study and builds on the theoretical background developed in Chapter 2. More specifically, the framework serves as an analytical framework for examining how fans interpret the brand narratives of elite athletes and how these interpretations relate to sponsor-related brand perceptions in Formula 1 and professional tennis.

The framework integrates the key concepts identified in the literature review: athletes as human brands, athlete image, athlete brand narratives, sport sponsorship, meaning transfer, image transfer, secondary brand associations, consumer perception, fan interpretation and sponsor-related brand perceptions. These concepts are not treated as isolated theoretical categories, but as interrelated components of an interpretive meaning-making process.

Importantly, the framework should not be interpreted as a statistically testable causal model. The study follows a qualitative design and does not seek to confirm theory-based hypotheses or measure causal effects. Instead, the framework functions as a conceptual guide for the empirical investigation. It outlines the main phenomena discussed in the interviews and identifies the sensitising concepts that guide data collection, coding and interpretation.

3.1 Purpose and Status of the Framework

The framework has three objectives. Firstly, it helps to keep the theoretical background and empirical study conceptually consistent. The concepts incorporated in the framework are taken from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. They include research on brand image, brand associations, brand identity and brand personality (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996, 1997; Plumeyer et al., 2019; Mühlbacher et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025), athlete branding and human brands (Thomson, 2006; Arai et al., 2014; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Anderski et al., 2023; Panthen et al., 2025), narrative processing and brand storytelling (Escalas, 2004; Woodside et al., 2008; Lundqvist et al., 2013; van Laer et al., 2014; Mills & John, 2025; Ronkainen et al., 2016), sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer (McCracken, 1989; Keller, 1993; Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005; Gross & Wiedmann, 2015; Chiu & Pyun, 2020; Alonso Dos Santos et al., 2021; Boronczyk & Breuer, 2020; Rai et al., 2021; Koo, 2022), consumer information processing and interpretation (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; MacInnis et al., 1991; Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Deitz et al., 2012; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022; Achen & Blank, 2024), and sport fandom as an interpretive audience (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Bee & Kahle, 2006; Hunt et al., 1999; Dionísio et al., 2008; Shah & Williams, 2025; Uhrich et al., 2024).

Second, the framework has an empirical logic. It outlines the aspects of fan interpretation that are relevant for the study: descriptions of athlete image, reconstruction of athlete brand narratives, noticing and interpretation of sponsor linkages, and articulation of sponsor-related meanings. Third, the framework clarifies the contribution of the empirical study. The thesis is not designed to demonstrate that athlete narratives cause specific changes in sponsor perceptions. Rather, it aims to provide qualitative conceptual depth by showing how fans relate athlete meanings to sponsoring brands in their own narratives. In this sense, the framework is not a predictive model, but an analytical map.

3.2 Conceptual Logic of the Framework

The framework is founded on the notion that elite athletes are not only sporting performers but also public figures, whose images have commercial and symbolic values. Athletes, as human brands, also bring in associations, emotional attachments and audience relationships which may be applicable to sponsoring brands (Thomson, 2006). In elite sport, other elements influence athlete brand image, including appearance, lifestyle, values, media exposure and social media self-presentation and public conduct (Arai et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2022; Zheng & Xu, 2024). Meanwhile, the meaning of the athlete is not a product of the athlete alone. Since it emerges from interaction with fans, media, sponsors and other stakeholders (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Anderski et al., 2023; Panthen et al., 2025), one can call it dynamic, socially constructed, and context-dependent.

Within the framework, athlete image refers to the broader set of associations that fans attach to an athlete. This includes performance-related meanings, personality traits, values, lifestyle cues, public conduct and symbolic impressions. This understanding builds on Keller's (1993) view of brand image as associations held in consumer memory and adapts it to the athlete-branding context through the Model of Athlete Brand Image (Arai et al., 2014). Brand identity and brand personality remain relevant as related concepts, but the empirical focus of the framework is on perceived image and associations rather than on strategically intended identity (Aaker, 1996, 1997).

Athlete brand narratives are treated as a more specific form of athlete-related meaning. While athlete image refers to the broader association structure around the athlete, athlete narratives describe how these meanings are organised into story-like patterns over time. Narrative-based consumer research shows that consumers often make sense of brands and people through stories rather than isolated attributes (Escalas, 2004). According to Mills and John (2025), brand stories may have plot, character and purpose. At the same time consumer storytelling research indicates that consumers actively assign roles, actions and relationships to brands (Woodside et al., 2008). Narratives in sport might involve struggle, comeback, rivalry, dominance, authenticity, controversy, activism, or moral reputation.

The commercial relevance of these narratives is explained through sponsorship, meaning transfer, image transfer and secondary brand associations. McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer theory suggests that meanings attached to public figures may become connected to brands through symbolic association. Keller's (1993) concept of secondary brand associations further explains how brands can acquire meanings through connection with people, events or other entities. In sponsorship research, this logic is developed through image-transfer theory, which shows that meanings attached to a sponsored property may influence sponsor brand perceptions,

especially when the relationship is perceived as fitting or congruent (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005). Later studies also show that sponsorship-related meanings can circulate through broader associative networks and depend on congruence, emotions and sponsor-property evaluation (Chiu & Pyun, 2020; Gross & Wiedmann, 2015). More recent sponsorship and athlete endorsement research further specifies this logic by showing that image-transfer processes can be shaped by sponsorship leverage, fan involvement, affective responses, brand credibility, athlete-product fit and sports celebrity personality (Alonso Dos Santos et al., 2021; Boronczyk & Breuer, 2020; Rai et al., 2021; Koo, 2022). These studies support the framework's assumption that sponsorship-based meaning transfer depends on how consumers interpret the athlete-sponsor relationship rather than on visibility alone.

However, the framework does not assume that meaning transfer is automatic. The connection between athlete narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions depends on consumer perception and fan interpretation. Information-processing research shows that consumers' motivation, opportunity and ability influence how they process brand-related information (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; MacInnis et al., 1991). Consumer knowledge and expertise also shape how information is organised, elaborated and recalled from memory (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). In the context of this thesis, this means that fans may notice, interpret and evaluate athlete-sponsor cues differently depending on their prior knowledge, emotional attachment, perceived fit, authenticity judgments and moral evaluations. Sponsorship information-processing research further supports this position by showing that consumers evaluate sponsor relationships through perceptions of fit, sponsor motives and identification with the sponsored property (Deitz et al., 2012). In addition, persuasion knowledge research suggests that consumers may interpret sponsorship as a commercial partnership and evaluate whether it appears authentic, forced or coherent with the athlete's public image (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). Since athlete and sponsor cues also circulate through digital platforms, social media engagement is included as part of the broader interpretive environment in which fans encounter and discuss athlete-sponsor relationships (Achen & Blank, 2024).

Sport fans are therefore defined as the interpretive audience of the framework. This understanding builds on the definition of fans as enthusiastic devotees of a sport-related consumption object, which may include an individual athlete, not only a team or sport as a whole (Hunt et al., 1999). It also reflects the distinction between fans and spectators, because fandom involves learning and accepting sport-specific values, norms, language and cultural knowledge rather than merely watching sport content (Shah & Williams, 2025). Fan research shows that sport relationships can develop from awareness to attraction, attachment and allegiance (Funk & James, 2001), and that consumers form multidimensional brand associations around sport entities

(Gladden & Funk, 2001). Sport consumer relationships may also deepen when sport meanings become connected to self-image, identification and internalised values (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Fan typology and affiliation research further indicate that fans are heterogeneous consumers whose interpretations may differ according to their level of commitment, symbolic affiliation, social recognition and emotional investment (Dionísio et al., 2008; Samra & Wos, 2014). This matters because athlete narratives often contain identity-, value- and emotion-based meanings.

Fan interpretation is also socially situated. Fans discuss, reinforce and challenge athlete meanings through social media, fan communities and everyday interaction. Brand community research shows how collective meanings, rituals and moral boundaries can form around shared objects of admiration (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Other important factors that shape sport fan communities are emotions, symbols, rituals, solidarity, authenticity and group affiliation (Cottingham, 2012; Behrens & Uhrich, 2020). In addition, customer-to-customer interactions in sport contexts can create hedonic, social, symbolic and utilitarian value (Uhrich et al., 2024). This means that athlete-sponsor meanings may be shaped not only individually, but also through collective fan discourse.

The outcome of interest in the framework is sponsor-related brand perception. This refers to the associations, perceived meanings and symbolic impressions that fans attach to sponsor brands in relation to elite athletes. The framework therefore connects athlete image, athlete narratives, fan interpretation and sponsorship-based meaning transfer, but it does not treat this connection as a linear causal chain. Instead, it provides an analytical map for examining how fans make sense of athlete-sponsor relationships in Formula 1 and professional tennis.

3.3 Analytical Framework of the Empirical Study

The analytical framework can be summarised as follows. In Formula 1 and professional tennis, sport fans encounter elite athletes as human brands. These athletes are associated with particular images, including traits, values, lifestyle meanings, performance-related associations and symbolic impressions. Some of these meanings are organised into athlete brand narratives, such as stories of success, struggle, comeback, competition, authenticity, controversy, activism or social responsibility.

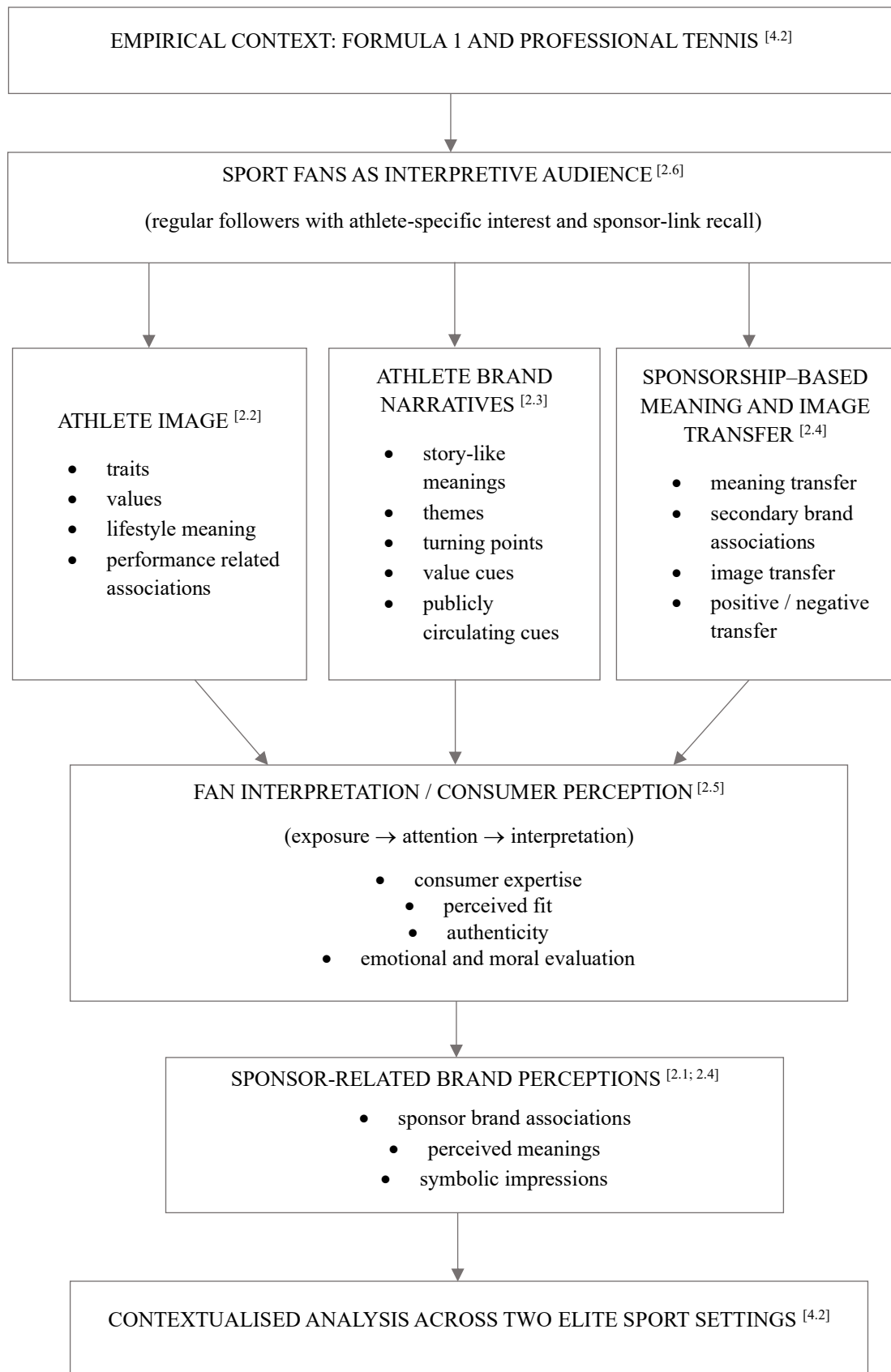
Athlete-related meanings can become linked to sponsor brands through sponsorship relationships and secondary brand associations. This process is informed by meaning transfer and sponsorship-based image-transfer theory (McCracken, 1989; Keller, 1993; Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). However, the framework places fan interpretation at the centre of meaning-making. Fans must be exposed to athlete-sponsor cues, attend to them and interpret

them through prior knowledge, emotional attachment, perceived fit, perceived authenticity, moral evaluation and existing sponsor associations.

There is also a contextual dimension to the framework. Formula 1 and professional tennis are both commercialised and highly visible sport settings in which individual athletes play an important role in fan meaning-making and sponsor visibility. At the same time, the two contexts differ in their sport structures and sponsorship environments. Formula 1 is organised around drivers, teams, constructors and highly branded technological settings, whereas professional tennis is organised around individual players competing on the ATP and WTA tours. These contextual differences may influence fans' engagement with athlete narratives and their perceptions of sponsor relationships. However, the inclusion of both sports is not intended to produce a systematic comparison between Formula 1 and professional tennis. Instead, it provides a broader empirical context for understanding how fans construct athlete-related meanings and connect them to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

Figure 1.

Analytical Framework of the Empirical Study



Source: own illustration based on the analytical framework developed in this thesis

Figure note. The concepts included in the framework are grounded in the theoretical background as follows: athlete image and athletes as human brands are discussed in Section 2.2; athlete brand narratives are discussed in Section 2.3; sport sponsorship, meaning transfer, image transfer and secondary brand associations are discussed in Section 2.4; consumer perception, including exposure, attention and interpretation, is discussed in Section 2.5; sport fans as interpretive audiences and fan-community contexts are discussed in Section 2.6; sponsor-related brand perceptions are grounded in Section 2.1 and Section 2.4. The empirical contexts of Formula 1 and professional tennis are discussed in Section 4.2.

3.4 Conceptual Definitions Used in the Framework

To ensure consistency between the theoretical background, the analytical framework and the empirical investigation, the main concepts used in the framework are defined as follows.

Table 3.1

Conceptual Definitions Used in the Analytical Framework

Concept	Definition in this thesis	Main theoretical basis
Elite athletes	Current or recently active athletes competing at the highest professional level in Formula 1 or ATP/WTB professional tennis, who possess international media visibility, public recognisability and visible sponsorship relationships.	Thomson (2006); Arai et al. (2014); Centeno & Wang (2017); Anderski et al. (2023); Panthen et al. (2025)
Athlete image	The broader set of associations fans attach to an athlete, including performance-related meanings, traits, values, lifestyle cues, public behaviour and symbolic impressions.	Keller (1993); Arai et al. (2014); Doyle et al. (2022); Zheng & Xu (2024); Panthen et al. (2025)
Athlete brand narratives	Structured, story-like accounts of athlete-related identity and meaning, including events over time, roles, values, turning points, recurring themes and implied purpose, as interpreted by consumers.	Escalas (2004); Woodside et al. (2008); Lundqvist et al. (2013); van Laer et al. (2014); Ronkainen et al. (2016); Mills & John (2025)
Narrative elements	Empirically identifiable cues through which athlete narratives become meaningful, such as struggles, comebacks, rivalries, authenticity cues, controversies, value statements or success stories.	Escalas (2004); Green & Brock (2000); van Laer et al. (2014); Mills & John (2025)
Sport sponsorship	A marketing communication mechanism through which a sponsor creates an association with a sport property or athlete, using this association to generate awareness, image effects, symbolic meaning and potential image transfer.	Meenaghan (1999); Meenaghan & Shipley (1999); Cornwell et al. (2005); Gwinner (1997); Gwinner & Eaton (1999); Alonso Dos Santos et al.

Concept	Definition in this thesis	Main theoretical basis
		(2021); Boronczyk & Breuer (2020)
Meaning transfer	The process through which meanings associated with an athlete may become connected to a sponsor brand through repeated symbolic association.	McCracken (1989)
Secondary brand associations	Associations that a brand acquires through links to other entities, such as people, events, sport properties or athletes.	Keller (1993)
Image transfer	The transfer of image-related associations from a sponsored property, athlete or linked entity to a sponsor brand.	Gwinner (1997); Gwinner & Eaton (1999); Gross & Wiedmann (2015); Chiu & Pyun (2020); Alonso Dos Santos et al. (2021); Rai et al. (2021); Koo (2022)
Consumer perception / fan interpretation	The process through which fans are exposed to, attend to and interpret athlete-sponsor cues, integrating them into existing knowledge and association structures.	MacInnis & Jaworski (1989); MacInnis et al. (1991); Alba & Hutchinson (1987); Deitz et al. (2012); Eisend & Tarrahi (2022); Achen & Blank (2024)
Sport fans	Individuals who follow Formula 1 or ATP/WTB professional tennis at least weekly during the active season, report meaningful interest in at least one elite athlete and can discuss athlete narratives and sponsor links reflectively.	Hunt et al. (1999); Funk & James (2001); Gladden & Funk (2001); Bee & Kahle (2006); Shah & Williams (2025); Samra & Wos (2014)
Fan community context	The social and symbolic environment in which fans discuss, reinforce, contest and reinterpret athlete meanings and sponsor associations.	Muniz & O'Guinn (2001); Dionísio et al. (2008); Cottingham (2012); Behrens & Uhrich (2020); Uhrich et al. (2024); Shah & Williams (2025)
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	The associations, perceived meanings and symbolic impressions fans attach to sponsor brands in connection with athlete narratives and sponsorship relationships.	Keller (1993); Gwinner & Eaton (1999); Gross & Wiedmann (2015); Chiu & Pyun (2020); Boronczyk & Breuer (2020); Rai et al. (2021); Koo (2022)

Note. The table summarises the central sensitising concepts used to connect the theoretical background, interview guide and coding logic.

This table also clarifies the relationship between the concepts. Athlete image and athlete brand narratives are distinct but related constructs. Athlete image refers to the broader associative perception of the athlete, while athlete brand narratives refer to the story-like organisation of athlete-related meanings. Sponsor-related brand perceptions are the outcome of interest, but they are not treated as mechanically produced by athlete narratives. They are explored as meanings articulated by fans through interpretation.

3.5 Aim and Expected Contribution of the Empirical Study

The empirical study aims to examine athlete brand narratives as perceived by sport fans in the contexts of Formula 1 and professional tennis, and to explore how these interpretations become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions. In particular, the study seeks to identify which athlete-related meanings and narrative elements are salient for fans, how fans describe and evaluate athlete-sponsor relationships, and how they connect athlete-related meanings to sponsoring brands. Formula 1 and professional tennis are included as two commercially visible elite sport contexts rather than as cases for systematic comparative testing.

This directly serves the overall research aim of the thesis. Because the study is qualitative, influence is not measured as a statistically significant causal effect. Instead, it is understood as an interpretive relationship in which fans connect athlete-related meanings with sponsor-related associations in their own accounts.

The empirical study is expected to make three contributions. First, it advances athlete-branding research by examining how fans interpret athlete image and athlete narratives as meaning structures rather than isolated attributes. Second, it contributes to sponsorship and image-transfer research by exploring how athlete-related meanings are connected to sponsor brands in consumer interpretation. Third, it contributes to sport consumer behaviour research by situating sponsorship meaning-making within fan identity, consumer expertise and fan-community contexts.

This study therefore builds on and contributes to the current theory in the fields of athlete branding, narrative theory, sponsorship image transfer and consumer perception, and is predominantly qualitative and context-sensitive. It explores two sport environments that are visible and commercially relevant, in which the individual athlete is salient: Formula 1 and professional tennis. Both contexts are included to build a wider understanding of how fans create athlete-related meanings and link them to the perceptions of the brand.

3.6 Implications for the Empirical Design

The analytical framework is directly translated into the empirical design of the thesis. First, it structures the interview guide by defining the key concepts that need to be elicited: athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation, sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer, and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Second, it guides the coding logic by providing deductive sensitising concepts while allowing inductive themes to emerge from the interview data. Third, it enables the same core ideas to be explored in both Formula 1 and professional tennis.

The framework also specifies the function of the interview guide. Participants are not asked to verify the theoretical framework. Instead, the interview questions are designed to elicit their own associations, interpretations and examples. The relationship between athlete narratives and sponsor perceptions is therefore not imposed as a hypothesis. It is analysed descriptively through participants' descriptions of athletes, narrative constructions, memories of sponsor connections and expressions of sponsor meanings.

This is consistent with the qualitative approach of the study. The empirical material is analysed to identify common interpretive themes, contextual patterns across the two sport contexts, and possible relationships between athlete meanings and sponsor brand meanings. In this regard, the analytical framework serves as a bridge between the literature review and the methodology. It allows conceptual coherence while preserving the openness required for qualitative inquiry.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist and theory-informed research design. The objective of the empirical study is to understand how sport fans interpret elite athletes' brand narratives and how these interpretations are linked to fans' perceptions of sponsoring brands in Formula 1 and professional tennis. Because the research focuses on meanings, associations and interpretive processes rather than causal effects, a qualitative design is appropriate.

Table 4.1

Study Factsheet

Element	Description
Overall research aim	To explore how sport fans interpret elite athletes' brand narratives and how these interpretations become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions in Formula 1 and professional tennis.
Research approach	Qualitative, interpretivist and theory-informed.
Research design	Qualitative, interpretivist interview study situated in two elite sport contexts.
Empirical contexts	Formula 1 and professional tennis (ATP and WTA professional tennis tours)
Unit of analysis	Individual fan interpretations of one focal elite athlete and the athlete's associated sponsoring brands.

Element	Description
Target population	Engaged fans of either Formula 1 or professional tennis who regularly follow the sport and can reflect on athlete-related meanings and sponsor linkages.
Definition of elite athlete	In this study, elite athletes are understood as current or recently active Formula 1 drivers or ATP/WTa professional tennis players who compete at the highest professional level, possess international media visibility, public recognizability and visible sponsorship relationships.
Sampling strategy	Purposive, criterion-based sampling. Participants are selected because they are expected to provide information-rich accounts relevant to the research aim.
Sampling frame	The researcher's sport-focused Instagram and Telegram communities, consisting primarily of followers interested in Formula 1 and professional tennis.
Recruitment channels	Recruitment invitations published through Instagram and Telegram. Interested individuals are asked to complete a short screening form.
Inclusion criteria	Participants must be at least 18 years old; follow Formula 1 or ATP/WTa professional tennis at least weekly during the active season; be able to name and discuss one focal elite athlete in their sport; recall at least one athlete-sponsor linkage; and be willing to participate in an online interview.
Sport-group logic	Participants are not required to be fans of both sports. Instead, the study includes fans of either Formula 1 or professional tennis. Formula 1 fans and tennis fans are interviewed separately in relation to their focal sport.
Focal athlete logic	The study uses a participant-selected focal athlete approach. Each participant is asked to choose one elite athlete within their focal sport whom they follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in depth.
Procedure if several athletes are mentioned	If a participant mentions more than one athlete, the interviewer asks the participant to select the one athlete whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they feel most able to discuss in detail.
Sample size	12 semi-structured interviews.
Sample composition aim	The sample aims to include participants from both sport contexts, with variation in gender, age, athlete preferences and levels of fan involvement where possible. Statistical representativeness is not the purpose of the sampling strategy.
Data collection method	Semi-structured online interviews.
Interview mode	Online Zoom call.
Interview duration	Approximately 30 minutes.
Interview language	Russian or English, depending on participant preference.
Main interview topics	Sport-following background; focal athlete selection; athlete image; athlete brand narratives; sponsor recall; sponsor-related brand perceptions; perceived fit or mismatch between athlete and sponsor meanings.
Main analytical concepts	Athlete image; athlete brand narratives; fan interpretation / consumer perception; sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer; sponsor-related brand perceptions; cross-context comparison between Formula 1 and professional tennis.
Data recording and transcription	Interviews are audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed by the researcher. Russian-language excerpts are translated into English for reporting where necessary.
Data analysis method	Reflexive thematic analysis using a deductive–inductive coding logic. Initial deductive categories are derived from the analytical framework, while inductive refinement allows new themes to be developed from the interview material.
Software	MAXQDA is used to organize transcripts, document coding decisions, retrieve coded segments and support cross-context comparison.
Trustworthiness measures	Concept-question alignment, transparent recruitment and sampling description, systematic coding documentation, reflexive memoing, use of participant excerpts in the findings, and cross-context comparison.
Consent, audio recording and data protection	Participants receive written study information and provide written informed consent before the interview. Interviews are audio-recorded only with consent. Audio files are

Element	Description
	deleted after transcription and verification, and the analysis is conducted on pseudonymised transcripts using participant codes such as F01 and T01.
Expected empirical contribution	The study contributes qualitative conceptual depth by showing how fans articulate, interpret and connect athlete-related narrative meanings to sponsor-related brand perceptions across two elite sport contexts.

The study is grounded in an interpretivist research approach because it assumes that brand meanings are not passively received by consumers, but actively interpreted and contextualised. In this thesis, sport fans are understood as meaning-making consumers who interpret athlete image, athlete narratives and sponsor relationships through their own knowledge, experiences, emotional attachments and fan identities. This orientation aligns with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3, where fan interpretation is positioned as the central analytical process connecting athlete-related meanings with sponsor-related brand perceptions.

The empirical study uses a qualitative, interpretivist interview design situated in two elite sport contexts: Formula 1 and professional tennis. Both contexts were selected because individual athletes are highly visible, commercially embedded and linked to sponsoring brands. The inclusion of both sports is not intended to produce a systematic comparison between Formula 1 and professional tennis. Rather, it provides a broader empirical setting for exploring how fans interpret elite athletes' brand narratives and connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor-related brand perceptions. Contextual features of each sport, such as sponsorship structures, team or individual positioning and media visibility, are considered where they appear in participants' accounts.

The unit of analysis is the individual fan interpretation of one focal elite athlete and the athlete's sponsoring brands. Participants are not required to be fans of both sports. Instead, the study focuses on engaged fans of either Formula 1 or professional tennis. Each participant discusses one focal sport and one focal elite athlete of their choice within that sport. This design reduces sequence effects that could occur if both sports were discussed in the same interview and enables more in-depth analysis of the athlete, the athlete's public image, narrative meanings and sponsorship connections in the sport context most familiar to the participant.

The research is theory-informed but not hypothesis-testing. The concepts developed in the analytical framework in Chapter 3, such as athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation, sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer, and sponsor-related brand perceptions, are used to sensitise the empirical study. They guide the interview design and initial coding structure, but the empirical work is not intended to validate the framework or test assumptions from the literature. Rather, the framework functions as an analytical map that

supports systematic data collection while leaving space for inductive insights from participants' own accounts.

Semi-structured interviews are used as the data collection method because they allow the researcher to address theoretically relevant topics while leaving enough room for participants to develop their own associations, examples and interpretations. Athlete narratives and sponsor perceptions may be complex, personal and context-specific. Semi-structured interviews are therefore appropriate for capturing fans' descriptions of a focal athlete, the narrative elements they consider salient, their memories of athlete-sponsor relationships and the meanings they attribute to both athletes and sponsoring brands (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kallio et al., 2016).

The expected contribution of the empirical study is to provide qualitative conceptual depth on the interpretive relationship between athlete brand narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Specifically, the study aims to show how fans articulate athlete-related meanings, how these meanings are organised into narratives and how fan interpretation may connect them to sponsor brands. The study contributes to athlete branding, sport sponsorship and consumer behaviour research by exploring sport sponsorship meaning-making from the perspective of engaged sport fans.

4.2 Research Setting and Scope: Formula 1 and Professional Tennis

The empirical study is situated in two elite sport settings: Formula 1 and professional tennis (ATP and WTA). These contexts were selected because they are highly visible, commercially embedded and strongly connected to individual athlete branding. In both sports, athletes are evaluated not only through performance, but also through public image, personality, lifestyle, values, media visibility and sponsor relationships. Formula 1 and tennis therefore provide suitable empirical contexts for exploring how fans interpret athlete brand narratives and how these interpretations become connected to sponsor brand perceptions.

Theoretically, the selection of Formula 1 and professional tennis is grounded in the emphasis on the athlete as a human brand. Human brands are conceptualised as public figures around whom consumers develop meanings, associations and attachments (Thomson, 2006). Athlete brands are shaped through performance-related, appearance-related and lifestyle-related meanings (Arai et al., 2014), as well as through social media communication and consumer engagement (Doyle et al., 2022; Zheng & Xu, 2024). Formula 1 drivers and professional tennis players are therefore appropriate cases for investigating fan interpretations of athlete image and athlete narratives. However, the two sports are different in ways that allow a useful analysis. Formula 1 drivers operate in a very branded world of teams, constructors, technology, worldwide sponsors and

high visual presence of sponsors. Professional tennis players, by contrast, are placed more squarely as individual performers whose image in the public eye is linked to their own performance, style, career path, values and individual endorsement contracts. These differences enable the research to examine how fans relate athlete stories and sponsor meanings in similar and/or distinct ways between the two sport contexts.

The study focuses on individual elite athletes and their sponsor relationships. In Formula 1, this refers to drivers who currently compete or have recently competed in the Formula 1 World Championship. In professional tennis, this refers to players who currently compete or have recently competed on the ATP or WTA tours. Elite athletes are defined as current or recently active professional athletes who compete at the highest level of their sport and possess international media visibility, public recognisability and visible sponsorship relationships.

The study uses a participant-selected focal athlete approach. Participants are asked to name one elite athlete in their focal sport whom they follow closely and feel able to discuss in detail. This design is consistent with the interpretivist orientation of the study because it allows athlete narratives to be explored from the perspective of participants' own experiences and interpretations, thereby increasing the relevance and richness of the data.

If a participant names more than one athlete, the interviewer asks them to choose the athlete whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they feel most able to discuss in detail. Participants are not required to be both Formula 1 and tennis fans. Instead, each participant is interviewed about one focal sport: either Formula 1 or professional tennis. Formula 1 fans and tennis fans are therefore interviewed separately. This design prevents sequence effects that might occur if participants were asked to discuss both sports in one interview. It also enables participants to provide more detailed and sport-specific descriptions of athlete image, athlete narratives and sponsor-related perceptions.

The analysis in this thesis is not based on asking participants to compare Formula 1 and professional tennis directly. Instead, each participant discusses one focal sport and one focal athlete within the sport context they know best. After data collection, the interview material is analysed thematically in order to identify how fans interpret athlete narratives and connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor-related brand perceptions. Contextual features of Formula 1 and professional tennis are considered where they help to explain participants' accounts, but the purpose is not to establish systematic differences between the two sports. Rather, the inclusion of both contexts supports a broader understanding of fan meaning-making in elite sport sponsorship.

There are a number of scope limitations for the study. First, it is about individual athlete-related sponsorship meanings, instead of about team sponsorships, event sponsorships or league-level

sponsorships as key objects of analysis. These sponsorships can be seen in the participants' accounts, but are not the main focus of the study. Second, the study focuses on fans' interpretations of the sponsor relationships, not on the intentions of the sponsor managers, or on measurable outcomes of the sponsorship. Third, the study does not make a comprehensive analysis of the contents of media and social media narratives about athletes. Rather, it examines the processes of fan construction of athlete related stories, values and symbolic meanings that are publicly accessible and socially present within the sport context.

The outcome of interest is sponsor-related brand perception, defined as the associations, meanings and symbolic impressions that fans attach to sponsor brands in relation to the focal athlete. Purchase intention, sales effects and sponsorship return on investment are not measured. Instead, the study examines how sponsor meanings are expressed by fans in relation to athlete image, athlete narratives and athlete-sponsor linkages. This focus corresponds to the analytical framework presented in Chapter 3, where Formula 1 and professional tennis are defined as empirical contexts for studying athlete- and sponsor-related meaning-making.

4.3 Target Population, Sampling Frame and Recruitment

The target population for this study consists of engaged sport fans of Formula 1 or professional tennis. Based on the operational definition developed in Section 2.6, participants are considered sport fans if they regularly follow Formula 1 or ATP/WTA professional tennis, have meaningful interest in at least one elite athlete in their focal sport and are able to reflect on athlete-related meanings and sponsor linkages. Participants do not need to follow both sports. Instead, they are recruited as fans of either Formula 1 or professional tennis and are interviewed about one focal sport.

The recruitment process is designed to ensure that participants can give rich, relevant and reflective accounts of the phenomenon of interest. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is used when participants have knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon of interest, and can communicate about it (Palinkas et al., 2015). For the purposes of this study, this implies that the selected participants are not only fans, but also active fans who can express their opinions on athlete image, athlete narratives, and athlete-sponsor relationships in detail.

The sampling frame consists of the researcher's sport-related Instagram and Telegram communities. These platforms were chosen because they provide access to an audience interested in elite sport, particularly Formula 1, and potentially able to discuss athlete- and sponsorship-related meanings. The sampling frame is not representative of all Formula 1 or tennis fans. Rather, it provides a relevant pool from which information-rich participants who meet the inclusion criteria can be recruited.

Recruitment is conducted through invitations published on the researcher's Instagram and Telegram channels. The recruitment invitation briefly explains the study topic, the voluntary nature of participation, the interview format, the estimated interview length and the eligibility criteria. Interested individuals are invited either to contact the researcher directly or to complete a short screening form. The screening procedure is used to determine whether a potential participant meets the inclusion criteria and whether they should be included in the Formula 1 or professional tennis interview group.

The inclusion criteria are summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Screening and Inclusion Criteria

Criterion	Operationalization in this study
Age	Participants must be 18 years or older.
Focal sport	Participants must follow either Formula 1 or ATP/WTA professional tennis. They are not required to follow both sports.
Following frequency	Participants must follow their focal sport at least weekly during the active season, for example through live events, highlights, news, social media content or fan discussions.
Athlete-specific interest	Participants must be able to name one elite athlete within their focal sport whom they follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in depth.
Understanding of elite athlete	Participants must understand the focal athlete as a current or recently active Formula 1 driver or ATP/WTA tennis player competing at the highest professional level, with public visibility and visible sponsorship relationships.
Sponsor awareness	Participants must be able to recall at least one sponsor, partner or endorsing brand associated with the focal athlete.
Language	Participants must be able and willing to complete the interview in either English or Russian.
Interview availability	Participants must be willing to participate in an online semi-structured interview, receive written study information and provide written informed consent. Audio recording takes place only if additional consent is provided.

Eligible volunteers are contacted individually to arrange an interview. Participants are assigned to the interview group corresponding to their focal sport. Formula 1 fans are interviewed using the Formula 1 version of the interview guide, while tennis fans are interviewed using the professional tennis version. This separation allows participants to speak about the sport they know best and prevents sequence effects that might occur if the same participant were asked to discuss both Formula 1 and tennis in the same interview.

The final sample is therefore a self-selected group of eligible volunteers from the recruited audience. This is recognised as a limitation because those who respond to the recruitment invitation may be more motivated, engaged or interested in athlete branding and sponsorship

than those who do not respond. This limitation does not affect the qualitative aim of the study, which is to generate rich and reflective accounts rather than statistically representative findings (Campbell et al., 2020).

Reflexivity is especially important because recruitment takes place through the researcher's own sport-related social media communities. The researcher's close relationship with the Formula 1 fan community may support access to engaged participants and contextual understanding, but it may also influence recruitment, participant interaction and interpretation. Therefore, reflexive memoing is employed throughout recruitment, interviewing and analysis to document the researcher's assumptions, expectations and role in the research process (Berger, 2015).

Overall, the recruitment process aims to identify participants who can provide meaningful and insightful descriptions of athlete image, athlete brand narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Recruitment is therefore not designed to maximise sample size, but to ensure that the selected participants can contribute information-rich accounts relevant to the research aim.

4.4 Sampling Strategy and Sample Composition

The study uses purposive, criterion-based sampling. Such sampling strategy is suitable because the research is not intended to be statistically representative, but to select participants who can provide detailed and meaningful accounts of the phenomenon under study. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research involves selecting information-rich cases, that is, people who have relevant experience and can communicate about it (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sampling strategy is criterion-based because all participants are required to have the inclusion criteria outlined in Section 4.3. These criteria ensure that participants are not casual spectators, but people who regularly watch either ATP/WTa pro tennis or Formula 1 and can explain meanings of the athletes and meanings of the sponsors. The criteria also allow for all interviews to be relevant to the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 3, such as the concepts of sport fans as interpretive audiences, athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation and the fan's perceptions of the brand in relation to the sponsor.

The study conducted 12 semi-structured interviews. This is considered appropriate for the focused and exploratory nature of the research. The empirical study has a clearly defined phenomenon, a specific population and two bounded sport contexts. Guest et al. (2006) show that significant thematic development can occur within the first 12 interviews when the research aim is focused and the participant group is relatively coherent. The final sample consisted of twelve interviews, which was appropriate for the focused and exploratory nature of the research. The study includes twelve participants in total: six Formula 1 fans and six professional tennis fans. This distribution ensures that both sport contexts are equally represented in the empirical

material, while the analysis remains focused on developing a broader understanding of fan interpretation and sponsor-related meaning-making rather than producing a systematic comparison between the two sports.

Table 4.3

Sample Composition

Sport context	Number of interviews	Rationale
Formula 1 fans	6	To explore fan interpretations of athlete image, athlete narratives and sponsor-related meanings in a highly branded motorsport context.
Professional tennis fans	6	To explore fan interpretations of athlete image, athlete narratives and sponsor-related meanings in an individualized ATP/WTa sport context.
Total	12	To allow focused qualitative comparison across two elite sport contexts.

The study seeks to vary across multiple dimensions in the sample. These include sport context, age, gender, focal athlete, level of fan involvement, forms of following and sponsor awareness. Variation is important as fans can understand athlete stories and sponsor relationships in different ways, depending on their experience of the sport, the athletes they are associated with and their knowledge of the sponsor relationship. These dimensions are not set as hard and fast quotas, though. Rather, they serve as variation criteria to help select participants from the pool of eligible volunteers.

Table 4.4

Variation Criteria for Final Sample Selection

Variation criterion	Relevance for the study
Sport context	Ensures that both Formula 1 and professional tennis are represented in the two-context qualitative study.
Age	Helps capture different adult fan perspectives where possible.
Gender	Supports variation in fan experiences and interpretations where recruitment allows.
Focal athlete	Ensures that different athlete images and narratives are represented and reduces over-reliance on a single athlete.
Level of fan involvement	Captures variation between highly involved and moderately engaged fans who still meet the inclusion criteria.
Forms of following	Accounts for different ways of engaging with the sport, such as live events, highlights, news, social media and fan discussions.
Sponsor awareness	Ensures that participants can discuss athlete-sponsor linkages, which is necessary for addressing the research aim.

When there are more eligible volunteers than can be interviewed, participants are chosen to represent diversity on the above criteria. For instance, the final choice could be based on participants talking about different sports athletes, different sport contexts, or different ways of following and fan involvement. This helps to make the final sample more relevant and prevent having a sample of just similar fan perspectives.

The overall sampling design aims to produce a targeted but informative sample of engaged Formula 1 and professional tennis fans. The goal is not to capture the perspectives of every fan type, but to generate rich accounts that can illuminate how fans interpret elite athlete narratives and connect them to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

4.5 Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured online interviews are used to collect data. This method is suitable because it enables the researcher to discuss theoretically relevant topics while allowing participants to express their own meanings, experiences and examples. The study examines interpretation, perception and narrative meaning rather than measurable attitudes or behavioural outcomes. Interviews therefore provide an appropriate way to explore how fans describe athletes, reconstruct athlete narratives and connect these meanings to sponsoring brands.

Interviews are conducted online using Zoom calls. The online format is suitable because participants are recruited through online sport communities and may be located in different places. Online interviews also reduce the time and logistical barriers associated with participation.

Before the interview, participants are screened according to the inclusion criteria described in Section 4.3. Eligible participants are then contacted individually to arrange the interview time, interview language and preferred interview platform.

A written participant information sheet and written consent form, based on the University of Vienna data protection templates for student social science research, are sent to participants before the interview (University of Vienna, Office of the Studienpräses, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). The information sheet describes the study purpose, voluntary participation, interview format, duration, audio recording, pseudonymisation, data storage and participant rights. The consent form confirms participation and audio recording separately.

Interviews are limited to one sport context each. Participants who are recruited as Formula 1 fans talk about Formula 1, and participants who are recruited as professional tennis fans talk about ATP/WTA professional tennis. The participants are not required to make comparisons between both sports in the same interview. This design does not have any sequence effects and enables

participants to give more in-depth and focused explanations in the sport context that they are familiar with.

A participant-selected focal athlete approach is used. The interviewer asks each participant to name one elite athlete in their focal sport whom they follow closely and feel able to discuss in detail. If a participant initially mentions several athletes, the interviewer asks them to select the athlete whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they can discuss most deeply. This approach ensures that the interview is focused on an athlete who is meaningful and familiar to the participant.

The overall interview logic is the same in both versions to support comparison across the two sport contexts. The interview begins with warm-up questions about the participant's sport-following background and focal athlete selection. It then moves to athlete image, athlete brand narratives, sponsor recall, perceived sponsor fit or mismatch and sponsor-related brand perceptions. The final question allows participants to add further reflections.

Table 4.5
Overview of the Interview Procedure

Interview stage	Focus	Procedure
Opening and consent	Study information, voluntary participation and recording permission	The researcher explains the purpose of the study, confirms consent and reminds the participant of the right to withdraw.
Concept clarification	Shared understanding of “elite athlete”	The researcher explains how “elite athlete” is understood in the study.
Sport-following background	Participant’s engagement with Formula 1 or professional tennis	The participant describes how they follow their focal sport.
Focal athlete selection	Selection of one participant-chosen elite athlete	The participant identifies one elite athlete they follow closely and can discuss in depth.
Athlete image	Personality, characteristics and public image	The participant describes the athlete’s perceived personality, distinguishing features and broader image.
Athlete brand narratives	Public stories, recurring themes, values and symbolic meanings	The participant reflects on stories or narratives surrounding the athlete and what these suggest about the athlete.
Sponsor recall and sponsor links	Known sponsors, partners or endorsing brands	The participant identifies sponsor brands associated with the focal athlete.
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	Associations, meanings, perceived fit or mismatch	The participant explains how they perceive the sponsor brands in connection with the athlete.
Closing	Final reflections	The participant can add further thoughts before the interview ends.

The interview guide is structured to first ask open-ended and descriptive questions to minimize the possibility of leading responses and socially desirable answers, and then asks more interpretive questions. For instance, participants are first asked to describe the athlete and remember the links of the sponsors before they are asked to think about the perceived fit or meanings of the sponsors. The interviewer refrains from making interpretations and instead asks neutral questions like “Can you give an example?”, “What makes you say that?”, “How did you notice this?” And “Could you explain this in more detail?”. This helps to make sure that responses are based on the participants' own interpretation and experience and reduce the influence of researcher's assumptions.

The interview guide is designed to collect participants' sense-making of stories, values and symbolic meanings that are publicly visible and socially available in the sport context. Participants are not asked to evaluate a sponsor campaign as marketing professionals. Rather, they are encouraged to describe their own impressions, memories and associations as fans. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. This duration is appropriate because the study focuses on one sport and one focal athlete per participant. The structure is sufficiently focused to cover the main research concepts while leaving enough flexibility for participant-led examples. All interview data are pseudonymised. Participants are given codes (e.g. F01, T01) to help identify the sport context without compromising the anonymity of the participant. Transcripts are anonymised where required to identify personal information. Audio recordings and transcripts are kept securely and only for the purposes of this thesis. The thematic analysis described in Section 4.7 is based on the pseudonymised transcripts.

Interviews are audio-recorded only with the participant's explicit written consent. Audio recording is used to enable accurate transcription and to allow the researcher to focus on the interview interaction rather than detailed note-taking. If a participant does not consent to audio recording, the interview may either not be included or may be documented through researcher notes, depending on whether the data can still be collected and handled in a methodologically appropriate way.

After each interview, the recording is transcribed by the researcher. Russian-language interviews are transcribed in Russian and translated into English where necessary for reporting. Translation is conducted with attention to meaning rather than word-for-word equivalence. Identifying information such as names, usernames or contact details is removed from the transcript. Each participant is assigned a pseudonymised code, for example F01 for Formula 1 participants and T01 for tennis participants.

The use of MAXQDA supports systematic data organisation and coding. Each transcript is imported into MAXQDA, and document variables such as sport context, focal athlete, interview

language and participant code are recorded. MAXQDA is used to organise codes, retrieve coded segments, write analytic memos and examine how themes develop across the interview material. Sport context is used as a document variable to support contextual interpretation, rather than to conduct a systematic comparison between Formula 1 and tennis interviews.

4.6 Interview Guide Development and Concept–Question Alignment

The interview guide was developed to connect theoretical concepts with open-ended conversation. Semi-structured interviews are suitable when the researcher needs to cover specific themes while allowing participants to add their own ideas, examples and explanations (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The guide was therefore developed according to a theory-informed interview design that remains open to participant-generated meanings (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interview guide was developed in four phases. First, the main analytical concepts were taken from the theoretical background and analytical framework: sport fans as interpretive audiences, the focal elite athlete, athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation, sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer, and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Second, open-ended questions were developed for each concept. Third, the wording was adapted to the two sport contexts. Fourth, the question order was reviewed to move from descriptive recall to interpretation.

All substantive questions are directed toward the participant-selected focal athlete. This ensures consistency throughout the interview and avoids the risk that participants move between several athletes when discussing image, narratives and sponsorship connections. If a participant initially mentions several athletes, the interviewer asks them to select the athlete whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they can discuss in the greatest detail.

The interview guide does not require participants to validate the theoretical framework. Instead, the framework functions as a sensitising structure for eliciting fan interpretations. Participants are invited to discuss their perceptions of the focal athlete, the stories or themes they associate with the athlete, sponsor brands they remember and their understanding of the athlete-sponsor relationship. This is consistent with the qualitative aim of exploring meaning-making rather than testing predefined hypotheses.

The following table summarises the main interview questions. Wording is adapted slightly depending on whether the participant belongs to the Formula 1 or professional tennis group.

Table 4.6***Core Interview Questions***

Question number	Core question
Q1	How do you usually follow Formula 1 / professional tennis?
Q2	Within Formula 1 / professional tennis, which elite athlete do you follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in detail?
Q3	What comes to your mind when you think about this athlete?
Q4	If you had to describe this athlete's personality to someone who does not know them at all, what would you tell that person?
Q5	What mostly characterises and distinguishes this athlete from other athletes in this sport?
Q6	When fans or media talk about this athlete, what kind of public story or narrative do you think surrounds them?
Q7	Which events, moments or recurring themes are most important in this story?
Q8	What do you think this story suggests about who the athlete is or what they stand for?
Q9	Which brands do you know are official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands of this athlete?
Q10	When you think about these brands in connection with this athlete, what associations or impressions come to mind?
Q11	Do any values, qualities or meanings of the athlete seem to match or mismatch these sponsoring brands? Why?
Q12	Is there anything else about this athlete, their public image or their sponsors that you think is important for this study?

The questions are formulated to move gradually from descriptive recall to interpretation. The interview begins with the participant's sport-following background and focal athlete selection. It then moves to athlete image, personality and distinguishing characteristics. Only after these topics does the guide ask about public stories, recurring narrative elements and symbolic meanings. Sponsor-related questions are placed later so that sponsor interpretations do not frame the participant's initial description of the athlete.

This sequence is designed to minimise the likelihood of introducing sponsorship interpretations too early. It also helps reduce socially desirable responses by encouraging participants to describe their own impressions before discussing sponsor relationships directly.

The alignment between the analytical framework, interview questions and initial coding categories is shown in Table 4.7. The table illustrates how each theoretically grounded concept is elicited in the interview and translated into initial coding categories.

Table 4.7***Concept–Question Alignment and Category Derivation***

Figure 1 concept	Working definition in this study	Interview question(s)	Category derivation
Sport fans as interpretive audience	Participants are engaged fans who regularly follow either Formula 1 or professional tennis and are able to reflect on athlete-related meanings and sponsor linkages.	Q1, Q2	Deductive categories derived from Section 2.6: sport-following behaviour, focal sport, fan involvement, athlete-specific interest. Inductive subcategories may include different forms of following, such as live viewing, highlights, news, social media or fan discussions.
Focal elite athlete	A participant-selected current or recently active Formula 1 driver or ATP/WTa tennis player competing at the highest professional level, with public visibility and visible sponsorship relationships.	Q2	Deductive category derived from Sections 2.2 and 4.2: focal elite athlete. Inductive subcategories may include reasons for athlete selection, strength of attachment and participant familiarity with the athlete.
Athlete image	The broader set of associations fans attach to the athlete, including personality, traits, values, lifestyle meanings, performance-related associations and symbolic impressions.	Q3, Q4, Q5	Deductive categories derived from Sections 2.1 and 2.2: athlete personality, performance image, lifestyle image, symbolic associations and distinguishing characteristics. Inductive subcategories will be developed from participants' own descriptions.
Athlete brand narratives	Story-like organisation of athlete-related meanings, including public stories, recurring themes, turning points, roles, values and implied purpose.	Q6, Q7, Q8	Deductive categories derived from Section 2.3: narrative themes, plot elements, turning points, roles, values and public storylines. Inductive categories may include specific narrative types such as comeback, rivalry, dominance, authenticity, struggle, controversy or resilience.

Figure 1 concept	Working definition in this study	Interview question(s)	Category derivation
Fan interpretation / consumer perception	The process through which participants notice, attend to and interpret athlete-related and sponsor-related cues based on knowledge, involvement, expertise, emotional attachment and perceived authenticity.	Q3–Q11, especially probes	Deductive categories derived from Section 2.5: exposure, attention, interpretation, perceived fit, authenticity, emotional evaluation and moral evaluation. Inductive categories will capture participant-specific interpretive mechanisms.
Sponsor recall and sponsorship link	Participants' awareness of official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands associated with the focal athlete.	Q9	Deductive category derived from Section 2.4: sponsor-athlete linkage. Inductive subcategories may include strong recall, uncertain recall, confusion between team/event/athlete sponsors and sponsor visibility.
Sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer	The interpretive connection through which meanings associated with the athlete may become linked to sponsor brands as secondary brand associations or image-related meanings.	Q10, Q11	Deductive categories derived from Section 2.4: meaning transfer, image transfer, secondary brand associations, perceived fit and perceived mismatch. Inductive categories may include positive transfer, negative transfer, ambiguous transfer or no perceived transfer.
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	Associations, meanings and symbolic impressions that participants attach to sponsor brands in connection with the focal athlete.	Q10, Q11, Q12	Deductive categories derived from Sections 2.1 and 2.4: sponsor brand associations, sponsor image, perceived fit, perceived mismatch, symbolic impressions and evaluative meanings. Inductive subcategories will be derived from participant accounts.
Sport-contextual meaning-making	Contextual features of the focal sport that shape how participants encounter athlete narratives, sponsor visibility and athlete-sponsor relationships.	Not asked as a direct comparison question; derived from background questions, sponsor recall questions and follow-up probes across the interviews.	Deductive category derived from Chapter 3 and Section 4.2. It is used to contextualise fan interpretations by identifying how sport-specific features, such as sponsor visibility, athlete positioning, team structures or individual endorsement settings, appear in participant accounts. Inductive subcategories will be derived from the interview material.

The concept-question alignment table demonstrates the analytical framework to become empirical questions through the interview guide. It also demonstrates that each part of the interview aims to achieve a specific purpose and connects to the ideas of theory that have been introduced in the two previous chapters (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3).

This alignment ensures that all central parts of the analytical framework are covered in the interview guide. It also helps avoid gaps in the data by indicating which questions are expected to generate empirical material for each concept. At the same time, the guide remains flexible because the meanings, associations and examples brought by participants are not predetermined by the researcher.

The initial coding logic is also based on concept-question alignment. Some categories are deductively derived from the literature and analytical framework, such as athlete image, athlete brand narratives, sponsor recall, perceived fit and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Other categories are expected to emerge inductively from participants' accounts during the analysis. Overall, the interview guide aims to elicit fans' interpretations of athlete image, athlete-related stories, values and symbolic meanings, and how these interpretations link to sponsor-related brand perceptions. The guide connects each question with the concepts presented in Figure 1, ensuring coherence between the theoretical background, analytical framework and empirical design.

4.7 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis with a deductive-inductive coding logic is used to analyse the interview data. Thematic analysis is appropriate because it enables the researcher to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). As the thesis explores how fans interpret athlete brand narratives and connect them to sponsor-related perceptions, the method is appropriate for the study's interpretive and meaning-focused aims.

The analysis is theory-driven and does not aim to test hypotheses. This deductive-inductive approach is similar to flexible coding in qualitative interview analysis, where theoretically derived initial codes organise the first phase of analysis, while new codes and interpretive categories can be identified during the analytical process (Deterding & Waters, 2021). The analytical framework therefore functions as a sensitising structure rather than a fixed coding template.

The analysis is carried out in six main steps, following the logic of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Table 4.8***Data Analysis Procedure***

Analytical step	Procedure in this study
1. Transcription and pseudonymisation	Audio recordings are transcribed by the researcher. All transcripts are pseudonymised and participants are assigned codes such as F01 or T01.
2. Familiarisation with the data	The researcher reads the transcripts several times, notes initial impressions and writes short analytic memos.
3. Initial deductive coding	A first coding round is guided by the analytical framework and the concept–question alignment table in Section 4.6.
4. Inductive refinement of codes	Additional codes and subcodes are developed from participants’ own words, examples and interpretations.
5. Theme development and review	Codes are grouped into broader themes that capture patterns of meaning across interviews. Themes are reviewed in relation to the research questions and the full data set.
6. Context-sensitive interpretation	The coded material is reviewed across the full dataset to identify central themes in fan interpretations of athlete narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions. Sport context is considered where it helps to contextualise participants’ accounts, but it is not used to conduct a systematic comparison between Formula 1 and professional tennis.

Transcription and pseudonymisation is the first step. After each interview, the researcher listens to the recording, transcribes the interview and reads the transcript several times. It involves noting initial impressions, possible meanings and early analytical observations in memos.

The second step is the familiarisation. The researcher reads each transcript several times to gain an overall understanding of the participant’s account. In this phase, preliminary notes are recorded on striking associations, on recurrent athlete-related meanings, on perceptions of the sponsors, on emotional evaluations and on possible connections with the analytical framework. These notes are preliminary analytical notes and are not considered final findings, but are used to support later coding.

Initial deductive coding is the third step. The coding structure is based on the concepts shown in Figure 1 and implemented in Section 4.6. These categories offer a systematic basis for analysis and make sure that the empirical material is related to the theoretical basis of the thesis. The initial deductive categories are shown in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9***Initial Deductive Coding Categories***

Initial code	Link to analytical framework
Sport-following background	Sport fans as interpretive audience
Focal elite athlete	Participant-selected athlete within the focal sport
Athlete image	Athlete-related associations, traits, values and symbolic impressions
Athlete personality	Human-like characteristics attributed to the athlete
Distinguishing characteristics	Features that differentiate the athlete from others in the sport
Athlete brand narratives	Public stories, recurring themes, turning points and value cues
Narrative elements	Specific narrative components such as struggle, success, comeback, rivalry, dominance, authenticity, controversy or resilience
Fan interpretation	How participants make sense of athlete-related and sponsor-related meanings
Sponsor recall	Known sponsors, partners or endorsing brands connected to the focal athlete
Perceived athlete-sponsor fit	Perceived match or mismatch between athlete meanings and sponsor brands
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	Sponsor associations, symbolic impressions and evaluative meanings
Meaning and image transfer	Fan-articulated connections between athlete meanings and sponsor-related meanings
Sport-context specific meanings	Patterns specific to Formula 1 or professional tennis

Fourth step is inductive refinement. In this phase, the initial codes are extended, modified or differentiated based on the interview content. For instance, the deductive category "athlete brand narratives" may be divided into inductive subcategories such as "comeback narrative", "dominance narrative", "authenticity narrative", "controversy narrative" or "underdog narrative" if these meanings appear in the data. Similarly, sponsor-related perceptions may be differentiated into awareness effects, positive association transfer, perceived mismatch, symbolic value or no perceived influence.

The fifth step is theme development. Codes are analysed through interviews and organised into overarching themes that respond to the research questions. Themes are elaborated on the basis of their relevance to the research aim, their frequency in the accounts of the participants and their ability to illuminate how fans make sense of athlete narratives and meanings of the sponsors. The analysis focuses not only on common patterns, but also on very rich, contrasting or unusual interpretations.

Context-sensitive interpretation is the sixth step. In the first analysis, the interviews from Formula 1 and professional tennis are analyzed separately to gain insight into patterns within the respective sport context. This within-context analysis is then followed by a comparison of the themes between the two groups. This comparison is not meant to create statistically

generalizable differences between Formula 1 and tennis fans. Instead, it is to examine whether the same or different patterns of interpretation emerge in two elite sport settings that have different sponsorship environments and athlete-branding structures.

Data management and analysis are facilitated with MAXQDA. The software is used for storing and organizing transcripts, applying and revising codes, writing analytic and reflexive memos, retrieval of coded segments, and comparison of coded material from Formula 1 and tennis interviews. MAXQDA is not used to automate interpretation. Rather, it's a means of keeping things transparent, structured and documented throughout the analytical process.

Reflexive memoing is used throughout the analysis. Reflexive documentation is especially relevant in this context as the researcher is already familiar with the context of Formula 1 and has been engaged in the recruitment of participants via sport-related social media platforms. The researcher's field experience can improve the contextual understanding, but also can influence the attention, interpretation and assumptions made in analyzing the data. These memos are thus used to record analytic decisions, potential preconceptions, developing interpretations, and changes to the coding structure. This practice helps to improve transparency and enables the systematic verification of interpretations with participants' accounts.

The final step is interpretation and reporting. Themes are interpreted in relation to the research aim, the analytical framework and the theoretical background. The findings chapter presents the themes with selected participant excerpts. The purpose is not to count how many participants expressed each view, but to explain how fans interpret athlete narratives and connect them to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

4.8 Quality Issues in Qualitative Research

The quality of this qualitative study is addressed through trustworthiness, transparency and reflexivity. Since the study follows a qualitative and interpretivist research design, quality is not assessed through statistical reliability, validity or generalisability. The study seeks to provide credible and analytically meaningful interpretations of fan meaning-making (Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017) and it does not aim for statistical representativeness or hypothesis testing. That is why criteria such as statistical reliability, validity and generalisability are not the main quality standards.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research depends on whether the research process is systematic and sufficiently documented for readers to understand how findings were developed. In thematic analysis, this includes transparent coding decisions, theme development and analytical reasoning (Nowell et al., 2017). In this thesis, credibility is supported by the clear connection between the

analytical framework, the interview guide and the initial coding categories. The concept–question alignment table in Section 4.6 shows how central concepts such as athlete image, athlete brand narratives, fan interpretation, sponsorship-based meaning transfer and sponsor-related brand perceptions are translated into interview questions. Open-ended questions and neutral probes are used to allow participants to describe their own examples and interpretations rather than confirm predefined assumptions.

Credibility is also supported by grounding the analysis in participants' accounts. The findings chapter uses anonymised interview excerpts to show how themes are connected to the empirical material. These excerpts are treated as evidence of interpretation, not merely as decorative examples. The analysis also considers variation between participants, including cases where sponsor relationships were weak, ambiguous or interpreted differently.

Detailed description of the empirical context, sampling frame, participant criteria and interview procedure allow transferability. The study does not claim that its findings represent all Formula 1 or professional tennis fans. Instead, contextual information is provided so that readers can judge whether the findings may be relevant to other elite sport, athlete-branding or sponsorship contexts. This includes the description of the two sport settings, the participant-selected focal athlete approach, the recruitment channels and the criteria used to identify engaged fans.

Dependability and confirmability are supported through a documented research process. The methodology chapter describes recruitment, screening, data collection, transcription, coding and theme development step by step. The connection between theory, interview design and analysis is made transparent through the concept–question alignment table in Section 4.6 and the initial coding structure described in Section 4.7. The analysis follows a deductive–inductive logic: initial codes are informed by the analytical framework, while subthemes are refined through engagement with the interview material.

MAXQDA is used to organise and document the analysis. The software supports transcript storage, coding, memo-writing and retrieval of coded segments across interviews. Sport context is recorded as a document variable to support context-sensitive interpretation, not to conduct a systematic comparison between Formula 1 and professional tennis. MAXQDA is not treated as an automatic analysis tool; it is used to maintain an audit trail and to document the development of codes, memos and themes.

Reflexivity is particularly important because recruitment takes place through the researcher's own Formula 1- and sport-focused Instagram and Telegram communities. This position provides access to engaged participants and contextual knowledge, but it may also influence recruitment,

the interview situation and the interpretation of data. Some participants may know the researcher as a content creator or as part of the same fan community. To address this, the interviewer uses open-ended questions, avoids leading formulations and writes reflexive memos during analysis. These memos document assumptions, emotional reactions, coding decisions and moments where the researcher's own knowledge of Formula 1, athlete branding or sponsorship could shape interpretation.

The sampling strategy may lead to a sample of highly engaged fans who are especially willing to discuss athletes and sponsorship. This is acknowledged as a limitation. However, the sampling strategy remains consistent with the qualitative objective of selecting participants for their ability to provide detailed and relevant accounts, rather than for statistical representativeness (Campbell et al., 2020).

Overall, the trustworthiness of this study is supported by transparent sampling criteria, a clearly described interview procedure, explicit concept–question alignment, systematic coding, MAXQDA-based documentation, reflexive memoing and the use of participant excerpts in the findings. These measures ensure that the empirical analysis is coherent, transparent and data dependent, but also open for qualitative interpretation.

4.9 Ethics and Data Protection

This study involves semi-structured interviews with adult sport fans and is therefore considered low risk. Nevertheless, ethical care is required because the research involves personal data, audio recordings and participants' subjective interpretations. The study follows the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, data minimisation, pseudonymisation, confidentiality and secure data handling.

Participation is voluntary and unpaid. Potential participants are recruited through Instagram and Telegram posts and are included only if they actively express interest in the study and meet the inclusion criteria described in Section 4.3. Because recruitment takes place through the researcher's own sport-related online communities, recruitment messages are kept neutral and make clear that there is no obligation to participate.

Written informed consent is obtained before each interview. Participants receive a participant information sheet and consent form adapted from the University of Vienna data protection templates for student social science research (University of Vienna, Office of the Studienpräses, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). These documents explain the study purpose, voluntary participation, interview format, audio recording, data processing, pseudonymisation, storage

procedures and participant rights. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher also confirms consent to participate and to be audio-recorded.

Audio recording is used only with written consent and only for accurate transcription.

Participants may refuse recording, decline to answer individual questions or stop the interview at any time without giving a reason. After transcription, each participant is assigned a code such as F01 or T01. Names, usernames, contact details and other identifying information are removed from transcripts or stored separately from the interview data. In the thesis, participants are referred to only by their codes, and identifying details are removed or altered in quoted excerpts where necessary.

Audio files are stored securely until transcription and transcript verification are completed. After this stage, they are deleted unless temporary retention is needed for clarification during analysis. The analysis is conducted on pseudonymised transcripts, coding files and analytic memos, which are stored in password-protected files and used only for the purposes of this master's thesis. If material needs to be shared for supervision or assessment, only anonymised or pseudonymised material is used.

The study follows University of Vienna data protection guidance for student social science research and applies GDPR/FOG principles when processing interview data (University of Vienna, Office of the Studienpräses, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). In line with data minimisation, only information necessary for the research aim is collected. This includes screening information, interview scheduling details, audio recordings until transcription, pseudonymised transcripts and contextual information relevant to the analysis. Unnecessary personal data, such as full addresses, private social media information or unrelated sensitive data, are not collected.

The study does not collect confidential information about athletes, sponsors or sport organisations. Although participants may discuss real athletes and real brands, the empirical focus is on fan interpretations of publicly visible athlete images, public narratives and sponsor relationships. The study does not examine internal sponsor strategies, private athlete information or organisational data.

Participants are informed about their data protection rights, including the right to obtain information about collected data, request rectification, restrict processing, request erasure and object to processing. They are also informed whom to contact in case of questions about the study or data protection. Before data collection, the need for formal ethics approval is discussed with the supervisor and, if required, with the appropriate university body. Regardless of whether

formal ethics approval is required, the study follows the ethical and data protection procedures described above.

5. Findings

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative analysis of interviews. The findings are organized in thematic order to explain how participants interpreted public images of elite athletes, athlete narratives and sponsor relationships, and how these interpretations became connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

The findings are not presented in the form of descriptions of specific cases of individual participants. Instead, the chapter focuses on recurring analytical themes in the dataset. Formula 1 and professional tennis are considered as two empirical sports contexts that help contextualise how athlete sponsorship is noticed, interpreted and attributed by fans.

The chapter is organized around six analytical themes. First, it explores the ways in which fans have built up more complex athlete narratives than simple athlete images. Secondly, it looks at the fit of the sponsor in terms of the narrative coherence. Third, it discusses the distinction between visibility, awareness and limited meaning transfer. Fourth, it examines reverse transfer and sponsorship risk for athletes. Fifth, it explores symbolic affiliation and fan attachment. Finally, it discusses sport-contextual patterns in sponsorship interpretation.

5.1 Overview of the Final Sample and Analysis Process

The findings are based on twelve semi-structured interviews included in the final core sample. Six interviews were conducted with Formula 1 fans and six with fans of professional tennis. All participants regularly followed their sport, were able to discuss the athlete they were following closely, and recall at least one sponsor, partner, or brand associated with that athlete. The final tennis subsample included interviews T01, T03, T04, T05, T06 and T07, while the Formula 1 subsample included interviews F01, F02, F03, F04, F05 and F06.

The final sample composition is summarised in Table 5.1. The table provides an overview of the participant codes, sport context, focal athletes, interview language, transcript language and sponsor examples discussed in the interviews.

Table 5.1***Final Sample Composition***

Participant ID	Sport context	Focal athlete	Interview language	Transcript language	Main sponsors mentioned
F01	Formula 1	Max Verstappen	Russian	English	Red Bull; TAG Heuer; Heineken; AlphaTauri; EA Sport
F02	Formula 1	George Russell	Russian	English	Tommy Hilfiger; IWC; Adidas; Marriott
F03	Formula 1	Carlos Sainz	Russian	English	L'Oréal Paris; Santander; Estrella Galicia; Hackett London
F04	Formula 1	Lewis Hamilton	Russian	English	Dior; Puma; Monster Energy; Lululemon; Peroni
F05	Formula 1	Lewis Hamilton	Russian	English	Tommy Hilfiger; Monster Energy; Perplexity; HP
F06	Formula 1	Lando Norris	Russian	English	TUMI; Ralph Lauren; Monster Energy; SunGod; Richard Mille; Hilton
T01	Professional tennis	Alexander Bublik	Russian	English	Armani; Fonbet / First & Red; Waterdrop
T03	Professional tennis	Andrey Rublev	Russian	English	K-Swiss / Rublo; Nike; Head; Bulgari
T04	Professional tennis	Jannik Sinner	Russian	English	Gucci; Nike; Lavazza; Explora; Head
T05	Professional tennis	Jannik Sinner	Russian	English	Gucci; Rolex; Head; Nike; Lavazza; Explora; Alfa Romeo
T06	Professional tennis	Andrey Rublev	Russian	English	Head; Nike; Rublo; K-Swiss; Bulgari
T07	Professional tennis	Aryna Sabalenka	Russian	English	Nike; IM8 Health; First&Red; Emirates; Gucci; Oakberry

Note. Participant codes are pseudonymised. F = Formula 1; T = professional tennis.

One of the initial tennis interviews was excluded from the main analysis. This decision was made because the interview was about an athlete who was already well represented in the tennis subsample. The exclusion of this interview helped to reduce the overrepresentation of one of the key athletes and preserved greater analytical variability in all tennis-related cases. The interview was not used for the final thematic interpretation.

The analysis was performed in MAXQDA using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. The deductive categories were based on a conceptual framework and included the athlete image, athlete brand narratives, sponsor fit and mismatch, sponsor awareness and visibility, meaning transfer, fan interpretation and sport-contextual meanings. At the same time, the coding process remained open, taking into account the patterns identified during the interviews themselves, including reverse transfer, symbolic affiliation, and various forms of sponsor visibility.

After the first coding cycle, summaries of documents and specific cases were created for each interview. These summaries helped generalise the main analytical observations on each case, while preserving the context of the participant's story. The cases were then analysed by taking notes and interpreting specific cases. This process allowed to move from individual coded segments to broader analytical themes.

Thus, the final themes presented in this chapter were developed in several stages: coding, summarising, memo-writing, cross-case analysis and thematic refinement. This analytical process supports the thematic structure of the chapter and allows to identify patterns in the entire dataset, while at the same time recognising the relevant contextual differences between Formula 1 and professional tennis.

5.2 Layered Athlete Narratives in Fan Interpretation

The first analytical topic is related to the fact that the participants perceived the images of athletes as multi-layered narratives, rather than as a simple set of individual characteristics. In interviews, athletes were rarely described solely through athletic performance, success, or general personality traits. Instead, the participants interpreted them as complex public figures who combine athletic achievements, emotionality, media presence, lifestyle, values, and commercial visibility.

This was especially evident in the way the participants interpreted the tensions and contradictions in the images of athletes. Such contradictions were not necessarily perceived as inconsistencies or problems. On the contrary, participants often included them in the broader history of the athlete. For example, Alexander Bublik's emotionality and unpredictability were not interpreted only as negative or problematic qualities. One participant explained that "if the match itself is not going well, he still tries to give the audience entertainment and positive emotions so that they can leave the match smiling" (T01). In this case, emotionality becomes part of Bublik's entertainment value and public distinctiveness.

A similar logic manifested itself in the interpretation of Andrey Rublev. His emotional difficulties were not separated from his positive personal qualities, but became part of a more ambivalent and humane image. One participant described this tension bluntly: “From the negative side, I associate him with self-harm, self-destruction, and self-deprecation. From the positive side, I associate him with kindness” (T03). This shows that fans can perceive the vulnerable or complex sides of an athlete's image as part of authenticity, and not just as a reputational weakness.

The same logic was evident in interviews about Formula 1, where the drivers were also interpreted through multi-layered public narratives. For example, Lewis Hamilton was described through a combination of emotional transparency, brilliance, and distance. One participant associated it with “courage, brightness, mystery, and at the same time openness” and added that “there is a kind of contrast in his image” (F04). Lando Norris was also perceived through duality. One participant said that “he is like a person who has two personalities living inside him” (F06), referring to the coexistence of a playful, media-oriented persona and a more serious competitive identity.

These examples show that fans actively construct athlete narratives by linking different and sometimes contradictory elements of the athlete's public image. Athlete narratives, therefore, are not fixed meanings that are simply passed on to fans. They are interpreted, discussed, and sometimes reassembled through fan knowledge, emotional attachment, and understanding of the athlete's media context. This layered interpretation serves as a basis for further evaluation of sponsorship relationships.

5.3 Sponsor Fit as Narrative Coherence

The second analytical theme is related to how the participants evaluated the fit between athletes and sponsoring brands. In the interview, sponsor fit was not perceived only as a matter of product category or a general connection with sports. On the contrary, brands were perceived as appropriate when participants could relate them to an athlete's already existing narrative, lifestyle, values, national identity, public image, or sports context. In this sense, perceived fit depended on narrative coherence: the sponsor had to make sense within the broader story that fans associated with the athlete.

Table 5.2 distinguishes between athlete image associations and athlete narratives by showing how participants organised image-related meanings into story-like explanations of sponsor fit.

Table 5.2***Forms of Narrative Coherence in Athlete-Sponsor Fit***

Form of narrative coherence	Athlete image association	Examples from the interviews	Narrative logic used by participants
National / cultural coherence	National identity, cultural familiarity, regional lifestyle	Sinner + Lavazza; Sainz + Estrella Galicia	The sponsor was linked to the athlete's national or cultural story.
Lifestyle coherence	Everyday habits, travel routine, mobility, personal lifestyle	Sabalenka + Oakberry; Norris + TUMI	The sponsor was interpreted as part of the athlete's everyday lifestyle or routine.
Value-based coherence	Authenticity, sincerity, charity, responsibility, moral positioning	Rublev + Rublo / Play for the kids; Bublik + charity-linked sponsor activities	The sponsor relationship was connected to values already associated with the athlete.
Performance / sport-context coherence	Competitive identity, equipment use, performance, racing context	Sinner or Rublev + Head; Verstappen + Red Bull	The sponsor was explained through equipment, performance, team identity or sport context.
Visual / fashion coherence	Style, status, aesthetics, public appearance	Hamilton + Tommy Hilfiger / Dior; Russell + IWC / Tommy Hilfiger	The sponsor was interpreted through the athlete's style, status or visual public image.
Emotional / personality coherence	Emotional intensity, playfulness, entertainment value, fan-facing persona	Bublik + Fonbet; Norris + Monster Energy	The sponsor was connected to the athlete's emotional style, energy or public persona.

Note. The table separates athlete image associations from narrative logic. Athlete image associations refer to meanings participants attached to the athlete, while narrative logic refers to how participants used these meanings to explain sponsor fit.

This was evident in several tennis interviews, where participants interpreted sponsor fit through personal, cultural, and lifestyle-related meanings. In the case of Jannik Sinner, the Lavazza brand was perceived as well-suited to his image, because it could be associated with Italian identity and familiar cultural associations. One participant explained this relationship directly: “Lavazza is one hundred percent authentic: he is Italian, and it is coffee” (T04). Thus, fit here was based not on athletic performance, but on the perceived authenticity of the connection between the athlete's nationality and the cultural significance of the brand.

A similar logic can be traced in the interpretation of Aryna Sabalenka's partnership with Oakberry. Here, fit was based on lifestyle authenticity rather than nationality or sports equipment. The participant explained, “I know that she actually eats it too, so it is not just

marketing from her team. It really fits into her lifestyle” (T07). This shows that sponsor fit becomes stronger when fans perceive the brand as part of an athlete's real habits or everyday identity, rather than as an externally imposed commercial collaboration.

Other tennis examples show that fit could also be formed through emotional or sport-specific associations. In the case of Alexander Bublik, the partnership related to the betting category was perceived as relatively consistent, because it was associated with the emotional intensity and unpredictability of sports. The participant noted that “Bublik's emotions and the emotional, gambling-related side of sport fit together. The excitement and intensity of sport make this cooperation feel more natural” (T01). This example shows that perceived fit can arise from a fan's interpretation of an athlete's emotional behavior and the atmosphere around the sport, even if the sponsor's category is not unambiguously positive.

In Formula 1 interviews, sponsor fit often connected the driver's racing identity, team environment, mobility, lifestyle or visual image. The most powerful example was the bond between Max Verstappen and Red Bull. One participant described this relationship as: “Red Bull and Max Verstappen almost feel like interchangeable words” (F01). In this case, sponsor fit was not based on a separate campaign or product association, but on a long-term fusion between the driver, team, sponsor and racing identity.

Lando Norris and TUMI show a different form of narrative coherence. The participant explained that “TUMI ... Works very well with the image of a driver who constantly travels between races and lives according to a very dynamic schedule” (F06). Here, fit was created through the Formula 1 lifestyle itself: constant flights and a dynamic schedule made the brand reasonable for the driver. Similarly, Carlos Sainz's connection with Estrella Galicia was interpreted through lifestyle and personality, because the brand was perceived as corresponding to his sociable and relaxed image.

Taken together, these examples show that sponsor fit is not just a matter of whether a brand belongs to the sports category. Participants evaluated fit by asking whether the sponsor could be narratively explained through the athlete. A brand was perceived as more coherent if it was associated with an athlete's nationality, lifestyle, values, emotional style, visual identity, team context, or public persona. This finding shows how the interpretation of sponsorship depends on the meanings that fans already associate with the athlete.

5.4 Visibility, Awareness and Limited Meaning Transfer

The third analytical theme is related to the difference between sponsor visibility, sponsor awareness and deeper meaning transfer. In interviews, participants were often able to recall

sponsors or recognize brands associated with selected athletes. However, brand visibility alone was not necessarily accompanied by deeper sponsor-related meaning in participants' accounts. Therefore, the analysis suggests that sponsor visibility can support awareness, but does not automatically produce deeper sponsor-related associations.

This pattern is especially noticeable in cases where participants discussed brands that were visible but did not become particularly meaningful to them. In tennis, sponsor awareness was often created through clothing, gear, bags, campaign images, social media content, or visible logos. Participants could recall brands such as Nike, Head, Gucci, Armani, Waterdrop, Lavazza, Emirates or Rolex. However, the fact of recall did not always mean that participants described the brand as more meaningful or personally relevant. In several cases, the brand was recognized as part of the athlete's public or commercial environment, but remained loosely connected to the participant's own perception of the brand.

For example, Alexander Bublik's partnerships with Armani and Waterdrop were noticed by the participant, but these brands were not described as strongly shaping sponsor-related perceptions. Armani was remembered partly because of its long-term appearance, whereas Waterdrop remained a weaker and less meaningful association. Similarly, in interviews about Jannik Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka, brands such as Gucci, Nike, Head or Emirates were visible and recognizable, but their relevance depended on whether the participant could connect them to the athlete's image, lifestyle or values. When such a connection was weak, sponsorship mainly created awareness rather than deep meaning transfer.

A similar pattern appeared in interviews about Formula 1, although the sponsors' visibility environment was different. Formula 1 sponsors were often more structurally visible because they appeared on cars, racing suits, helmets, team accounts, paddock events, and global campaigns. In this regard, participants often encountered sponsors, but this appearance was not always interpreted as personally meaningful. In some cases, sponsors were perceived as a normal part of the Formula 1 highly-commercialized environment, rather than as brands that participants described as personally relevant.

This distinction is important because some sponsorships were clearly noticed, but were not described as personally or emotionally significant. For example, team-related sponsors in Formula 1 could be highly visible, but it was difficult to separate them from the broader team ecosystem. Participants sometimes recognized the presence of brands around Mercedes, Ferrari, McLaren, or Red Bull, but not all of these brands became personally relevant or emotionally significant. In this sense, Formula 1 created a high level of sponsor visibility, but the depth of the meaning transfers still depended on whether it was possible to connect the sponsor with the driver's narrative or with the participant's own fan attachment.

Meaning transfer was more evident when the sponsor could be interpreted through the athlete's existing narrative. This required more than repeated exposure. Participants needed a reason to understand the partnership as credible, whether through perceived authenticity, lifestyle relevance, actual product use, emotional attachment, symbolic affiliation or a particularly strong athlete-brand fit. Without such a connection, sponsor visibility mainly produced recognition rather than deeper association.

Thus, visibility should be understood as an entry point, not as the mechanism itself. A sponsor may become familiar through repeated exposure, but familiarity does not automatically change what the brand means to fans. In this study, sponsor-related meanings developed only when participants could make sense of the brand within the athlete's public image and story.

5.5 Reverse Transfer and Sponsorship Risk for Athletes

The fourth analytical theme is related to the reverse direction of meaning transfer. In the context of athlete sponsorship, sponsorship is often understood as a process in which the values associated with an athlete are transferred to the sponsored brand. However, interviews have shown that the sponsor's values can also reflect back on the athlete. The participants assessed not only whether the athlete makes the brand more attractive or significant. They also drew attention to what the sponsorship relationship itself says about the athlete.

This reverse transfer was especially noticeable when participants perceived the sponsor as inconsistent with the athlete's existing image or values. In such cases, the sponsor was not just a weak or irrelevant brand association. On the contrary, it could make an athlete more commercialized, less authentic or less coherent. Therefore, sponsorship appeared not only as a potential source of positive brand meanings, but also as a reputational risk for the athlete.

In tennis interviews, this pattern was noticeable in the discussion of luxury fashion partnerships by Jannik Sinner. For example, Gucci was interpreted not only as a sponsored brand associated with Sinner. The partnership also shaped how the participant made sense of Sinner's public image. This partnership could make him more commercial and managed, which created tension with Sinner's image as a disciplined, modest and grounded athlete. In this case, the sponsor did not necessarily get a deeper meaning through the athlete. Instead, the image of the athlete himself was partially reinterpreted through the sponsor.

A similar risk appeared in relation to value-based athlete narratives. In the case of Andrey Rublev, participants associated the athlete with kindness, emotional vulnerability, sincerity and charity. Hence, a sponsor perceived as morally problematic or inconsistent with these values could raise doubts about the athlete's perceived authenticity and integrity. This shows that

athletes with strong value-based narratives can be particularly vulnerable to reverse transfer because choosing sponsors is perceived as a signal of personal authenticity and integrity. One Formula 1 interview reflected a similar pattern. In the case of Lewis Hamilton, one participant questioned the coherence of an AI-related sponsor because such a connection was difficult to harmonise with the values associated with Hamilton, including environmental awareness and social responsibility. The problem was not only whether the brand was suitable for the sport context, but whether the sponsorship link was compatible with values attached to Hamilton's public image. This example suggests that value-based mismatch may create a stronger reputational risk than visual or lifestyle mismatch.

Nevertheless, reverse transfer has not always been negative. In the case of Lando Norris, the fashion-related partnership with Ralph Lauren was described as making the driver's image appear more mature, stylish and visually coherent. This example shows that sponsor values can also enhance or refine an athlete's public image if the partnership is perceived as credible and aesthetically coherent.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants evaluated sponsorship relationships in two directions. Fans did not only consider whether the athlete made the sponsor more attractive or meaningful. They also reflected on what the sponsor relationship says about the athlete. Sponsorship appeared as a potentially valuable, but at the same time risky element of athlete branding. When a sponsor is perceived as coherent with the athlete narrative, it can enhance the image of the athlete. When it conflicts with the values, authenticity, or public persona of an athlete, it can create reputational tension and weaken the perceived coherence of the athlete brand.

5.6 Symbolic Affiliation and Fan Attachment

Another pattern in the interview was that sponsored products could become meaningful through fan attachment. In such cases, the sponsor was perceived not only as a commercial brand associated with the athlete. The product itself or the brand connection could become a symbol of intimacy, admiration, or identification. This does not mean that sponsorship automatically created the purchase intention. In these cases, participants' accounts suggest that fan attachment could make some sponsor products more emotionally relevant or personally meaningful. This pattern was especially noticeable where participants had a strong emotional connection with the athlete or driver. In such cases, sponsor products could be perceived almost as an extension of the athlete's public image. For example, in a Formula 1 interview, Hamilton's fashion and lifestyle partnerships were interpreted not only as an advertisement, but also as part of the

symbolic world around him. The appeal of such products was linked to admiration for Hamilton's style, values, and identity. The product became more than just a functional object; it carried part of the meaning associated with the athlete.

A similar mechanism emerged in the Lando Norris discussion. The partnership with TUMI was meaningful not only through the brand visibility, but through representation of travel and mobility, which corresponds well to the imagined lifestyle of the Formula 1 driver. The product could evoke associations with the rhythm of the sport itself: movements between races, international trips and a dynamic calendar. Monster Energy also became more symbolically charged when it connected to Norris through driver-specific visual elements, such as helmet colors. In these examples, the sponsor product became more memorable because it was tied to a recognizable fan-facing identity.

The tennis symbolic affiliation manifested itself slightly differently. Since sponsorship signals were often associated with equipment, clothing, or athlete-linked projects, symbolic value was more often attributed to performance, use, and values. For example, a racket brand like Head could become more personally relevant because it was used by a favorite player. Similarly, Rublev's charity-related brand activities gained importance because they coincided with Rublev's interpretation as sincere, humane and value-driven athlete. Here, the sponsor-related object was significant not because it was very visible, but because it resonated with the values associated with the athlete.

This finding adds nuance to the sponsorship role in consumer perception. Interviews do not show a simple transition from admiration for an athlete to immediate consumption. They show a softer symbolic process: a sponsor product could become more visible, attractive, or emotionally intense because it allowed a fan to keep in touch with an athlete. In this sense, sponsorship can work not only through awareness or fit, but also through affiliation.

Symbolic affiliation helps explain why some sponsor relationships were more memorable than others. When a sponsor product could carry part of an athlete's image, lifestyle, or values, it was easier for participants to integrate it into their own fan experience. The product didn't have to be purchased to become significant. Its meaning arose from its position within the relationship of a fan to an athlete.

5.7 Sport-Contextual Patterns in Sponsorship Interpretation

Participants' accounts suggest that the sport context shaped how sponsorship relationships with athletes were interpreted. The difference was not only in which brands the participants remembered, but also in where these brands appeared in practice and to whom they were

attributed. In this sense, tennis and Formula 1 created different material and media conditions for fan interpretation.

In tennis interviews, sponsorship signals were more often directly related to the individual player. Clothing, shoes, rackets, bags, watches, and social media campaigns were perceived as part of the athlete's personal public presence. Participants were more likely to associate them with the player's own image since the athlete wore, used, or demonstrated these objects directly. Tennis sponsorship looked more personal and individualized. For example, Lavazza connected with Sinner through cultural recognition, Oakberry with Sabalenka's lifestyle, and charity-related activities Rublev with the values that participants associated with his image.

Formula 1, by contrast, created a more layered sponsorship setting. The brands appeared on cars, helmets, racing suits, team accounts, and during race broadcasts. Thus, participants often identified sponsors as part of a broader racing environment, rather than as obviously drivers' personal endorsement relationships. This made the attribution of sponsorship more ambiguous. From the fans' point of view, the brand could be visible through the driver, but at the same time relate to the team partnership, car manufacturer relationship or the broader commercial infrastructure of the sport.

The strongest examples of this overlap are Max Verstappen and Red Bull. One participant described this relationship with the words: "Red Bull and Max Verstappen almost feel like interchangeable words" (F01). In this case, the sponsor was not perceived as a separate brand added to the image of the driver from the outside. Instead, the driver, the team, and the sponsor formed a single recognizable racing identity. Other Formula 1 cases showed a less complete but still noticeable overlap between driver image, team structures and sponsor exposure.

These patterns suggest that the sport context shaped how participants attributed sponsorship meaning. Tennis made it easier to perceive sponsorship as part of an individual athlete brand, because sponsorship signals were closely related to the player's body, equipment, and personal media presence. Formula 1, on the contrary, placed sponsors in a tighter commercial environment, where brands were often perceived through the team, the car, and the racing context. Therefore, the sport context shaped not only how visible the sponsor was, but also whether this connection was perceived as personal, team-based, or structurally embedded in the sport.

5.8 Summary of Findings

The interview analysis shows that fans make sense of athlete sponsorship through active interpretation rather than passive exposure. Sponsor brands were not understood merely as logos,

commercial partners or visibility cues. Instead, participants interpreted sponsorship relationships through the meanings they already associated with the athlete, including personality, values, lifestyle, emotional expression and public image.

A central finding is that athlete images were rarely perceived as fixed or one-dimensional. Participants often made sense of athletes through layered narratives that included tensions and contradictions. Emotionality could become entertaining, vulnerability could signal authenticity, discipline could coexist with commercialization, and playfulness with serious competitive identity. These narratives provided interpretive frames through which participants evaluated sponsorship relationships.

The findings further suggest that sponsor fit depended on narrative coherence. The sponsor was perceived as more convincing if the participants could explain why the brand made sense next to a particular athlete. Such a relationship could be based on nationality, lifestyle, values, sport context, visual identity, product use, or emotional style. At the same time, brand visibility alone was not sufficient for a deep meaning transfer. Participants often noticed or remembered sponsors, but this was not necessarily accompanied by deeper sponsor-related meaning.

The next important finding is related to the reverse direction of sponsorship meaning. Sponsorship relationships could also be reflected back on the athlete. If the sponsor was perceived as coherent, it could enhance the image of the athlete. If it seemed incompatible with the athlete's image and public opinion, it could create reputational risks. This shows that sponsorship is not only a potential benefit for brands, but also an important and sometimes risky element of athlete branding.

The findings also indicate that the sports context shaped how sponsorship became visible and interpreted. In tennis, sponsorship was more often perceived through the athlete's figure, equipment and personal presence in the media. In Formula 1, sponsors appeared in a denser environment of teams, cars, helmets, racing suits, and the commercial infrastructure of the sport. These contexts shaped who the participants attributed sponsor meanings to: the athlete himself, the team, or the broader sports community.

Finally, the findings suggest that fan attachment can make some sponsor products symbolically meaningful. In such cases, sponsored products did not function only as commercial cues. They could be associated with admiration, identification, or emotional closeness to an athlete. This does not mean a direct or automatic transition to purchase intention, but it shows that sponsor relationships can become part of a broader fan experience.

In general, the findings suggest that elite athlete sponsorship should be understood as a process of fan interpretation, and not as a simple transfer of visibility from the athlete to the brand. Sponsor meanings arise through the interaction of athlete narratives, perceived coherence,

visibility, emotional attachment and sports-contextual conditions. This sets the stage for the Discussion chapter, where the findings will relate to the theoretical concepts of athlete branding, consumer perception, sponsor fit and meaning transfer.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of the Main Findings

The findings suggest that participants perceive sponsorship of elite athletes not as a direct reaction to information about the sponsor, but as an active process of meaning-making. Participants evaluated sponsored brands not only by the logos or brand names they recalled. Images of athletes and narratives that were already known to fans were of great importance for the interpretation of sponsorship relations. This supports a consumer perception perspective in which exposure is only one stage of processing, while interpretation determines how marketing stimuli become meaningful to consumers (MacInnis et al., 1991). It also aligns with Keller's (1993) view of brand image as a network of associations held in consumer memory. To answer the research questions explicitly, Table 6.1 summarises the central findings in relation to each research question. The table does not present statistically generalisable results, but provides an analytical overview of the recurring interpretive patterns identified across the interviews.

Table 6.1

Summary of Main Findings by Research Question

Research question	Main finding
RQ1: How do sport fans describe the image and brand narratives of elite athletes in Formula 1 and professional tennis?	Fans described elite athletes through layered image associations and story-like interpretations rather than through isolated performance attributes. Athlete image included performance, personality, values, lifestyle, emotional expression, public behaviour, media visibility and symbolic meanings. These associations became narrative when participants organised them into broader stories of struggle, success, authenticity, rivalry, discipline, controversy, maturity or personal development.
RQ2: Which athlete-related meanings, values and narrative elements do fans consider most salient?	The most salient meanings were authenticity, discipline, emotionality, resilience, lifestyle, national or cultural identity, moral positioning, public conduct, visual style and perceived closeness to fans. These meanings were not equally important in every interview, but they repeatedly shaped how participants made sense of the focal athlete and their sponsor relationships.

Research question	Main finding
RQ3: How do fans recall and interpret sponsorship relationships connected to their focal athlete?	Sponsor recall was often triggered by visible cues such as logos, clothing, equipment, campaigns, cars, racing suits, social media posts or long-term partnerships. However, recall did not necessarily imply deeper interpretation. Sponsorship became meaningful when participants could explain why the sponsor appeared coherent with the athlete's image, values, lifestyle, sport context or public narrative.
RQ4: How do fans connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor-related brand perceptions?	Fans connected athlete meanings to sponsor perceptions through perceived narrative coherence. Sponsor brands were evaluated more positively or described as more meaningful when they could be embedded in the athlete's existing public story. When this connection was weak, sponsor brands often remained at the level of visibility, awareness or commercial presence rather than becoming deeper sponsor-related associations.
RQ5: How do sport-contextual features of Formula 1 and professional tennis appear in fan accounts and help contextualise interpretations of athlete-sponsor relationships?	Sport context shaped attribution. In professional tennis, sponsor cues were often perceived as more directly attached to the individual athlete through clothing, equipment and personal campaigns. In Formula 1, sponsor cues were often embedded in a denser environment of teams, cars, racing suits, technical partnerships and broadcasts. This made it more difficult for participants to distinguish between driver-related, team-related and sport-structural sponsor meanings.

A crucial interpretation of the results is that the athlete served as an interpretive anchor for sponsor meaning. Participants assessed sponsors in relation to the athlete's perceived personality, values, lifestyle, emotional expression, and public history. This is consistent with athlete branding research, which conceptualises athletes as brands whose images extend beyond sporting performance and include symbolic and personality-based associations (Arai et al., 2014). This point of view is supported by the fact that fans do not just perceive athletes' images as fixed values. They collect their narratives from various public sources and then use these narratives to assess whether a sponsor relationship appears coherent.

The results also clarify existing assumptions about the meaning transfer in sponsorship. Meaning transfer theory explains how meanings associated with a person, event or cultural object may move toward a brand (McCracken, 1989; Gwinner, 1997). However, interviews show that this process was not automatic and was not limited to one direction. Sponsor visibility was often associated with awareness or recall, but it was not necessarily accompanied by deeper sponsor-related meaning in participants' accounts. At the same time, sponsor meanings were sometimes described as reflecting back on the athlete image, either strengthening perceived coherence or creating reputational tension. This expands sponsorship research on image transfer and

congruence by emphasising the interpretive and potentially bidirectional character of athlete-sponsor associations (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005).

Overall, the main findings point to a more conditional understanding of athlete sponsorship. Sponsor relationships became meaningful when fans could connect them to an athlete narrative in a credible way, when the relationship resonated with existing fan attachment, or when the sport context made the sponsorship personally attributable to the athlete. Where these conditions were absent, sponsorship often remained at the level of visibility or recall. The following sections discuss these implications in relation to sponsor fit, meaning transfer, sport context and the broader contribution of the study.

6.2 Athlete Narratives, Sponsor Fit and Consumer Meaning-Making

The relevance of the results lies in the fact that they complicate the understanding of sponsor fit. In the literature on sponsorship, fit is often viewed as a relationship between two entities: the sponsor and the sponsored property. Nevertheless, the interviews in this thesis show that in the context of elite athlete sponsorship, this connection is mediated by a fan interpretation. A sponsor does not automatically “fit” an athlete just because of the similarity of the product category or strategic alignment. It becomes fitting when fans can convincingly embed the brand into the athlete's public story.

This is important for athlete branding because elite athletes operate as brands with symbolic, emotional and personality-based associations, not only as sporting performers (Arai et al., 2014). However, this study shows that these associations are not fixed values that are automatically transferred to sponsors. Fans actively connect different elements of an athlete's image and use these connections to evaluate sponsorship relationships. Athlete narrative works like a filter in this sense: it helps fans decide whether sponsorship looks authentic, forced, overly commercial, or meaningful.

Keller's (1993) concept of brand image as a set of associations in consumer memory is useful for interpreting this process. In the interview, the athlete's image functioned as a structure of multiple associations through which another brand was assembled. The sponsor was perceived in relation to what the participants already associated with the athlete. If these associations provided a credible explanation for the partnership, the sponsorship link looked more convincing. If such a connection did not arise, brand visibility alone was not enough to form a stronger brand meaning.

It also clarifies the existing literature on fit and congruence in sponsorship. As per previous research, perceived fit can influence sponsorship processing and image transfer (Gwinner &

Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005). The findings are consistent with the importance of fit, but suggest that fit should not be understood only as similarity between product categories. Fit can also be created through narrative coherence: cultural identity, lifestyle, values, aesthetics, actual product use or the emotional tone of an athlete.

Narrative-based consumer research helps explain why this is possible. Escalas (2004) argues that consumers use stories to connect brands with personal meanings. In the interview, the fans acted in a similar way. They perceived sponsorship not as an isolated commercial transaction, but as part of a broader athlete narrative. That is why non-sport brands such as fashion, coffee, travel or food brands could still be perceived as relevant. Their relevance arose not from the product category itself, but from the way fans associated the brand with the athlete.

Therefore, sponsor fit in elite athlete sponsorship can be understood as interpretive judgment. Brands and managers can strategically design partnerships, but their coherence is ultimately assessed by fans. Sponsorship becomes meaningful when it can be embedded in the athlete narrative, through which fans already interpret the athlete. This helps explain why some highly visible sponsors remained weak associations, while other partnerships were perceived as more authentic, even if they were outside the narrow sports category.

6.3 Rethinking Meaning Transfer: Limited Transfer and Reverse Transfer

The findings suggest that meaning transfer in elite athlete sponsorship should be understood as conditional rather than automatic. Classical meaning-transfer theory explains how meanings associated with a person or cultural object may become connected to a brand (McCracken, 1989), while sponsorship research applies a similar logic to image transfer between a sponsored object and a sponsor (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). The interviews suggest, however, that being visible as a sponsor was sometimes not linked to a greater degree of meaning in participants' accounts in relation to sponsors. Participants were able to recall or identify the sponsor brands but recognition did not always result in a sense of emotional, authentic or meaningful connection to the sponsor.

These findings are consistent with empirical sport sponsorship research showing that image transfer depends on more than the presence of a sponsor-property link. Chiu and Pyun (2020) show that congruence can influence event emotions, attitudes toward the event and attitudes toward the sponsor. Gross and Wiedmann (2015) further demonstrate that sponsorship meanings can circulate through broader associative networks, including co-sponsor relationships. Alonso Dos Santos et al. (2021) show that image-transfer processes are shaped by perceived sponsorship leverage, perceived product quality and fan involvement. Boronczyk and Breuer (2020) also

emphasise that sponsor attitude formation can be influenced by affective responses and by the fact that sponsor messages are processed in emotionally charged sport environments. Taken together, this literature supports the interpretation that image transfer is not a simple consequence of exposure, but depends on congruence, involvement, affective response and consumer interpretation.

The present study adds qualitative depth to this research by showing how fans explain the perceived coherence of athlete-sponsor relationships in their own words. Sponsor brands became more meaningful when participants could connect them to athlete image, lifestyle, values, product use, emotional attachment, symbolic affiliation or sport-contextual meaning. Where such connections were weak, sponsor recall often remained limited to logo recognition, brand awareness or general commercial visibility. This finding is also consistent with Keller's (1993) view that brand associations need to become meaningful within consumer memory rather than merely visible.

Athlete-related endorsement research further supports this interpretation. Rai et al. (2021) show that sports celebrity personality, endorser-brand congruence, brand credibility and image transfer are connected in consumer evaluations. Koo (2022) similarly shows that athlete-product fit and image transfer matter for attitudes toward athlete celebrity brand extensions. These studies are relevant because the interviews in this thesis also show that athlete-related meanings do not transfer equally to every sponsor. Transfer was more visible when participants could interpret the sponsor as fitting the athlete's public persona, lifestyle, values or narrative position.

The findings also complicate the direction of meaning transfer. Some sponsorship relationships were described as reflecting back on the athlete. In these cases, participants did not only ask whether the athlete made the sponsor more attractive or meaningful. They also evaluated what the sponsor relationship suggested about the athlete's authenticity, commercialisation, maturity, values or public image. This reverse direction was especially visible when a sponsor appeared inconsistent with the athlete's value-based narrative or when a sponsor relationship visually or symbolically refined the athlete's image.

Taken together, the findings refine meaning-transfer theory in two ways. First, transfer appears limited when sponsor visibility is not supported by narrative coherence, fan relevance or perceived fit. Second, transfer can be bidirectional, because sponsor meanings may also be reflected back onto the athlete. Athlete sponsorship should therefore be understood as a fragile interpretive process in which the sponsorship link needs to appear meaningful not only for the sponsor brand, but also for the athlete image to which it is attached.

6.4 Sport Context and Sponsor Attribution

Another important implication of the findings concerns the attribution of sponsorship meaning. Before the meanings can be transferred from athlete to the brand or back, fans need to understand exactly what kind of sponsorship connection they are observing and to whom the sponsor is attributed. The literature on sponsorship shows that context, fit, and congruence influence the processing of sponsorship information and image transfer (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005). This study adds that the sport context also influences attribution: fans may perceive a sponsor as part of the image of an athlete, team, outfit, event setting, or the broader commercial environment of sports.

Formula 1 and tennis have different settings for sponsor visibility. In tennis, sponsorship signals were often directly linked to the individual athlete through clothing, rackets, bags, watches, or personal media appearances. Therefore, it was easier for the participants to perceive the sponsor as part of the athlete's personal brand. This is consistent with the idea that athlete brands include not only athletic performance, but also symbolic and personality-based associations (Arai et al., 2014). At the same time, a more personal attribution also meant that a poorly fitting sponsor could have stronger implications for the athlete's public image.

As noted in Chapter 5.6, Formula 1 is characterized by a denser sponsorship environment. Brands can be seen on cars, racing suits, helmets, team social media, during broadcasts. Thus, sponsor meaning was often less unambiguously associated with a particular driver. A visible brand could be perceived not only as a driver association, but also as a team partnership, technical sponsor, manufacturer relationship, or just part of the commercial structure of Formula 1. This helps explain why high visibility has not always created personal relevance. The brand could often appear in the field of view, but not become strongly associated with the driver. Thus, sport context is important not because one sport creates a stronger sponsorship effect than another. It is important because it sets the conditions in which fans attribute meaning. Tennis more often makes sponsorship more individually attributable, whereas Formula 1 places it in the broader team and sport ecosystem. This distinction is important for athlete sponsorship because the meaning of transfer depends not only on visibility or fit, but also on whether fans can recognize the sponsorship as personally related to the athlete.

6.5 Contributions, Limitations, and Outlook

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its focus on fan interpretation as the central mechanism through which elite athlete sponsorship becomes meaningful. Existing literature

understands elite athletes as brands with symbolic, emotional and personality-based associations (Arai et al., 2014), while brand image research emphasises the role of associations in consumer memory (Keller, 1993). This thesis combines these approaches and shows that athlete-related associations can structure the perception of sponsorship relationships. In this context, sponsor fit is not just about product category similarity or strategic alignment. It is also an assessment of whether a sponsor can be meaningfully placed within an athlete narrative.

A second contribution concerns meaning transfer in athlete sponsorship. Classical meaning-transfer theory and sponsorship research explain how meanings can move from a person, event or sponsored property to a brand (McCracken, 1989; Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). However, the results of this study clarify this logic in two ways. Firstly, sponsor visibility did not always lead to deeper brand meaning. In many cases, it remained at the recognition or recall level. Secondly, the sponsor's values could be reflected back on the athlete, either enhancing the athlete's image or creating reputational risks. This adds a bidirectional dimension to the understanding of athlete-sponsor relationships, which means that sponsorship can influence both sides of this association.

The practical significance of the results is important for sponsoring brands, athletes and their managers. Visibility, such as repetitive logo placement, alone is not enough for brands. Partnerships are more likely to become meaningful when fans understand why this particular brand is associated with this athlete. A convincing connection with the athlete's public image is necessary. For athletes and athlete managers, the results highlight the importance of sponsor selection. A poorly fitting sponsor may not only fail to benefit the brand, but also weaken the perceived authenticity of the elite athlete's image itself.

For an effective sponsorship strategy, the sport context should also be taken into consideration. In professional tennis, sponsorship was more easily perceived as part of an athlete's personal brand, whereas in Formula 1, attribution was more difficult because brands are embedded in teams, cars, racing suits, broadcasts and the broader commercial environment of the sport. Therefore, brands that want to form a personal association with the driver need to make this connection more explicit and understandable for fans.

The study also has several limitations. It is based on a small qualitative sample and does not aim for statistical generalisation. Selection of focal athletes by the participants themselves allowed them to discuss the athletes they follow closely, but at the same time led to the fact that some athletes were more represented than others. The study also focused on fan interpretations rather than real purchase behaviour or measurable changes in brand attitude. In addition, only two sport

contexts were considered, and perspectives of sponsors, athlete managers or agencies were not included in the analysis.

Future research could extend this study by including a larger and more diverse sample, examining additional sport contexts or analysing one athlete-sponsor partnership in greater depth. Social media analysis would also be useful for understanding how sponsorship meanings are discussed, reinforced or challenged within fan communities. Quantitative studies could further test whether perceived narrative coherence, reverse transfer and sponsor attribution influence brand attitude, athlete image or purchase intention. Such research would help to determine more precisely under what conditions athlete sponsorship goes beyond visibility and becomes meaningful to consumers.

6.6 Conclusion

This thesis explored how sport fans interpret elite athletes' brand narratives and how these interpretations become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions in Formula 1 and professional tennis. The findings show that athlete sponsorship should not be understood as a simple or automatic transfer of meanings from athlete to sponsor. Instead, sponsor-related meanings emerge through fan interpretation.

Fans evaluated sponsor relationships through the athlete narratives they already associated with the focal athlete. These narratives included personality, values, lifestyle, emotional expression, public image, performance history and sport-contextual meanings. Sponsor brands became more meaningful when participants could interpret them as coherent with the athlete's story. When this coherence was absent, sponsorship often remained at the level of visibility or recall.

The study also suggests that meaning transfer can be limited and bidirectional. Sponsor visibility can lead to awareness but not to the transfer of more symbolic meaning; sponsor meaning can also resonate back to the athlete and influence perceptions of authenticity, coherence, and/or reputation. In this sense, athlete sponsorship creates opportunities for brands, but also requires careful management because fans may evaluate both sides of the sponsorship relationship.

Overall, the thesis contributes to athlete branding, sponsorship and sport consumer behaviour research by showing that elite athlete sponsorship is a context-sensitive and interpretive meaning-making process. Athlete narratives influence sponsor-related brand perceptions not through direct causal effects, but by providing symbolic frames through which fans evaluate sponsor fit, authenticity, affiliation and possible mismatch.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Construct Table for Interview Guide Development

The table below presents the analytical logic underlying the development of the semi-structured interview guide. It shows how the interview instrument was constructed around the central concepts of the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 3. The purpose of the table is to make transparent how the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 2 were translated into interview questions and initial coding categories.

The interview guide is not designed to test hypotheses or to confirm the analytical framework. Instead, the framework functions as a sensitising structure for eliciting participants' own interpretations of athlete image, athlete brand narratives and sponsor-related brand perceptions. The same analytical logic is used for both Formula 1 and professional tennis interviews, although the wording is adapted to the respective sport context.

Table A.1

Construct Table for Interview Guide Development

Analytical concept	Working definition / analytical focus in this study	Interview question(s)	Elicitation logic and category derivation
Sport fans as interpretive audience	Participants are engaged fans who regularly follow either Formula 1 or professional tennis and are able to reflect on athlete-related meanings and sponsor linkages.	Q1: How do you usually follow Formula 1 / professional tennis?	This question functions as a warm-up and context-setting question. Deductive categories are derived from Section 2.6, including sport-following behaviour, fan involvement and forms of engagement. Inductive subcategories may include live viewing, highlights, social media, news, podcasts or fan discussions.
Focal elite athlete	A participant-selected current or	Q2: Within Formula 1 / professional tennis,	This question ensures that the interview focuses on one

Analytical concept	Working definition / analytical focus in this study	Interview question(s)	Elicitation logic and category derivation
	recently active Formula 1 driver or ATP/WT A tennis player competing at the highest professional level, with public visibility and visible sponsorship relationships.	which elite athlete do you follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in detail?	athlete throughout. If participants mention several athletes, they are asked to select the one whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they feel most able to discuss in depth. The category is derived deductively from Sections 2.2 and 4.2, with inductive attention to reasons for athlete selection and familiarity.
Athlete image	The broader set of associations fans attach to the athlete, including traits, personality, values, performance-related meanings, lifestyle cues and symbolic impressions.	Q3: What comes to your mind when you think about this athlete? Q4: If you had to describe this athlete's personality to someone who does not know them at all, what would you tell that person? Q5: What mostly characterises and distinguishes this athlete from other athletes in this sport?	These questions elicit athlete-related associations before introducing sponsorship. Deductive categories are derived from Sections 2.1 and 2.2, including personality, performance image, values, lifestyle meanings and symbolic associations. Inductive subcategories will be developed from participants' own descriptions.
Athlete brand narratives	Story-like organisation of athlete-related meanings, including public stories,	Q6: When fans or media talk about this athlete, what kind of public story or narrative do you think	These questions elicit participant interpretations of publicly circulating athlete narratives. Deductive categories are derived from

Analytical concept	Working definition / analytical focus in this study	Interview question(s)	Elicitation logic and category derivation
	recurring themes, turning points, roles, values and implied purpose.	surrounds them? Q7: Which events, moments or recurring themes are most important in this story? Q8: What do you think this story suggests about who the athlete is or what they stand for?	Section 2.3, including narrative themes, turning points, roles, value cues and public storylines. Inductive categories may include comeback, rivalry, dominance, authenticity, struggle, controversy, resilience or other narrative types emerging from the data.
Fan interpretation / consumer perception	The process through which participants notice, attend to and interpret athlete-related and sponsor-related cues based on knowledge, involvement, emotional attachment, perceived authenticity and perceived fit.	Addressed across Q3–Q11, especially through follow-up probes such as: “Can you give an example?”, “What makes you say that?”, “How did you notice this?”	This is not elicited through one isolated question but through the way participants explain their perceptions across the interview. Deductive categories are derived from Section 2.5, including exposure, attention, interpretation, perceived fit, authenticity and emotional or moral evaluation. Inductive categories will capture participant-specific interpretive mechanisms.
Sponsor recall and sponsorship link	Participants’ awareness of official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands associated with the focal athlete.	Q9: Which brands do you know are official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands of this athlete?	This question clarifies that the study is interested in sponsor, partner or endorsement relationships rather than any brand the participant generally associates with the athlete. Deductive categories are derived from Section 2.4,

Analytical concept	Working definition / analytical focus in this study	Interview question(s)	Elicitation logic and category derivation
			including sponsor-athlete linkage and sponsor awareness. Inductive subcategories may include strong recall, uncertain recall, confusion between athlete, team or event sponsors, and sponsor visibility.
Sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer	The interpretive connection through which meanings associated with the athlete may become linked to sponsor brands as secondary brand associations or image-related meanings.	Q10: When you think about these brands in connection with this athlete, what associations or impressions come to mind? Q11: Do any values, qualities or meanings of the athlete seem to match or mismatch these sponsoring brands? Why?	These questions explore whether and how participants connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor brands. Deductive categories are derived from Section 2.4, including meaning transfer, image transfer, secondary brand associations, perceived fit and perceived mismatch. Inductive categories may include positive transfer, negative transfer, ambiguous transfer or no perceived transfer.
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	Associations, meanings and symbolic impressions that participants attach to sponsor brands in connection with the focal athlete.	Q10: When you think about these brands in connection with this athlete, what associations or impressions come to mind? Q11: Do any values, qualities or meanings of the	These questions explore whether and how participants connect athlete-related meanings to sponsor brands. Deductive categories are derived from Section 2.4, including meaning transfer, image transfer, secondary brand associations, perceived

Analytical concept	Working definition / analytical focus in this study	Interview question(s)	Elicitation logic and category derivation
		athlete seem to match or mismatch these sponsoring brands? Why? Q12: Is there anything else about this athlete, their public image or their sponsors that you think is important for this study?	fit and perceived mismatch. Inductive categories may include positive transfer, negative transfer, ambiguous transfer or no perceived transfer.
Sport-contextual meaning-making	Context-sensitive analysis of how Formula 1 and professional tennis fans interpret athlete narratives and sponsor-related meanings within their focal sport context.	Not asked as a direct comparison question. Contextual information is derived from participants' accounts of their focal sport, media consumption, athlete visibility, sponsor recall and perceptions of athlete-sponsor relationships.	Participants are not asked to compare Formula 1 and tennis directly. Instead, the same analytical structure is used across both sport-specific interview guides to ensure consistency in data collection. During analysis, the coded material is examined thematically across the full dataset, while sport-specific features are considered where they help to contextualise participants' interpretations of athlete narratives and sponsor-related meanings.

This construct table was developed to ensure that the interview guide is systematically aligned with the theoretical background, the analytical framework and the research questions. Rather than directly asking participants to explain abstract theoretical relationships, the guide elicits athlete image, athlete brand narratives and sponsor-related perceptions through open-ended questions. Their possible relationships are then examined through qualitative analysis.

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Formula 1 Fans

This interview guide is designed for participants whose focal sport is Formula 1. The purpose of the interview is to explore how Formula 1 fans interpret the public image and brand narratives of one focal elite Formula 1 driver and how these interpretations become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

Before the interview begins, the participant receives a written participant information sheet and a written consent form. The interview starts only after written informed consent has been provided. At the beginning of the call, the researcher briefly confirms that the participant agrees to take part and agrees to audio recording.

For the purposes of this study, an elite Formula 1 driver refers to a current or recently active driver competing, or recently having competed, in the Formula 1 World Championship, with public visibility and visible sponsorship relationships. Each participant is asked to focus on one driver throughout the interview. If the participant mentions several drivers, the interviewer asks them to choose the one driver whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they feel most able to discuss in detail.

Section 1. Background and Focal Driver

Q1. How do you usually follow Formula 1?

Possible prompts:

How long have you followed Formula 1?

How often do you follow it during the season?

Do you usually follow races, highlights, news, social media, documentaries or fan discussions?

Q2. Within Formula 1, which elite driver do you follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in detail?

Possible prompts:

Why this driver?

How familiar are you with their career, media presence or sponsor relationships?

Do you follow their interviews, social media or media coverage?

Section 2. Driver Image

Q3. What comes to your mind when you think about this driver?

Possible prompts:

What are the first words, impressions or associations that come to mind?

Can you give an example of what makes you think of them in this way?

Q4. If you had to describe this driver's personality to someone who does not know them at all, what would you tell that person?

Possible prompts:

What kind of personality traits would you associate with them?

What makes you describe them this way?

Are there specific moments, behaviours or communication examples that support this impression?

Q5. What mostly characterises and distinguishes this driver from other Formula 1 drivers?

Possible prompts:

Is it their performance, driving style, public behaviour, communication style, values, lifestyle or something else?

What makes this driver stand out in Formula 1?

Would you say this distinction is mostly sport-related, personality-related or image-related?

Section 3. Driver Brand Narratives

Q6. When fans or media talk about this driver, what kind of public story or narrative do you think surrounds them?

Possible prompts:

How would you describe this story in your own words?

Is there a particular image, role or storyline that often appears around this driver?

Q7. Which events, moments or recurring themes are most important in this story?

Possible prompts:

Turning points?

Setbacks?

Victories?

Rivalries?

Team changes?

Personal background?

Controversies?

Comeback or success moments?

Q8. What do you think this story suggests about who the driver is or what they stand for?

Possible prompts:

What values, qualities or meanings does this story communicate?

Does the story make the driver seem more authentic, ambitious, resilient, controversial, relatable or something else?

What makes you interpret it this way?

Section 4. Sponsor-Related Brand Perceptions

Q9. Which brands do you know are official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands associated with this driver?

Possible prompts:

Which brands come to mind first?

Where have you noticed these brands for example on the car, racing suit, helmet, social media,

advertising, campaigns or media coverage?

Do you understand this brand as a personal sponsor of the driver, a team-related sponsor, or another type of brand connection?

Q10. When you think about these brands in connection with this driver, what associations or impressions come to mind?

Possible prompts:

What do you associate with the brand when it is connected to this driver?

Does the driver make the brand seem different to you in any way?

Can you give an example?

Q11. Do any values, qualities or meanings of the driver seem to match or mismatch these sponsoring brands? Why?

Possible prompts:

Which driver qualities fit the brand well?

Are there any meanings that do not fit?

Does the connection feel authentic, logical, surprising, forced or irrelevant to you?

Does the driver's public story influence how you perceive the sponsor?

Section 5. Closing Reflection

Q12. Is there anything else about this driver, their public image or their sponsors that you think is important for this study?

Possible prompts:

Is there any example, impression or thought that stands out strongly to you?

Is there anything about the relationship between Formula 1 drivers and sponsors that you think is important but has not been discussed?

Optional Neutral Follow-Up Probes

The following probes may be used throughout the interview where appropriate:

Can you give an example?

What makes you say that?

How did you notice this?

Could you explain this in more detail?

Has your impression changed over time?

Is this something you noticed yourself, or something discussed among fans or in media?

Appendix C. Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Professional Tennis Fans

This interview guide is designed for participants whose focal sport is professional tennis, specifically ATP or WTA professional tennis. The purpose of the interview is to explore how tennis fans interpret the public image and brand narratives of one focal elite tennis player and how these interpretations become connected to sponsor-related brand perceptions.

Before the interview begins, the participant receives a written participant information sheet and a written consent form. The interview starts only after written informed consent has been provided. At the beginning of the call, the researcher briefly confirms that the participant agrees to take part and agrees to audio recording.

For the purposes of this study, an elite tennis player refers to a current or recently active player competing, or recently having competed, on the ATP or WTA professional tennis tours, with public visibility and visible sponsorship relationships. Each participant is asked to focus on one player throughout the interview. If the participant mentions several players, the interviewer asks them to choose the one player whose public image, story and sponsor relationships they feel most able to discuss in detail.

Section 1. Background and Focal Player

Q1. How do you usually follow professional tennis?

Possible prompts:

How long have you followed professional tennis?

How often do you follow it during the season?

Do you usually follow matches, highlights, tournaments, rankings, news, social media, documentaries or fan discussions?

Do you mainly follow ATP, WTA or both?

Q2. Within professional tennis, which elite player do you follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in detail?

Possible prompts:

Why this player?

How familiar are you with their career, media presence or sponsor relationships?

Do you follow their matches, interviews, social media or media coverage?

Section 2. Player Image

Q3. What comes to your mind when you think about this player?

Possible prompts:

What are the first words, impressions or associations that come to mind?

Can you give an example of what makes you think of them in this way?

Q4. If you had to describe this player's personality to someone who does not know them at all, what would you tell that person?

Possible prompts:

What kind of personality traits would you associate with them?

What makes you describe them this way?

Are there specific moments, behaviours or communication examples that support this impression?

Q5. What mostly characterises and distinguishes this player from other professional tennis players?

Possible prompts:

Is it their performance, playing style, public behaviour, communication style, values, lifestyle or something else?

What makes this player stand out in professional tennis?

Would you say this distinction is mostly sport-related, personality-related or image-related?

Section 3. Player Brand Narratives

Q6. When fans or media talk about this player, what kind of public story or narrative do you think surrounds them?

Possible prompts:

How would you describe this story in your own words?

Is there a particular image, role or storyline that often appears around this player?

Q7. Which events, moments or recurring themes are most important in this story?

Possible prompts:

Turning points?

Setbacks?

Victories?

Grand Slam moments?

Rivalries?

Injuries?

Comebacks?

Personal background?

Controversies?

Changes in ranking or career development?

Q8. What do you think this story suggests about who the player is or what they stand for?

Possible prompts:

What values, qualities or meanings does this story communicate?

Does the story make the player seem more authentic, ambitious, resilient, controversial, relatable or something else?

What makes you interpret it this way?

Section 4. Sponsor-Related Brand Perceptions

Q9. Which brands do you know are official sponsors, partners or endorsing brands associated with this player?

Possible prompts:

Which brands come to mind first?

Where have you noticed these brands — for example on clothing, rackets, equipment, social media, advertising, campaigns, press appearances or tournament coverage?

Do you understand this brand as a personal sponsor of the player, an equipment or apparel sponsor, a tournament-related sponsor, or another type of brand connection?

Q10. When you think about these brands in connection with this player, what associations or impressions come to mind?

Possible prompts:

What do you associate with the brand when it is connected to this player?

Does the player make the brand seem different to you in any way?

Can you give an example?

Q11. Do any values, qualities or meanings of the player seem to match or mismatch these sponsoring brands? Why?

Possible prompts:

Which player qualities fit the brand well?

Are there any meanings that do not fit?

Does the connection feel authentic, logical, surprising, forced or irrelevant to you?

Does the player's public story influence how you perceive the sponsor?

Section 5. Closing Reflection

Q12. Is there anything else about this player, their public image or their sponsors that you think is important for this study?

Possible prompts:

Is there any example, impression or thought that stands out strongly to you?

Is there anything about the relationship between professional tennis players and sponsors that you think is important but has not been discussed?

Optional Neutral Follow-Up Probes

The following probes may be used throughout the interview where appropriate:

Can you give an example?

What makes you say that?

How did you notice this?

Could you explain this in more detail?

Has your impression changed over time?

Is this something you noticed yourself, or something discussed among fans or in media?

Appendix D. Initial Deductive Categories for Coding

The table below presents the initial deductive categories used in the first stage of coding. These categories are derived from the theoretical background, the analytical framework and the concept–question alignment of the interview guide. They function as sensitising categories rather than fixed coding containers. In line with the deductive–inductive logic of the study, these categories may be refined, expanded, merged or reinterpreted during the analysis in response to the empirical material.

Table D.1

Initial Deductive Categories for Coding

Initial deductive category	Possible subcategories / coding focus	Related interview question(s)	Analytical purpose
Sport-following background	Focal sport; following frequency; following channels; live viewing; highlights; news; social media; documentaries; fan discussions; level of involvement.	Q1	To understand the participant's relationship to Formula 1 or professional tennis and to contextualize their interpretations as sport fans.
Focal elite athlete	Selected focal athlete; reason for athlete selection; familiarity	Q2	To ensure that each interview focuses on one

Initial deductive category	Possible subcategories / coding focus	Related interview question(s)	Analytical purpose
	with the athlete; closeness of following; athlete-specific interest; participant attachment to the athlete.		participant-selected elite athlete and to understand why this athlete is meaningful to the participant.
Athlete image	Performance-related meanings; personality traits; character descriptors; values; lifestyle meanings; public behaviour; symbolic impressions; authenticity; credibility; distinguishing characteristics.	Q3, Q4, Q5	To identify how participants describe and interpret the athlete as a public figure and what associations they attach to the athlete.
Athlete personality	Human-like traits attributed to the athlete; perceived sincerity; ambition; confidence; resilience; discipline; arrogance; relatability; emotional expression; moral character.	Q4	To capture personality-related meanings as one specific dimension of athlete image.
Distinguishing characteristics	Features that differentiate the athlete from others in the sport; driving or playing style; competitive identity; public image; values; communication style; lifestyle; media presence.	Q5	To identify which characteristics participants perceive as making the athlete distinctive within Formula 1 or professional tennis.
Athlete brand narratives	Public story; narrative frame; recurring themes; turning points; roles; values; implied purpose; story-like meanings; publicly circulating cues.	Q6, Q7, Q8	To identify how participants reconstruct the athlete's broader public story and which narrative elements they perceive as salient.

Initial deductive category	Possible subcategories / coding focus	Related interview question(s)	Analytical purpose
Narrative elements	Comeback; rivalry; dominance; struggle; resilience; authenticity; controversy; activism; success; failure; personal background; team change; injury; Grand Slam moments; championship moments; career development.	Q6, Q7, Q8	To code the specific narrative components through which athlete brand narratives become meaningful in participant accounts.
Fan interpretation / consumer perception	Exposure to athlete-sponsor cues; attention to athlete-related meanings; interpretation of public image; perceived authenticity; emotional evaluation; moral evaluation; perceived fit; expertise; prior knowledge; fan-community influence.	Q3–Q11, especially follow-up probes	To analyze how participants make sense of athlete-related and sponsor-related meanings rather than treating sponsorship meaning transfer as automatic.
Sponsor recall and sponsor linkage	Recalled sponsors; official sponsors; partners; endorsing brands; personal sponsor vs team sponsor vs event/tournament sponsor; sponsor visibility; uncertainty about sponsor relationship; source of sponsor awareness.	Q9	To identify which sponsor brands participants associate with the focal athlete and how clearly they understand the type of sponsor linkage.
Sponsorship-based meaning and image transfer	Athlete-to-sponsor meaning connection; secondary brand associations; image transfer; perceived fit; perceived mismatch; positive transfer; negative transfer; ambiguous transfer; no perceived transfer.	Q10, Q11	To analyze whether and how athlete-related meanings become connected to sponsor brands in participants' interpretations.

Initial deductive category	Possible subcategories / coding focus	Related interview question(s)	Analytical purpose
Sponsor-related brand perceptions	Sponsor brand associations; symbolic impressions; perceived meanings; perceived values and qualities; evaluative tone; authenticity of sponsor connection; perceived change in sponsor perception; sponsor image in connection with the athlete.	Q10, Q11, Q12	To identify how participants perceive sponsor brands when they discuss them in connection with the focal athlete.
Sport-context specific meanings	Formula 1-specific sponsorship environment; team and constructor context; visual sponsor presence; technology and luxury associations; tennis-specific endorsement context; equipment/apparel sponsorship; individual athlete positioning; ATP/WTa context.	Across interviews	To identify meanings that appear specific to Formula 1 or professional tennis and may shape how athlete-sponsor relationships are interpreted.
Cross-context comparison	Similarities and differences between Formula 1 and professional tennis interviews; sport-specific sponsor visibility; differences in athlete branding structures; differences in fan interpretation; differences in perceived athlete-sponsor fit.	Not asked directly; derived across coded material	To support the context-sensitive analysis by examining whether similar or different interpretive patterns appear across the two sport contexts.
Unexpected inductive meanings	New themes, associations, examples or interpretive patterns not anticipated in the analytical framework; ambiguous or contradictory	Across interviews	To preserve openness in the analysis and ensure that the coding process is not limited to deductively anticipated categories.

Initial deductive category	Possible subcategories / coding focus	Related interview question(s)	Analytical purpose
	accounts; participant-specific meanings.		

These initial categories provide a structured starting point for the first coding round. However, they do not determine the final themes in advance. During analysis, the deductive categories are revised through inductive engagement with the interview material. The approach ensures theoretical coherence without constraining the emergence of participant-generated meanings, unexpected sponsor associations and sport-specific interpretive patterns.

Appendix E. Participant Information Sheet / Data Protection Notice

Study title:

How Elite Athletes' Brand Narratives Influence Consumer Perceptions of Sponsoring Brands: A Qualitative Consumer Behaviour Study in Formula 1 and Tennis

Researcher:

Marina Tychina

Master's student in International Business Administration, University of Vienna

Supervisor:

ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Katharina Auer-Zotlöterer

Department of Marketing and International Business, University of Vienna

1. Purpose of the study

You are invited to participate in a master's thesis research project conducted at the University of Vienna. The study explores how sport fans interpret the public image and brand narratives of elite athletes and how these interpretations become connected to perceptions of sponsoring brands.

The empirical focus of the study is Formula 1 and professional tennis, specifically ATP and WTA professional tennis. The study aims to understand how fans describe one focal elite athlete, which public stories or meanings they associate with this athlete, and how they perceive sponsor brands connected to the athlete.

2. Why you are invited

You are invited because you follow either Formula 1 or professional tennis and may be able to discuss one elite athlete and at least one sponsor, partner or endorsing brand associated with this athlete. Participation is open only to individuals who are at least 18 years old and meet the study's inclusion criteria.

3. What participation involves

If you agree to participate, you will take part in one semi-structured online interview. The interview will be conducted via Zoom call.

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be asked questions about:

How you follow Formula 1 or professional tennis;

One elite athlete whom you follow particularly closely;

Your impressions of this athlete's public image and personality;

Public stories or narratives surrounding the athlete;

Sponsor, partner or endorsing brands associated with the athlete;

How you perceive these brands in connection with the athlete.

There are no right or wrong answers. The study is interested in your own perceptions, examples and interpretations.

4. Voluntary participation

Participation is completely voluntary and unpaid. You may refuse to answer any question. You may stop the interview at any time without giving a reason. Choosing not to participate or withdrawing from the interview will have no negative consequences.

5. Written consent and audio recording

Before the interview, you will be asked to provide written informed consent. The interview will be audio-recorded only if you agree to audio recording. Audio recording is used to allow accurate transcription and to help the researcher focus on the conversation during the interview.

You may refuse audio recording. If you do not agree to audio recording, the interview will not be recorded.

6. Personal data collected

The study collects only data necessary for the research purpose. This may include:

Basic screening information, such as age confirmation, focal sport and interview language preference;

Contact information required for arranging the interview;

The audio recording of the interview, if you consent to recording;

The interview transcript;

Contextual information relevant to the interpretation of the interview, such as how you follow the sport and which athlete you choose to discuss.

The study does not intentionally collect unnecessary personal data, such as private addresses, private social media information or unrelated sensitive data.

7. Pseudonymisation and confidentiality

Your interview data will be pseudonymised. This means that your name, username, contact details and other directly identifying information will be removed from the transcript or stored separately from the interview data where necessary.

Each participant will be assigned a participant code, such as F01 or T01. In the thesis, participants will be referred to only by these codes. Identifying details will be removed or modified in quoted excerpts where necessary to protect your identity.

8. Data storage and deletion of audio recordings

Audio files will be stored securely only until transcription and verification of the transcript are completed. After this stage, the audio files will be deleted, unless temporary retention is required for clarification during the analysis process.

The analysis will be conducted on the basis of pseudonymised transcripts, not identifiable audio recordings. Pseudonymised transcripts, coding files and analytic memos will be stored securely in password-protected files and used only for the purposes of this master's thesis. The thesis supervisor may access anonymised or pseudonymised material where necessary for supervision or assessment.

Data will not be transferred to third parties for unrelated purposes.

9. Use of quotes

Selected interview excerpts may be used in the thesis to illustrate findings. These excerpts will be anonymised or pseudonymised and will not include your name or directly identifying

information. If the interview is conducted in Russian, selected excerpts may be translated into English for reporting. Translation will aim to preserve the meaning and tone of your statement.

10. Discussion of athletes and brands

The study focuses on fan interpretations of publicly visible athlete image, athlete narratives and sponsor relationships. The study does not collect private information about athletes, sponsors or sport organisations. Public athletes and sponsor brands may be named where necessary for contextual clarity, but the empirical focus remains on participants' perceptions and interpretations.

11. Data protection and participant rights

This study follows the University of Vienna's data protection guidance for student social science research and applies GDPR/FOG-related principles, including data minimization, pseudonymisation and secure data handling.

You have the right to request information about the personal data collected about you. Where applicable, you may also request correction, restriction of processing or deletion of your personal data, and you may object to processing.

For questions about this study, please contact:

Marina Tychina

For general legal questions regarding GDPR/FOG and student research at the University of Vienna, participants may contact the Data Protection Officer of the University of Vienna through the contact details provided in the university's official data protection guidance.

Appendix F. Written Consent Form

Study title:

How Elite Athletes' Brand Narratives Influence Consumer Perceptions of Sponsoring Brands: A Qualitative Consumer Behaviour Study in Formula 1 and Tennis

Researcher:

Marina Tychina

Master's student in International Business Administration, University of Vienna

Please read the statements below and confirm your consent before the interview begins.

Consent statement	Please tick
I confirm that I am 18 years old or older.	☐
I confirm that I have received and read the participant information sheet / data protection notice for this study.	☐
I understand the purpose of the study and what participation involves.	☐
I understand that participation is voluntary and unpaid.	☐
I understand that I may refuse to answer any question.	☐
I understand that I may stop the interview at any time without giving a reason.	☐
I agree to participate in one semi-structured online interview for this master's thesis.	☐
I agree that the interview may be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.	☐
I understand that the audio file will be deleted after transcription and verification, unless temporary retention is required for clarification during the analysis process.	☐
I understand that the transcript will be pseudonymised and that direct identifiers such as my name, username or contact details will be removed or stored separately from the interview data where necessary.	☐
I understand that anonymised or pseudonymised excerpts from the interview may be quoted in the thesis.	☐
I understand that if the interview is conducted in Russian, selected excerpts may be translated into English for reporting.	☐
I understand that the data will be used only for the purposes of this master's thesis and related supervision or assessment.	☐
I understand that pseudonymised material may be accessed by the thesis supervisor where necessary for supervision or assessment.	☐
I understand that I may contact the researcher if I have questions about the study or about the processing of my data.	☐

Participant name:

Participant signature:

Date:

Researcher signature:

Date:

Appendix G. Recruitment Text for Instagram and Telegram

Instagram / Telegram Recruitment Text

Hello everyone,

I am currently working on my master's thesis at the University of Vienna in the field of Marketing and Consumer Behaviour. My thesis explores how fans interpret elite athletes' public image and brand narratives, and how these interpretations may influence perceptions of sponsor brands.

I am looking for participants for short online interviews.

You can participate if you:

- Are 18 years old or older;
- Follow Formula 1 or professional tennis regularly during the season;
- Can name one elite Formula 1 driver or ATP/WTB tennis player whom you follow particularly closely;
- Can recall at least one sponsor, partner or endorsing brand associated with this athlete;
- Are willing to take part in an online interview in English or Russian.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and can take place via Zoom call.

Participation is voluntary and unpaid. The interview will be audio-recorded only with written consent. All interview data will be pseudonymised and used only for my master's thesis.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly or complete the short screening form.

Thank you very much for your help.

Marina

Appendix H. Screening Form

Study title:

How Elite Athletes' Brand Narratives Influence Consumer Perceptions of Sponsoring Brands: A Qualitative Consumer Behaviour Study in Formula 1 and Tennis

The purpose of this short screening form is to check whether you meet the inclusion criteria for the interview study. Your responses will be used only for recruitment and scheduling purposes.

Screening questions

1. Are you 18 years old or older?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. Which sport do you follow most closely?

- ☐ Formula 1
- ☐ ATP professional tennis
- ☐ WTA professional tennis
- ☐ Both ATP and WTA professional tennis
- ☐ Other:

3. How often do you follow Formula 1 or professional tennis during the active season?

- ☐ Several times per week
- ☐ About once per week
- ☐ A few times per month
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ I do not follow it regularly

4. How do you usually follow this sport? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Live races or matches
- ☐ Highlights
- ☐ News articles
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ Interviews
- ☐ Documentaries
- ☐ Podcasts or youtube content
- ☐ Fan discussions / group chats / forums
- ☐ Other:

5. Please name one elite athlete in your focal sport whom you follow particularly closely and feel able to discuss in detail.

Answer:

6. Why did you choose this athlete?

Answer:

7. Can you recall at least one sponsor, partner or endorsing brand associated with this athlete?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

8. If yes, please name one or more brands you associate with this athlete.

Answer:

9. Which language would you prefer for the interview?

☐ English

☐ Russian

☐ Either English or Russian

10. Are you willing to participate in an online interview of approximately 30 minutes via Zoom call?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. Are you willing to receive written study information and provide written informed consent before the interview?

☐ Yes

☐ No

12. Do you agree that the interview may be audio-recorded for transcription purposes?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I would like more information before deciding

13. Please provide your preferred way of being contacted for scheduling the interview.

Email / Telegram / Instagram:

14. Is there anything else you would like the researcher to know before scheduling the interview?

Answer: