



# **The Evolution of Athlete Branding as perceived by French Practitioners from Generation X, Y and Z**

**As survey in form of semi-structured interview**

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**The Evolution of Athlete Branding as perceived by French Practitioners from Generation X, Y and Z - As survey in form of semi-structured interview**

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### **Abstract**

The athlete branding evolution among the French athletes and marketing professionals from generation X, Y, and Z was the focus of this research study. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used to highlight important generational differences. Generation Z focuses on authenticity, personal values, and social media engagement to connect with audiences directly. Conversely, Generation X emphasizes professionalism, stability, and long-term partnerships in honoring their own career accomplishments and traditions in their sport. Generation Y sits in the middle, advocating visibility, innovative storytelling, and multi-channel campaigns maintaining a delicate balance between brashness and authenticity.

The findings also highlight how cultural and technological paradigm shifts influence branding practices and underlying technologies, showcasing how each generation's distinct preferences and tastes affect the athlete-brand nexus. Hence, in terms of managerial implications, this study contributes important suggestions for marketers on planning athlete collaborations to drive consumer engagement and brand loyalty strategically in sync with generational values and expectations.

### **Keywords/tags (subjects)**

Athlete branding, Evolution, French practitioners, Generation X, Y, and Z

### **Miscellaneous (Confidential information)**

No confidential information was disclosed in the thesis.

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# 1 Introduction

Athlete branding has emerged as a potent tool for global companies wishing to stay relevant in a changing marketplace and engage consumers in new ways. The advancement of the endorsement paradigm, in which athletes merely lent their names or faces to products, has now become more complicated and dynamic. Today, athletes are not simply endorsers; they are the protagonists in brand stories that position these companies in the marketplace.

The birth of digital platforms, especially social media, has largely propelled this new tide of change, which allowed athletes to take control of their own narrative. Athletes have directly shared their lives, training regimens, and personalities with their fan bases by which they cultivated loyal followings, all of which global companies are vying to intercept. The marketing benefits of having an athlete coolly connect with the consumer enable a more genuine and engaging marketing strategy, allowing Michael or Serena to be understood not only as figureheads but as partner collaborators in brand storytelling.

The growing recognition of athlete branding further pours in societal changes. With the changing consumer ethos emphasizing authenticity and connection, the timeline proposed by the alignment of an athlete with a brand may create ripples in consumer behavior. Sportswear, technology, and lifestyle have been chief among the categories where athlete appeal may lend full-fledged affiliation to a brand.

The purpose of this research is to study how the evolution of athlete branding has affected the marketing strategy of multinational corporations. The elements through which companies can exploit the personal branding of athletes to engage consumers and build loyalty for their own companies will also be studied. Another focus will be mutual advantage within the brand partnership, that is, how athletes gain from the partnerships in terms of growth of their personal brands and revenue generation.

This research has been initiated out of the researchers' interest in the future of marketing, particularly in sports. The presence of networks in sports and marketing render the study feasible and timely, with future athlete branding playing an increasingly important role in worldwide marketing strategies.

## 1.1 Background, motivation, and purpose

The last couple of decades have seen athlete branding developing into a significant component of the marketing strategies deployed by major international companies. Brands now not only employ athletes as endorsers, but these athletes also take center stage as protagonists in the stories of what define a brand. With the emergence of social media, athletes can now directly engage with end consumers, thus further propelling the trend of becoming branding-oriented athletes. This thesis explores the changes in athletes' perceptions and the way companies use them, along with the implications of such changes for athletes and companies alike.

## 1.2 Research objectives, questions and approach

**Research Question :**

- **What has been the Evolution of Athlete Branding as perceived by French Practitioners from Generation X, Y and Z ?**

**Research Objectives :**

- **To find out what has been the Evolution of Athlete Branding as perceived by French Practitioners from Generation X, Y and Z based on qualitative survey in form of semi-structured interviews and five respondents that answered the interview script-based questionnaire.**

**Approach:** This research follows a qualitative, cross-sectional approach utilizing interviews with athletes and their branding relationships with global companies. Surveys will be used to assess practitioner perceptions of athlete-brand partnerships.

## **1.3 Thesis structure**

The thesis comprises five main chapters. Chapter I presents an introduction to the study by giving background information, research objectives, and motivation for the study. It discusses the importance of athlete branding in this business-oriented world and how it has gradually become an integral part of marketing strategies for global corporates.

Chapter II engages in a comprehensive literature review, covering concepts such as athlete branding, its history of evolution, and the role of social media in building the modern athlete-brand relationship. This chapter identifies a gap within the body of literature that lacks in-depth studies on how athletes actively manage their personal brands along with companies.

Chapter III focuses on the way research is carried out and the methods used. It explains the research design, including the study context, data collection methods, and qualitative approach taken. Within this chapter, it gives justification for the particular methodology adopted, introducing how data are collected about athlete branding strategies using interviews, case studies, and surveys.

Chapter IV analyzes the practical implications and findings of the research. It engages with the interpretation of the data collected and assesses athlete-brand partnerships in relation to consumer engagement and brand performance. It also treats the issue of value for athletes in obtaining personal brand enhancement and revenue.

The last chapter wraps up the thesis with a summary of the essential points followed by discussion on their implications for multinational companies and athletes alike. It demonstrates a feel for the limitations that were met during research and gives directions for future studies, especially in relation to new digital platforms and the newer trends in athlete branding.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Athlete Branding and it's Evolution**

Athlete branding has transitioned from the really put-aside endorsement way, where athletes were preoccupied with advertising products through commercials, print ads, or more traditional media, into a stake held by the athlete brand as an integrated model. Traditionally, this integrated approach would comprise basing campaigns on the athlete's success, appeal, or stylishness to

draw consumers. But, as noted, "the emergence of digital platforms has given athletes an unprecedented level of control over their public personas" (Kunkel et al., 2016). But that politeness ceased to exist with the development of digital platforms, which have afforded athletes an unprecedented level of control over their public personas, allowing them to showcase their personalities, values, and daily lives. (Kunkel et al., 2016).

Athletics have therefore over the years evolved to establish connections with consumers in a very meaningful and authentic way through the image and voice of athletes. Athletes today are often looked upon as co-creators or ambassadors representing the brand's values and messages instead of mere product displays. This mode of athlete branding, which encompasses an inclusive approach, takes the concepts of authenticity and transparency to the fore in the current marketplace. In this new model proposed, athletes play an active role in both advertising as well as becoming a prominent aspect of brand identity combining their own narratives with the messages of the brand in such a way as to appeal to socially aware audiences.

## **2.2 The Role of Social Media**

The advent of Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok has completely changed the way athletes portray and communicate their brands. Unlike traditional media, social platforms allow the athlete a direct engagement with the fans, creating real-time interaction building authentic relationships—a new brand approach. An athlete can share personal stories, offer live updates, or engage in interactive postings on social media that enhance familiarity and transparency to breed loyalty and trust (Geurin & Burch, 2017). Influencing the branding process, social media has enabled the athletes to be their own media channels, deciding what stories to share with the public and how to present them. By facilitating engagement through interactive content and cultivating loyal fanbases of interest to brands, social media enhances the athlete's marketability. Beyond being strong influencers for partnerships, athletes have become leaders in their communities, advocates, and storytellers, thereby redefining athlete branding in the current digital age.

### **2.2.1 Athlete-Brand Engagement on Social Media**

First, the collaboration between athletes and brands in content development for social networking is one of the most important aspects of branding an athlete in today's time. This collaboration does not just seek endorsements; the goal is to create emotional content that helps develop a relationship with the followers. Aspects of interactivity can comprise live videos, polls, behind-the-scenes teasers, and personal recaps from the athletes to enhance engagement between the brand and its audience.

Using this dimension will create more visibility and enable many interactions since audiences will connect more with content that is really speaking to them. The aim of this section is to survey successful examples of athlete-brand partnerships that have successfully managed to engage an audience and awaken it through social media. Insight gained from specific partnerships, for example, key athletes with established brands, allows for the identification of core strategies that create engagement, foster brand loyalty, and add appeal to both the athlete and brand (Geurin, 2023).

Insights gained from showcasing particular partnerships between notable athletes and famous brands provide an understanding of the strategies that create engagement, develop brand loyalty, and increase cross-appeal of both athletes and brands. Case studies will illustrate how those brands, through the use of authentic and relatable athlete-generated content, have been able to meet the social media demands to reach their audiences successfully.

### **2.2.2 Athlete Performance and Brand Perception**

Linking performance to perception of the brand is another important aspect of athlete branding. The athlete's performance, sportsmanship, and behavior on and off the field have an impact on the personal brand of the athlete and how the general public views the brands associated with that athlete. A victorious athlete would elevate a brand's placement in the eyes of the consumer: admiration of the athlete would equal support of the brand. However, bad performances and misconduct would tarnish an athlete's individual brand and, in turn, affect the brands they represent negatively.

This section will describe how athletes' performance creates consumer perceptions for a brand and thus brand loyalty. I will look at the literature on how performance affects the public image, which will also allow us to see how continued success and positive interventions with fans inspire brand loyalty. It will also look at how brands manage and mitigate their risk when associating with athletes, but here mainly for when the pressure is high, and performance and public image could change within a split second. (Burton & Chadwick, 2019; Kolyperas et al., 2019).

### **2.3 The growth of athletes' image with companies**

As an athlete, these relationships with companies are changing considerably, evolving past simple sponsorship deals. The growth of an athlete's image with businesses is a revolution that changes from plain transactional agreements to active partnerships wherein athletes own the brands they represent.

Traditionally, companies would use an athlete primarily based on their on-field success, physical appeal, or sheer popularity to advertise through advertisements and other media formats. These companies would then use that to lure in consumer attention, making an association between the athlete's achievements and their brand. This scenario changed dramatically with the onset of digital platforms. Athletes are now able to project themselves, their values, beliefs, lifestyles, and personal narratives like never before. This change made athletes into great storytellers and influencers whose voices connect well with diverse audiences.

Having recognized the potential of this expanded role, companies have gone beyond the use of sports personalities as mere figureheads to now engaging them as co-creators and brand ambassadors. They involve athletes in the collective storytelling of the brands while champions promote values that resonate with both themselves and the company they represent. The partnership goes beyond product promotion to scope broader issues such as social responsibility, community engagement, and mutual aspirations.

This evolution fits well with the present-day marketplace that values authenticity and relatability. Consumers are attracted to brands that demonstrate an unwavering commitment to authentic connections and shared values. Athletes go through that bridge of connectivity between corporate identity and consumers' expectations as both relatable and aspirational figures.

In this new era, athletes are not merely endorsers; they are true partners in the process of building a brand image. Companies speak through their stories and public personas to create impactful and long-lasting partnerships. It is a win-win situation: athletes grow their relevance and marketability, while companies access an audience that is actually more engaged and emotionally invested.

## 2.4 Identified Research Gap

The transformation of athlete branding by major corporations around the globe is a remarkable phenomenon shaped by strategic marketing interventions, which have greatly benefited from the growing influence of social media. Nike, Adidas, and Reebok are some of the brands that have even refined their advertising strategies to exploit the athlete as an advertising medium to create a win-win relationship for enhancing brand recognition and customer loyalty. This shift is evident in several dimensions.

- **Strategic Sponsorships:**

Brands now conduct thorough analyses before partnering with athletes to ensure alignment with their marketing objectives (Siles & Panadero, 2015). Effective athlete endorsements significantly impact consumer purchasing behavior, with many buyers gravitating toward brands associated with celebrity athletes (Dugalić & Lazarević, 2017).

- **Social Media Influence:**

Social media has transformed athlete branding by allowing direct access to fans, therefore furthering personal branding campaigns. Through Instagram and Twitter, athletes can design public perceptions while engaging with audiences themselves, thus altering brand perceptions. (Hasaan et al., 2016a).

- **Evolving Market Dynamics:**

The rise of eSports has created new avenues for branding where corporations are implementing avant-garde public relations tactics to be able to connect with younger audiences (Nufer & Mariot, 2022). The changing market requires branding approaches that are more creative since conventional methods might not speak to the modern-day consumer.

While athlete branding has given considerable benefits to companies, it raises dilemmas and questions concerning sustainability amid a more digital and competitive environment. Marketers

face significant challenges in striking a balance between the image of the athlete and the integrity of the brand.

## 2.5 Research Framework

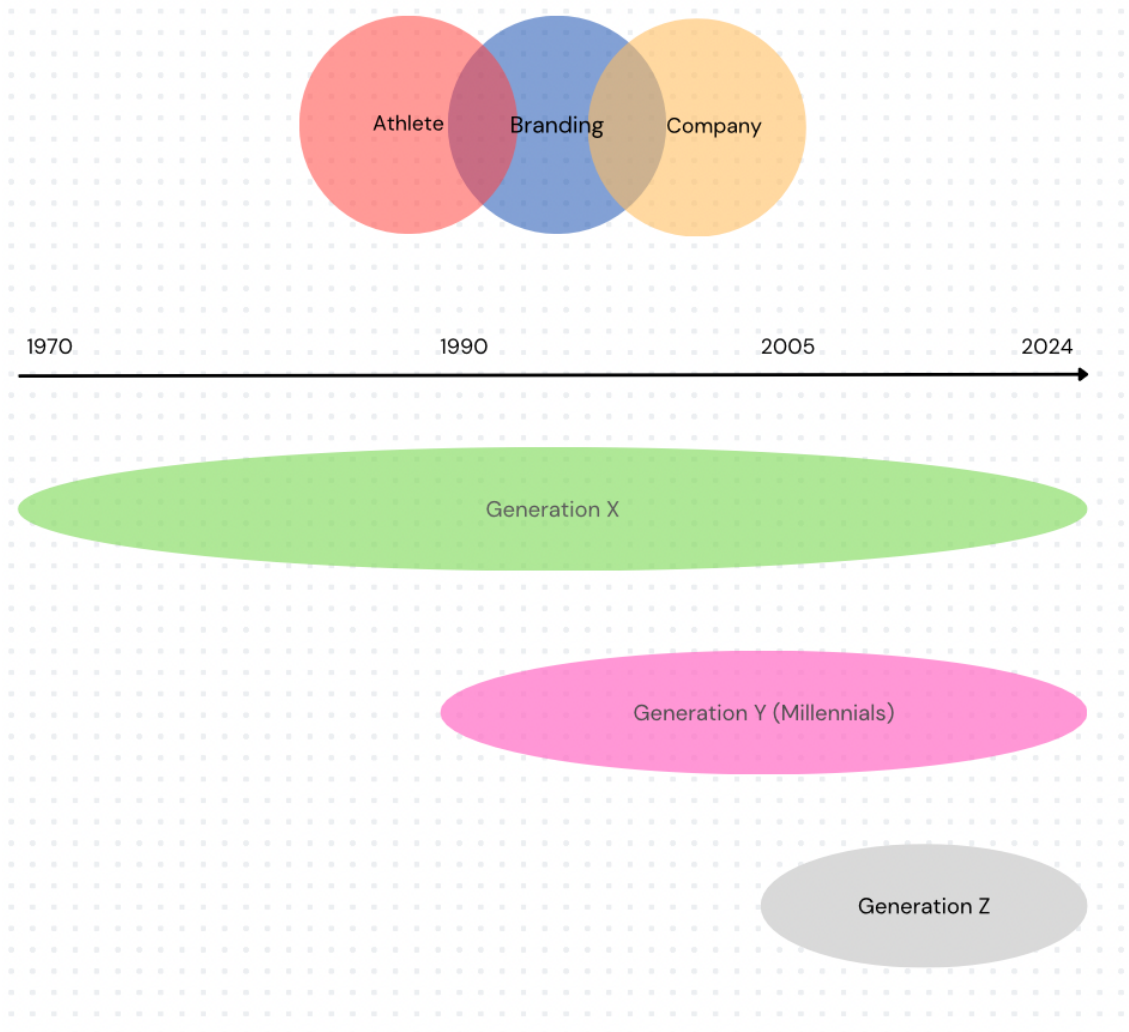


Figure 1. The research framework to study the Evolution of Athlete Branding as perceived by French Practitioners from Generation X, Y and Z.

To assess if athlete-brand-nurtured loyalty and consumer engagement are rendered possible, models such as Consumer-Based Brand Equity and Athlete Branding via Social Media frameworks will be applied in this research.

### 3 Research methods and implementation

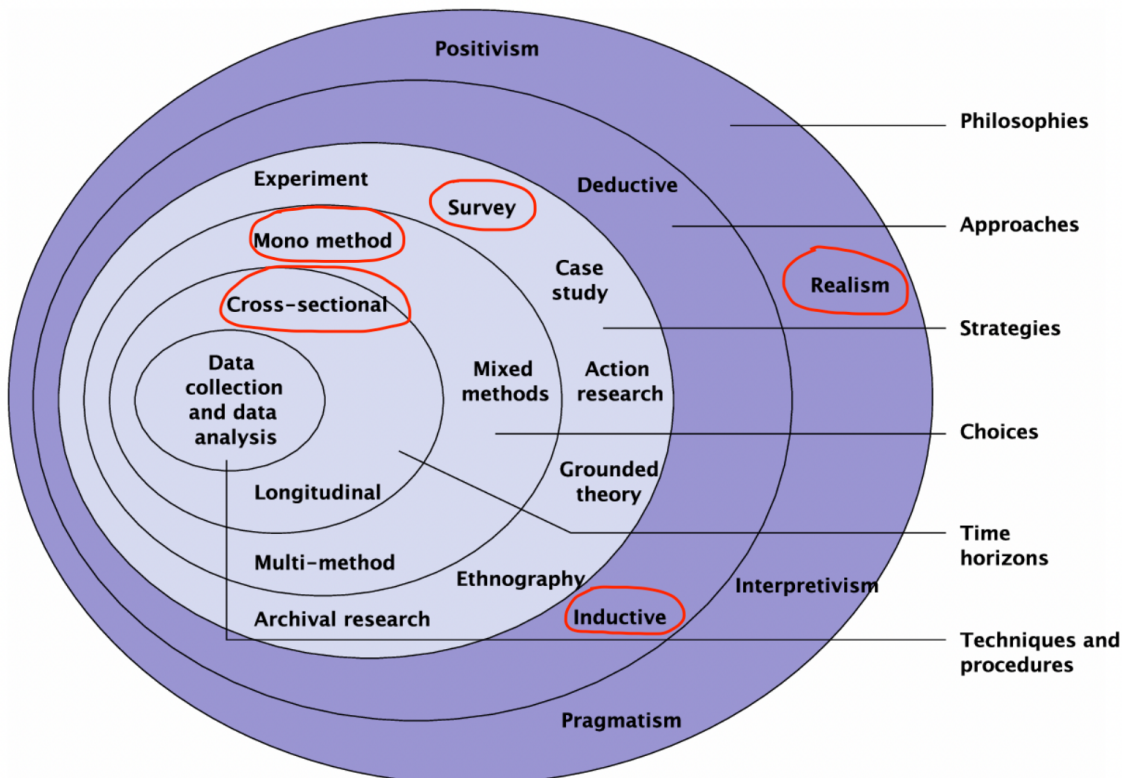


Figure 2. The "research onion" (Saunders et al. 2008)

#### 3.1 Research context

The athlete branding as a phenomenon is relevant in global industries for marketing and consumer engagement, and this study looks into industries like sportswear, automotive, and luxury, where athletes have gone beyond being mere endorsers to become cultural icons and ambassadors for brands with a personality. These industries showcase differentiable brand personality traits, target audience, and consumer expectations that provide the study with diverse branding considerations.

Brands of sport apparel that include Nike and Adidas strongly stress athlete endorsement to convey notions of performance, authenticity, and resilience. These brands are essentially marketed to consumers valuing athletic excellence and personal achievement. Meanwhile, the automotive in-

dustry may be interested in the reliability, innovation, or status aspects of an athlete, thus commissioning athletes whose personalities may embody just such values. On the contrary, luxury brands have an opposite focus: Rolex and Gucci leverage athletes to communicate qualities of exclusivity, prestige, and an aspirational lifestyle, directed to the consumers who identify with luxury and sophistication.

In addition, the research takes into consideration athletes from other sports, such as football, basketball, and golf. Each sport creates its own cultural impact and has a unique set of fans. Branding strategies will be influenced accordingly. For example, whereas football players may draw a wider and more diverse audience, golf would likely benefit from associations across traditional and wealthy appeal with some limited appeal.

This research encompasses an analysis of athletes in differing sports and industries, allowing for an overall understanding of the ways in which brands customize athlete partnerships to speak to specific audience segments and brand values across generations.

### **3.2 Research design**

This research adopts a qualitative design suited for revealing the intricate workings and entrenched complexities surrounding athlete-brand collaborations. Such a qualitative model fits the present study since it concerns itself with understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions of industry stakeholders and consumers alike. Athlete branding is an exploration of personal identity, emotional attachment, and consumer perception, which would find their fullest expressions in qualitative approaches.

Contrasted with lacking statistically important data, the qualitative nature of the study included semi-structured interviews. The interviews with marketing personnel and athletes provided firsthand findings, firsthand knowledge, and insights into the motivation, challenges, and strategies of athlete-brand partnerships. They allowed for open-ended verbalization which captured subtle views residents-spinning important information on athlete branding decisions and managing such partnerships to safeguard brand alignment and authenticity.

By this methodological approach, the study considers further dimensions-offering an encompassing insight to the research question from industry aspects to consumer perspectives.

### **3.2.1 Research purpose (exploratory)**

This research is strictly exploratory, investigating the ongoing transformation of athlete branding and its manifold effects on athletes and corporations. The main aim is to comprehend the change-over of athletes from being mere endorsing figures promoting a product to storytellers circumscribed to the brand itself. This research will investigate the implications of this transition on perceptions of the brand, partnerships' loyalty, and revenue generation. For companies, athlete branding has become a strategic tool for establishing emotional connections with consumers and propagating common values along with the ambassadors for the purpose of enhancing brand resonance. The study also discusses the benefits of branding partnerships for the athletes' personal branding, revenue generation, and building a career legacy. Through these lenses, the study aims at rendering some insight into modern branding strategies and the significant role of athletes in this arena.

### **3.2.2 Research approach**

This research follows an inductive approach whereby data collection and analysis generate theories based on observed patterns and emerging themes. This approach encourages free exploration of the insights derived from the interviews rather than proceeding from predefined hypotheses that might restrict the insights. The inductive nature of the present study is meant to capture the ever-evolving dynamics associated with athlete branding, which may lead to theoretical contributions toward the understanding of branding within a contemporary marketing context. Identifying recurring patterns and themes spanning across various industries and sports, this research sets out to build new theories that mirror the distinctive position athletes occupy as brand figures in today's marketing.

Induction proceeds in the study whereby data collection and analysis generate theories grounded on observed patterns and emerging themes. Instead of working with preconceived hypotheses that would constrain the insights, the approach lets insights grow free from them in the examination of interviews. It is the intent of the inductive nature in this study to capture the changing dynamics that go with athlete branding, which may contribute in theory toward the understanding of branding within a modern marketing context. This new theory on athletes as brand figures is sought to be framed by detecting themes and patterns that have ubiquity across various industries and sports.

### **3.2.3 Research strategy/method/s**

Three main methodological approaches comprise the design for this research study: semi-structured interviews. Interviews with athletes and marketing practitioners are being conducted as part of this study. The interviews are intended to draw out strategic considerations surrounding athlete branding, including considerations of brand fit, audience creation, and authenticity. With the semi-structured format, respondents are allowed to talk at length, and additional questions can be raised in response to emergent topics.

### **3.2.4 Methodological choice**

The research chooses a mono-method qualitative dimension, focusing only on qualitative data collection and analysis in the quest to answer research questions. The appropriation of qualitative methods stems from the need to explore branding relationships that possess emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions that can hardly be conceptualized. Because athlete branding concerns an interplay between personal identity, consumer perception, and brand loyalty, a considerably interpretative methodology is required. This study, being qualitative, provides a more profound understanding of these complex dynamics, thus capturing the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of athletes and industry persons.

### **3.2.5 Time horizon**

By its nature cross-sectional, the study evaluates athlete-brand collaborations at a given time. Here, this is relevant for present-day considerations of brand associations made by athletes since the digital world changes very fast, with branding strategies and consumers' concerns being in

flux. Therefore, in providing a snapshot of current athlete-brand partnerships, the research reveals aspects of contemporary branding practices and consumer perceptions.

### 3.3 Data collection

Interviews will be carried out as part of data collection. Targeted informants include athletes and marketing professionals for firsthand insights into strategies and motivations relating to athlete-brand partnerships. Discussions would include aspects of brand alignment, offers and counter-offers, and risk management.

### 3.4 Data analysis

#### 3.4.1 Quantitative data analysis

Since this research focuses on qualitative methods, there will be no quantitative data analysis.

#### 3.4.2 Qualitative data analysis

Primary qualitative data come from interviews and their analysis with NVivo 12 and the following codebook based on the precedent framework. This method involves coding and categorizing data into themes to identify recurring patterns in such collaborations between athletes and brands. By employing thematic analysis, we can systematically interrogate the qualitative data to draw insights into how the end-user perceives and experiences athlete branding strategies. NVivo assists in organizing and managing large datasets, enabling an in-depth exploration of particulars and subtleties in the qualitative findings.

Code	Definition	When to use	When not to use
<b>Theoretical framework of consumer-based brand performance</b>	Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) has attracted academic endeavor and strategic emphasis in practice to examine its role for brand success. Despite	To assess brand strength and consumer perception. For strategic brand management to enhance brand equity. When comparing competing brands.	When there's no clear consensus on measuring brand equity. For new brands or prospective consumers with little brand awareness. In cases where factors beyond

	its diagnostic power for brands, prior studies fail to: reach consensus on conceptualization and operationalization, consider prospective consumers and competing brands	To understand consumer behavior and predict purchasing decisions.	consumer perception drive brand success.
<b>The Model of Athlete Branding via Social Media.</b>	<p>Research Question: Social media platforms provide opportunities for athletes to promote their personal brands and attract engagement from consumers.</p> <p>Through this research, we examined the factors that influence social media engagement (likes and comments) with athlete content on Instagram.</p>	To analyze how athletes build personal brands through social media. When studying factors that drive engagement (likes, comments) with athlete content. For evaluating the effectiveness of social media strategies for athletes.	When the focus is on traditional media or offline athlete branding. For assessing long-term brand equity rather than short-term social media engagement. When looking at branding outside social media platforms, like sponsorships or endorsements.

Table 1 : Code book

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

The research of this kind bears considerable ethical concerns owing to the fact that it is conducted with primary data from human subjects. Thus, interviews will entail informed consent from subjects, and they will be informed of the purpose of the research and their role in it. Confidentiality

will be upheld regarding sensitive aspects, with the participants being assured about the anonymous handling of their personal and professional input. All ethical practices will be considered in this study, and all data sources will be appropriately credited to avoid plagiarism so that integrity and transparency can be achieved.

## 4 Research Results

### 4.1 Athlete Branding: Perspectives from Generation Z

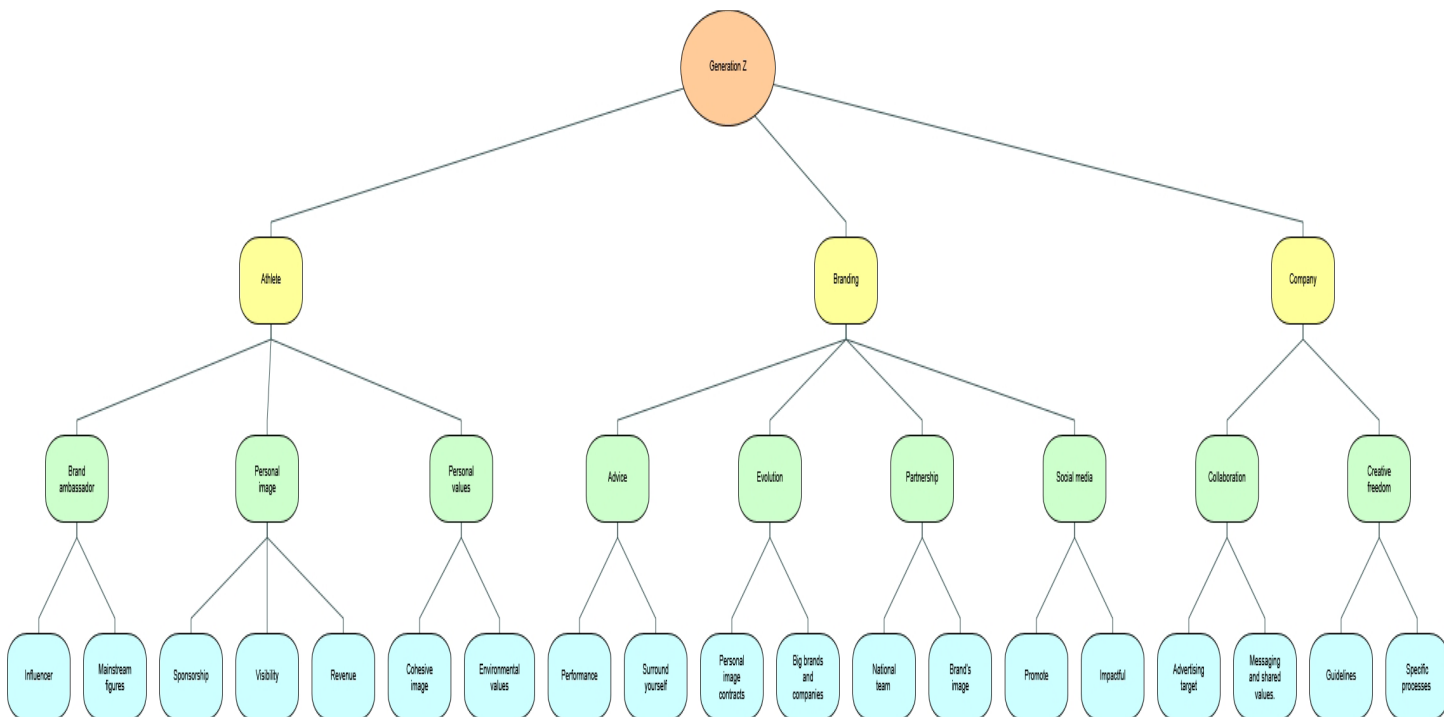


Figure 3. Mindmap generation Z

Generation Z athletes have provided insights that illuminate the life-interconnections of their personal value systems, ambassadorial responsibilities, and social media in relation to branding strategies. Being the first fully digital generation, the mold of branding to which they relate emphasizes authenticity, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement with audiences.

#### 4.1.1 Generation Z : Athlete as Brand Ambassadors

Generation Z athletes identify both as influencers and mainstream figures in their branding strategies. They work as influencers in that they rely on their personal identity to build close relationships with their audience. During the interviews, the athletes shared that they often use social media to engage with their followers, sharing snapshots of their everyday life that speak to their

audiences. Being able to express moments of intimacy and trust gives credibility to their actual promotion of the brands. (Interviewee 1, 2024)

Generation Z athletes also recognize that they exist outside of niche groups. Their visibility on the major platforms and public campaigns is a way they have mentioned to reach larger audiences. It is this contradiction of being simultaneously relatable influencers and generally known mainstream figures that enables them to strike a balance between personal involvement and professional representation, making them amenable to various branding demands. (Interviewee 6, 2024)

#### **4.1.2 Generation Z : Athlete's Personal Image**

Personal image in Generation-Z athletes relates deeply to sponsorship, visibility, and revenue. Athletes view sponsorship as an indispensable ingredient of their branding campaign because it allows them to partner with brands that fit their values and increase their reach. Regarding sponsorships, the athletes have pointed out via interviews that partnerships that are not only true to their identity but also serve to build public profile that credibilizes their personal image are very important. (Interviewee 3, 2024)

Visibility constitutes the central part of their personal image. Generation-Z athletes are aware of the power of being present on every platform and engaging with their audience in real time. They were keen to emphasize that keeping the visibility of their brand purposefully high on social media and through public campaigns supports relevance and gives real value to their branding. For them, visibility is not just seeing and being seen, it is engaging a large audience meaningfully. (Interviewee 14, 2024)

Revenue is the other telling factor influencing their personal image. Athletes say that financial success attained through branding partnership reflects their marketability whereas, through time, it has also been successful in securing their future. They were quite vocal about sponsorships and branding deals that add to their income, allowing them to invest in their own careers and maintain their status. Balancing sponsorship with visibility and revenue, generation-Z athletes tend to build a personal image that is both relatable and aspirational. (Interviewee 11, 2024)

### **4.1.3 Generation Z : Athlete's Personal Values**

Generation Z athletes consider the coherent image and commitment to environmental values as vital elements of their personal values. Athletes during interviews described how important it is to maintain a coherent image that aligns all aspect of their lives on personal and professional levels. They extend the branding efforts as an extension of their identity-as their actions on and off the field narrate the same story in a matching, coherent manner. Trust amongst their audience cemented because of this coherence, and hence, authenticity is enhanced: making personal values central to their branding strategies. (Interviewee 3, 2024)

Environmental values become another big focus for Generation Z athletes. Generations themselves expressed definite interest to work with brands that advocate sustainable and miraculous environmental practice. They stated this generation has great awareness of world's exigent problems, and they feel inclined to leverage its platform to speak up in some of them. It is their mission to work with environmentally partitioned brands so their cohorts can get inspired and carry similar values and, thereby, keep reinforcing the authenticity of his/her personal image while aiding a cause they are really passionate about. (Interviewee 13, 2024)

### **4.1.4 Genration Z : Branding Advice**

Generation Z athletes highlight the importance of two key pieces of advice for building a successful brand: focusing on performance and the need to surround yourself with the right people. During the interviews, athletes emphasized that athletic performance makes the foundation of their brand. Continuous good performance in the sport brings credibility to the athletes and gives them a strong visibility to sponsors and partners. They consider performance as the ultimate prod of their professionalism that drives successful branding opportunities.

Besides performance, Generation Z athletes stressed the importance of surrounding themselves with trusted people and professional teams. It was explained that the right support network plays a crucial role in the various complexities faced in modern branding. This includes working with advisors, mentors, and peers with similar values toward a common vision concerning their career and personal image. These athletes believe that a strong, collaborative team equips them with the necessary resources to make decisions that are in integrity with the brand, thereby maximizing its recognition and impact. (Interviewee 12, 2024)

#### **4.1.5 Generation Z Branding Evolution**

In Generation Z athletes' branding evolution, emphasis is placed on personal image contracts and relations with big brands and companies. In interviews with the athletes, they remarked upon having a certain amount of control over their personal image and personal brand due to these defined image contracts. Their contracts allow them to define how his or her likeness, name, and identity will be used in branding campaigns so that all their public persona can be in line with their values. One could say that by not giving away this kind of control, athletes protect their own authenticity and at the same time make the most of their partnerships. Athletes also talked about their experiences with working with big brands and companies. They do appreciate the resources and the global outreach that big corporations are able to carry; however, they stressed the importance of a collaborative relationship. Generation Z athletes want to be seen as active players in the branding process rather than passive promotional tools. This means having a say on what the campaign story will be about and guaranteeing that their voice is reflected in the messaging. These dynamics reflect a changing paradigm in branding evolution, where this generation of athletes prioritizes partnerships that acknowledge their individuality, while leveraging the scale and influence of big brands. (Interviewee 3, 2024)

#### **4.1.6 Generation Z Branding Partnership**

For Generation Z athletes, branding partnerships are influenced by their national-team affiliation and their compatibility with a brand's image. According to the interviews, there are certain special branding avenues that come with being on the national team. The larger level of visibility lent to them by this entity also adds to their credibility, tying their own personal brand to a sense of pride, achievements, and collective identity. With that, they perceive their association with the national team as a huge rank from which they can globally showcase their talent, and that adds enormous value to the promotion of their brands. (Interviewee 1, 2024)

Additionally, Generation Z athletes mention that establishing alignment with brand image is vital. Hence, they scrutinize partnerships to ensure that their values and reputations complement their own identity. Athletes say that being associated with a brand that has an image they do not support would jeopardize their authenticity and credibility. The flip side is that they enhance their persona and bond with the audience when associated with brands that digest their values. That duality- both being the representatives of the national team and working with those brands that

represent their principles-is how Generation Z athletes carefully leverage their partnerships to maximize their impact while remaining authentic. (Interviewee 13, 2024)

#### **4.1.7 Generation Z Branding with Social Media**

For Generation Z athletes, social media is pivotal in branding because of their ability to promote themselves and connect meaningfully to their audience. In interviews, athletes said that Instagram and TikTok provide opportunities for them to tell their stories and celebrate personal achievements. This generation sees social media as essential to an authentic brand-building process where its value systems, personality, and daily activities are on display. The result is visibility but also trust and relatability with the audience. (Interviewee 2, 2024)

The significance of content creation that hits hard was stressed by the athletes. They try to communicate things that resonate with their followers while aligning with their personal and professional aspirations. These athletes try to pursue their posts by applying context that depicts their identity and values, thus ensuring that their digital presence creates a lasting impression. Whether it be through catchy visuals, personal stories, or engaging brand collaborations, social media provides Generation Z athletes with an avenue to maximize outreach for their branding endeavors, hence making this an integral part of their main strategy. (Interviewee 14, 2024)

#### **4.1.8 Generation Z Company Collaborations**

Collaboration entails the need for Generation Z athletes to be right on the target of advertising and ensure that campaigns show touchpoints of messaging and shared values. When interviewed, athletes stated that working with brands that have a well-defined understanding of the target audience is crucial to them. According to them, a partnership is said to work best if the advertising strategy speaks not only to the athlete's following but also to the demographic targeted by the brand. In their marketing efforts, athletes gain extra strength towards goals when they join hands with brands gaining the right eyeball.

The other point stressed by athletes was the importance of shared values. They stated that a partnership that works, in their opinion, does not just involve advertising but is about messaging that resonates with their consciousness and public persona. Messaging that communicates shared values lends even more depth to the authenticity of the campaign and deepens their connection with the audience. Generation Z athletes recognize great collaboration as being based on shared

values, where both sides come together to make an influence through a profound branding initiative. (Interviewee 8, 2024)

**4.1.9 Generation Z: Company’s Creative Freedom**

Generation Z athletes place creative freedom at a high priority within their branding partnerships, focusing on maintaining a delicate balance between guidelines that are too stiff and processes that are mutable. Within the interviews, the athletes expressed the necessity for guidelines to set the structure and consistency in campaigns but, nevertheless, to allow room for individual expression. In this sense, a structure that the brand gives creates a framework that fosters professionalism yet does not impede creativity. Branding would, therefore, be authentic for the athlete while ensuring it flows within the brand’s message.

Another core aspect that aids in invoking creative freedom entails specific processes. Athletes greatly preferred collaborative procedures, whereby they can contribute ideas and influence the final product. This way, they feel ownership of that business branding content, and the branding content best represents their characters and values. It is this combination of well-structured guidelines and flexible processes that allows Gen Z athletes to meet the profession while having conversation time with the audience in an authentic and relatable way.

**4.2 Athlete Branding: Perspectives from Generation X**

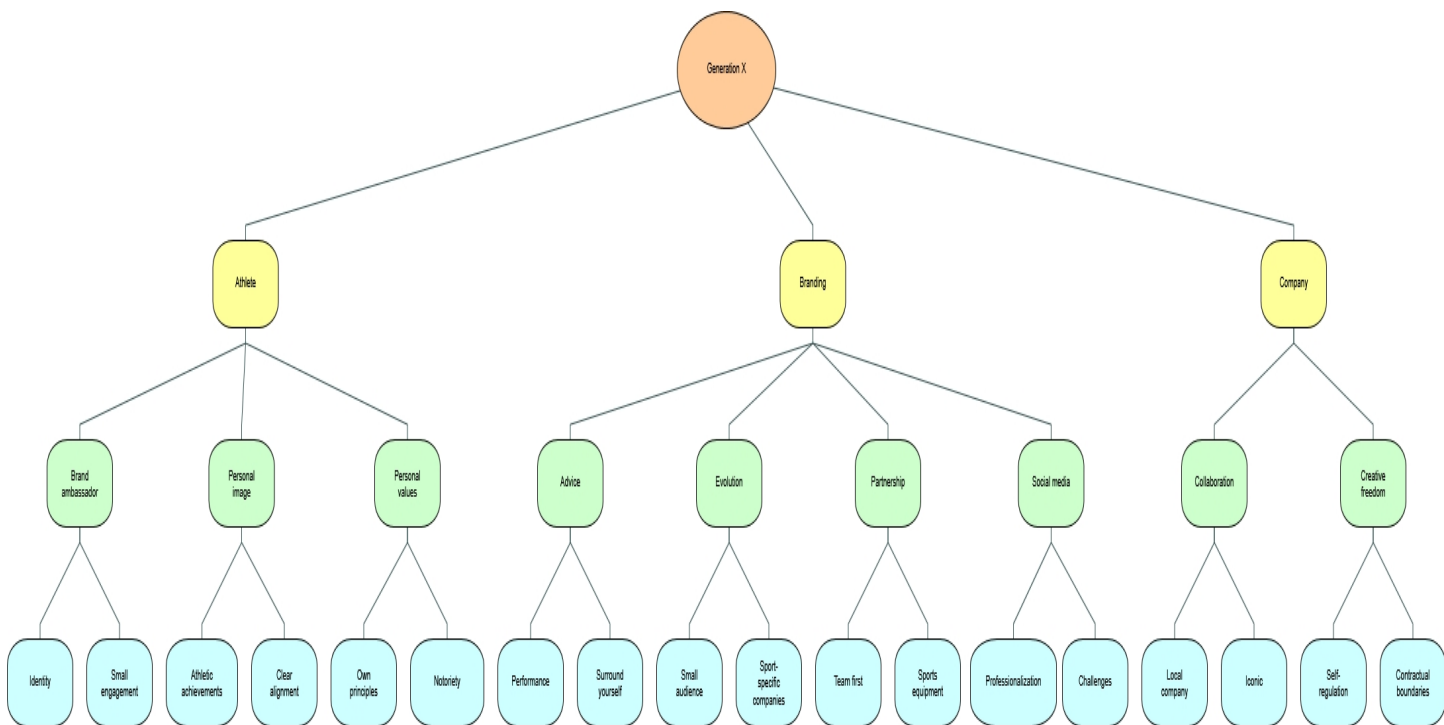


Figure 4. Mindmap Generation X

Generation X athletes provided insights that reflect a more traditional approach to branding. They emphasized professionalism, stability, and the importance of long-term partnerships that align with their career achievements. For this generation, branding is closely tied to their identity as athletes and their ability to represent a brand with dignity and respect.

#### **4.2.1 Generation X : Athlete as Brand Ambassadors**

Generation X athletes describe the function of branding to describe their identities, which perhaps very few can im-meshing with the notion of some small engagement with their audiences. The athletes, during interviews, underline that their professional identity remains at the center of their branding endeavors. They consider themselves to be representatives of discipline, reliability, and tradition, assuring that what they truly believe in matches with the brands they choose to endorse. Their identity as athletes is closely associated with success and with the ability to safeguard the integrity of their sport, which justly gives those brands they represent some credibility. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

Though small engagement, in reality, is not any more relevant to Gen X than to any other generation; nevertheless, it still helps keep niche engagement alive. Generation X athletes stressed particularly bonding with smaller groups through local events, targeted campaigns, or partnerships that affect the local community. This way, they connect strongly with their core audience and continue to build the reputation of being accessible and trustworthy athletes in their respective sport. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

#### **4.2.2 Generation X : Athlete's Personal Image**

Generation X sportsmen construct their personal image through athletic accomplishments and a constant clarity of alignment with their branding partners. These athletes stated during interviews that professional accomplishments on the field are their assets when it comes to marketability. Championships, records, or having a prolonged period of consistent athletic performance are all achievements that demonstrate dedication and skill to reinforce their action as brand representatives. The successful athletes would utilize these accomplishments with pride to gain respect and trust, thereby enhancing the value of their endorsement. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

Positive alignment is equally vital to their personal picture. Generation X athletes have said that they are very careful in selecting partnerships and analyze whether a brand's values and image merge with their own. This alignment thus reinforces the authenticity of their branding efforts while making that partnership seem natural to both the athlete's audience and the brand's target market. By making athletic achievements the priority and alignment a very close second, these athletes create a very professional and reliable personal image: the type of ambassador brands look for in a long-term partnership. (Interviewee 5, 2024)

#### **4.2.3 Generation X: Athlete's Personal Values**

Generation X athletes value honesty with themselves and the power of their celebrity as two key aspects of their personal values. In interviews, they elaborate on their principles being a guiding force in their decisions regarding brand partnerships. They are selective about the companies they partner with, ensuring that all collaborations are in good taste and do not compromise their integrity or conflict with the values they uphold both as athletes and individuals. Such loyalty to their principles allows them to be considered authentic, which is a significant part of their branding strategy. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

The other key element is notoriety or an acknowledged reputation. For this generation, the appreciation and recognition from the people outside provide them the advantage to better credibility and expand the horizon of the brand campaigns. They explained how their notoriety- being built through years of performances and public appearances- gives weight to their endorsements and makes them more desirable for the brands and the consumer. By providing parity between personal values and public standing, Generation X athletes perform a branding approach that has morality and intention. (Interviewee 5, 2024)

#### **4.2.4 Generation X: Branding Advice**

When interviewed, athletes of Generation X framed performance and gathering the right people around them as two key pieces of advice. Continuous athletic performance is seen as the very foundation of their branding success, with enhanced performance lending credibility and, thus, desirability among brands. The Generation X mentality is that their sports years-long performance-backed accomplishments hold far greater weight than any marketing spiel, further establishing them as trustworthy and professional athletes.

In conjunction with performance, these athletes emphasized the importance of relying on a solid support base. They noted that advisers, mentors, and collaborators who understand their goals and share their values are vital for navigating the complications surrounding branding partnerships. A good support system allows them to concentrate on their careers, maintaining honesty and integrity in their branding activities while remaining true to their personal and professional priorities. (Interviewee 13, 2024)

#### **4.2.5 Generation X: Branding Evolution**

Branding channels have gone through an evolution parallel to that of interests from a few key stakeholders to a broad and eclectic assortment of them as the communication channels have opened up. Traditional methods such as print advertisements, in-person appearances, and sponsorships concentrated on localized or niche markets, thereby lessening their impact on reaching larger audiences. This created an environment in which branding efforts were primarily focused on smaller, more targeted groups. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

With the improvement of communication channels from digital media to global platforms, the scope of branding broadened out considerably. Though Gen Xers usually would have begun their branding forays under these more limited conditions, they adapted to the new possibilities opened up by technology. However, many Gen X (Generation X) athletes still prefer the authenticity and meaningful engagement offered by a smaller audience and choose to integrate these principles with modern branding tools to stay relevant in the larger spectrum of today's media landscape. (Interviewee 15, 2024)

#### **4.2.6 Generation X: Branding Partnership**

For Generation X athletes—they did have branding partnerships, but those were historically team-centered and consisted mostly of brand collaborations with sport equipment companies. In interviews, athletes explained that contracts early in their careers seldom focused on individual branding, but rather on representing their team or collective identity. Accordingly, branding campaigns typically positioned themselves as celebrating the fortunes and virtues of the team as opposed to focusing on the individual athlete's personal traits. This sort of marketing tells us a good deal about the cultural priorities of the time; collective achievement trumped personal promotion.

Partnerships were mostly formed with sport equipment companies during this period: the athletes say these associations made sense because they were related mostly to the athletes' professional needs-to be well-suited in their gear or apparel that facilitated their performance. They were partners primarily for their actual purpose; namely, that of reinforcing an athlete's identity within that sport. While branding opportunities have since changed to look for and emphasize the individual athlete and sponsors from virtually all conceivable industry branches, Generation X athletes still respect the authenticity and credibility resulting from team-oriented and sport-specific collaborations. (Interviewee 5, 2024)

#### **4.2.7 Generation X: Branding with Social Media**

For Generation X athletes, social media remains a platform to consider professionalism and the challenges associated with adapting to contemporary facades. In interviews, athletes stressed that social media applications are tools serving to facilitate their maintenance of a professional image. Their content is seen as a canvas that would display the discipline and credibility they want to project so that it conforms to the industry standards they have set for their own working lives. Their preferences lean toward well-structured, polished posts over casual comments or spontaneous interactions; social media is then an extension of that effort to reinforce personal brand image and showcase successes to their audience.

However, these athletes also pointed out the many challenges they face in using social media effectively. Keeping up with rapid changes on digital platforms has become increasingly difficult, and meeting the demands of a younger audience that calls for more personal, interactive content has been equally challenging. The compromise between engagement and professionalism is one that takes additional time and resources. Nevertheless, Generation X athletes embrace the spirit of maximizing social media for the benefit of their better brand image and substance. (Interviewee 7, 2024)

#### **4.2.8 Generation X: Company's Collaboration**

Generation X athletes used to view their collaborations with local companies as dominant in their development, while such partnerships might in fact be considered to have been founded on very deep and strong interconnections for those believed almost any old thing. In interviews conducted, the athletes have stated that the conditions in which they found early branding opportunities were inextricably tied to regionally or community-based businesses. Those partnerships felt

more real and personal, according to the athlete-brand connection, because they often spoke to a cultural or geographic commonality shared between the athlete and the brand. Local businesses offered an avenue for athletes to promote their own values and achievements among their immediate communities. Athletes were equally strong in emphasizing that when compared to today's larger-scale branding endeavors, the relationships formed with these local collaborators were normally much more enduring and more cherished. These partnerships were founded on trust and respect for one another, allowing for a more compassionate bond between the athlete and the firms involved. Although the branding scene has now focused further on global markets and larger corporations, the Generation X athlete recalls with nostalgia the incredible relationships and the authenticity that characterized their early collaborations with the local businesses. (Interviewee 1, 2024)

#### **4.2.9 Generation X: Company's Creative Freedom**

For the Generation X athletes, the creative freedom in branding was a lot more or less restricted while governed by self-regulation and explicit contractual boundaries. During interviews, the athletes maintained that a sense of professionalism and discipline had allowed them to navigate different branding opportunities. Self-regulation of their branding efforts was viewed as essential, since it was tied to maintaining credibility and aligning with the traditional values of their respective sports. This way of thinking offered little chance for experimentation or personal expression, and athletes put more weight on being consistent and professional in their public persona. At the same time, commercial interests further confine creative freedom by defining contractual boundaries. Athletes felt that the contract terms left very little room for their input, as the framework for collaborations was chiefly constructed by the sponsors. Branding campaigns at this time were much more regimented and less interactive, with a greater emphasis on conveying a unified, refined message than on celebrating the uniqueness of the athlete. Modern branding, however, permits some freedom, which Generation X athletes view as largely necessary within their branding contexts to uphold the integrity and professionalism of these partnerships. (Interviewee 5, 2024)

### 4.3 Athlete Branding: Perspectives from Generation Y

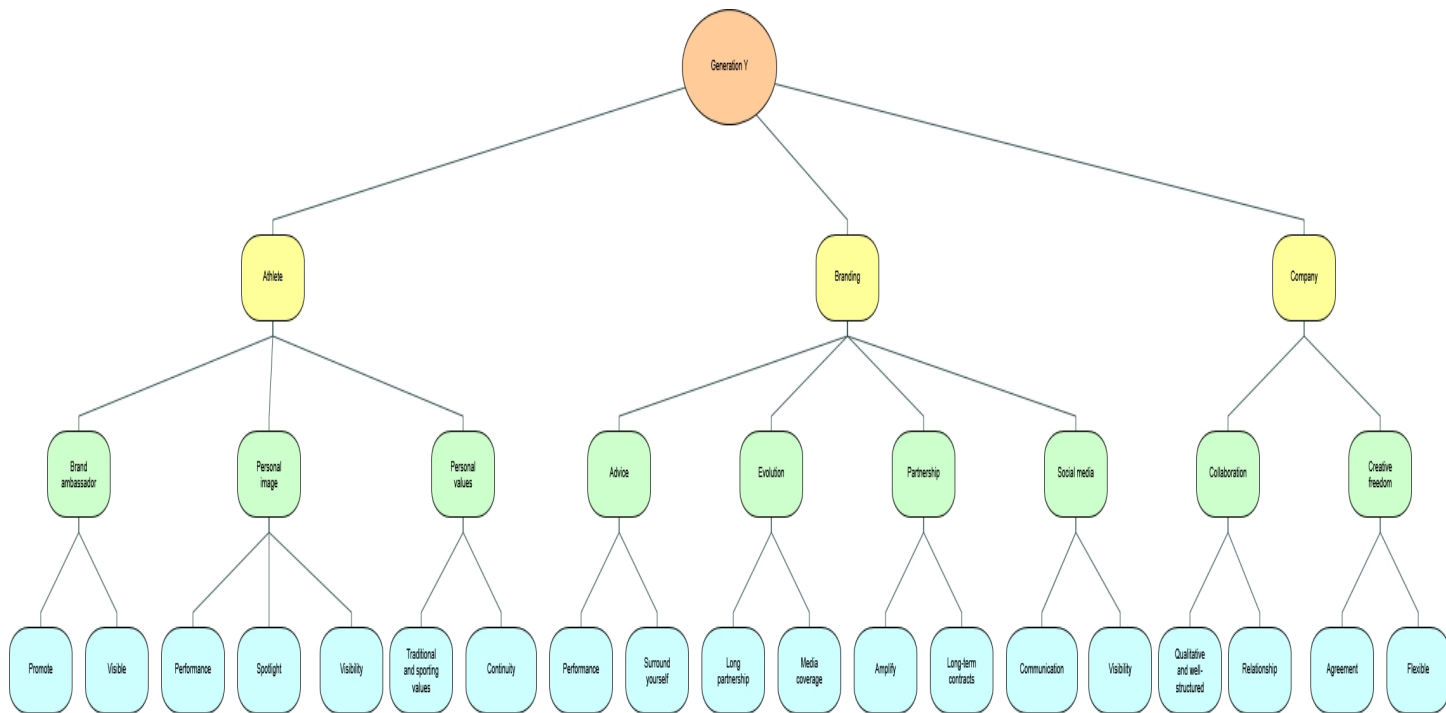


Figure 5. Mindmap Generation Y

Millennials, or Generation Y, offered a perspective on athlete branding that reflects their media-savvy nature and desire for impactful campaigns. They highlighted the importance of visibility, alignment with personal values, and innovative approaches to storytelling through branding partnerships.

#### 4.3.1 Generation Y : Athlete as Brand Ambassadors

Generation Y athletes intervene in their ambassadorships with promotion and visibility techniques that are perceived to maximize their impact. When athletes were asked in interviews, they said that promoting their personal brand and promoting the brand they represent was crucial. They perceive promotion as an inclusive effort wherein they work in close collaboration with the brands so that the campaigns reach the targeted audience showcasing both the athlete's personality and achievements. Engaging with promotional activities that resonate with their own values ensures that their endorsements feel genuine and dependable. (Interviewee 6, 2024)

Basically, visibility is another important channel for Generation Y athletes when serving as ambassadors. Being clearly in the picture will ensure powerful branding campaigns, the athletes say. For instance, on social media and other channels, they maintain their public profiles as front-people,

adding strength to their influence and adding importance in the association with the brands. Being a Millennial is about creating equilibrium between effectively promoting oneself and remaining visible and approachable to the eyes of a diverse audience. (Interviewee 17, 2024)

#### **4.3.2 Generation Y : Athlete's Personal Image**

Generation Y athletes base the construction of their image on performance, the media spotlight, and visibility, as emerged during the interviews. These athletes noted that the first platform of branding capabilities is athletic performance. Because of consistent performance on the field, they earn credibility with brands and popularity from audiences. Their understanding is that performance adds to their marketability and enhancement of their personal image. Secondly, the spotlight equally matters for the Millennials in defining their image. This generation of athletes explained how staying in the public eye helps connect with the audience further. In taking advantage of that spotlight, whether it be through championships or media interviews, they make sure their brand stays relevant and effective. The spotlight gives them exposure to showcase their athletic talent, twist it with an element of personality and values, and elevate that into their public persona. Thirdly, visibility is an important aspect that builds and sustains their personal image. The athletes talked about being constantly visible on different platforms and social media as being very crucial for them in branding themselves. The visibility is not just strengthening the bond with the audience but also making the branding efforts that are being exerted worthwhile and well-spread. By balancing performance, eyes on them, and visibility, Generation Y athletes forge a personal image that is dynamic, relatable, and aspirational. (Interviewee 16, 2024)

#### **4.3.3 Generation Y : Athlete's Personal Values**

Generation Y athletes tend to value tradition and sportsmanship in person-branding and its relevance to their identity. In interviews, athletes expressed their deep respect for tradition and stressed the importance of upholding these values in their partnerships. They view themselves as the custodians of their sport's legacy and maintain alignment between their actions, endorsements, and the ethics and values that define their professional identity. These values, in the traditional sense, are considered the core of their branding, supporting their credibility and trustworthiness toward both the audience and the brands they represent. (Interviewee 4, 2024)

Another vital area of focus in their personal values is continuity. According to Generation Y athletes, consistency across the different facets of an athlete's life is essential for branding. From competing on the field, presenting themselves in interviews, or being active on social media, they aim

to present a common storyline that best represents who they are in spirit and purpose. Developing this consistency can foster long-term trust with their audience and better leverage their branding efforts. Combining traditional values of sportsmanship with a commitment to continuity, this generation creates a personal brand that resonates deeply with audiences while being true to themselves. (Interviewee 17, 2024)

#### **4.3.4 Generation Y : Branding Advice**

Another key piece of advice was acknowledging the importance of performance and surrounding oneself with the right people when it comes to successful branding. During interviews, athletes placed consistent performance in their sport as a key pillar of their personal and professional brands. They view excellence in the field as a way of enhancing credibility and establishing a sound reputation, thereby attracting the brands and loyal audiences. For them, performance is not only about getting results but also about representing dedication, hard work, and resilience: values that echo with their fans. Supporting and surrounding oneself with like-minded peers, another strong theme, was mentioned by the athletes. Advisors, mentors, and teammates are important to athletes who understand their goals and share their visions. These relationships offer necessary guidance and encouragement in traversing the tough subtleties of branding while helping athletes uphold their personal values. By concentrating on performance and nurturing a capable support system, Generation Y athletes are sure that their branding paths will not diverge from their career aspirations. (Interviewee 3, 2024)

#### **4.3.5 Generation Y : Branding Evolution**

The evolution of branding for Generation Y athletes is heavily reliant on their penchant for long-term partnerships and the tactical media coverage with which they fill the pages. During interviews with us, athletes stressed the importance of having long-term relationships with brands. Extended partnerships are believed to furnish the time adequate to build coherent campaigns, ensuring the alignment of their personal brand with the brand's message genuinely. Second, long partnerships enable athletes to build a trust bond with their audience, in that their audience appreciates that an athlete is truly invested in the brand he or she represents. (Interviewee 6, 2024)

Media coverage is another vital element in the evolutionary processes surrounding branding for Generation Y athletes. They know that traditional and digital media amplify their reach and visibi-

lity. Athletes told us how targeted media coverage, be it interviews, documentaries, or feature stories, plays a role in not only reinforcing their personal image but also offers a broader connection to most audiences. With this merging of long-term brand collaborations with strategic media engagement, Generation Y athletes have evolved their branding strategies into a more impactful and lasting endeavor. (Interviewee 12, 2024)

#### **4.3.6 Generation Y: Branding Partnership**

For Generation Y athletes, partnerships are centered around amplification of their message and establishing a long-term contract. During interviews, athletes pointed out that collaborations with brands are platforms to increase their influence. They see partnerships as enhancing their visibility, whose resources will enhance their personal image and reach broader audiences. Amplification is not just about visibility but also the opportunity for them to reinforce their identity and values through strategic messaging. Long-term contracts are considered valuable by Generation Y athletes. They prefer partnerships that establish stability and continuity, thereby allowing them to develop deeper relationships with the brand and its audience over time. They also allow the athlete to develop more cohesive and powerful campaigns, as time fosters mutual understanding and collaboration. Thus, through a focus on amplification and negotiation of long-term contracts, Generation Y athletes build partnerships that are effective yet lasting. (Interviewee 16, 2024)

#### **4.3.7 Generation Y: Branding with Social Media**

For athletes of the Y generation, social media serves as a lifeline, considering its functions as a communication and visibility conduit. During interviews, athletes mentioned that being able to communicate directly with their audience is one of the advantages of social media platforms. This direct communion allows them to share their values and achievements and tell their personal stories in an authentic, relatable manner. Communication via social media oozes intimacy and trust, offering athletes an opportunity to bond more with their fans and build loyalty. Visibility is of utmost importance through social media for Generation Y athletes. They know how important it is to have a constant presence in the different media to stay relevant and engaging. Athletes recounted how social media helps in letting their personality shine, yet also increase their reach so that their branding efforts matter. (Interviewee 3, 2024)

With social media dialogue, visible attention is brought forth. Millennials use social media from both ends in communication and being more visible, thus maintaining their personal branding with dynamic engagement into which other audiences can relate. (Interviewee 16, 2024)

#### **4.3.8 Generation Y: Company's Collaboration**

Generation Y athletes perceive collaboration as prioritizing qualitative, well-structured partnerships and strong relationships with brands. Athletes during interviews specified that a good collaboration is a planned engagement where everything is set in order. They look for partnerships that are qualitative in nature, with campaigns of significance and impact rather than for superficial promotion. Well-structured collaborations give short tech specifications on what the goal is and the roles defined, which makes it possible for the athlete and the brand to contribute efficiently to the collaboration's success. (Interviewee 13, 2024)

Building strong relationships also ranks high among Millennials when it comes to collaboration. Athletes said they look for partnerships characterized by mutual respect and shared values. In their view, strengthening the positive bond with the brand adds authenticity and effectiveness to the collaboration, giving the parties a sense of trust and alignment. Well-structured and relationship-preserving collaborations allow Generation Y athletes to establish branding efforts that bleed into their audiences and effect in the long run. (Interviewee 17, 2024)

#### **4.3.9 Generation Y: Company's Creative Freedom**

Generation Y athletes are given creative freedom in branding partnerships through strong agreements and an informal mode of collaboration. During the interviews, the athletes stipulated that clarity of agreements would be primarily focused on outlining the scope of creative input by the athletes. They keep direct focus on how the athlete's vision works in concert with the brand's objectives. Hence, guidelines cleared up in advance suppress any mismatched expectations for collaborating. (Interviewee 12, 2024)

Flexibility is equally important to Millennials when it comes to creative freedom. The athletes stated that they prefer partnerships in which the building block of the relationship includes some means of adaptation and innovation. They appreciate brands that put trust in their input and allow them the freedom to lead campaigns that feel authentic to their identity. This gives a flexible approach ensuring relevance and relatability to doing branding while allowing the athlete to express

their personality and values. Through structured agreements and flexibility, Generation Y athletes can construct campaigns that are meaningful, resonate with audiences, and articulate their unique persona. (Interviewee 9, 2024)

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Limitations, reliability and validity**

This study provides qualitative insights into athlete branding. While these results warrant an exploration of certain limitations to contextualize the findings, the uniqueness of the data might limit generalizability. Data collection comprised only athletes from France, which might limit generalizability. Even though the participants belonged to various generations and could present different views regarding branding, the cultural and geographical background of the athletes might warp their perspectives. This extension of the study, including athletes from other nations and cultural contexts, might add to the dimensions of branding strategies.

Another limitation lies in the sample size. The qualitative method gives much room for in-depth study; however, a larger sample would give a wider view within each generation. For instance, exploration of the subgroups within each generation, such as team sport athletes versus individual sport athletes, could reveal even more subtle points.

Nevertheless, the validity of the study is supported by a rigorous methodological framework. Structured semi-structured interviews provided rigor and consistency for data collection, while thematic analysis, supported by extensive mind maps, ensured a highly reliable process for interpreting the data. The research was also carried out according to ethical guidelines, and confidentiality and informed consent further add to its credibility.

### **5.2 Answering the research questions**

This research study investigates the evolution of athlete branding as perceived by French athletes from Generations X, Y, and Z. This enabled the highlighting of distinct generational preferences and approaches to branding, all of which mirror the broader cultural and technological mobility. For Z Generation athletes, digital platforms have revolutionized branding strategies. They are

constantly valuing authenticity and creative freedom, integrating personal values into branding partnerships, and actively using social media to directly engage audiences. In contrast, Generation X athletes held mostly traditional views, with stability, professionalism, and long-term partnerships being recurrent themes among them. For them, branding is treated as an extension of career achievements, emphasizing collaborations with companies that match sport traditions and values. In between are the Y-generation athletes, who mix the two previous generations by emphasizing visibility and innovation while telling stories and remaining authentic. They are media-savvy, agile, and use multiple channels to maximize their brands' visibility and collaborate with the brands to develop campaigns that matter. The confluence of these generational insights paints a clear picture of athlete branding that has dynamically traveled through time and gives marketers some very real options for making decisions based on each generation's distinct approach.

### **5.3 Dialogue between key results and knowledge base**

The findings of this study align with and expand upon existing literature in the field of athlete branding. Generation Z athletes' emphasis on authenticity, social media engagement, and creative freedom mirrors broader trends in modern branding (Hasaan et al., 2016b; Pegoraro, 2010). This cohort's focus on integrating personal values and maintaining direct engagement with their audiences underscores the importance of brand congruence, highlighting how athlete identity and public perception must align to foster stronger audience connections and loyalty. (Linsner et al., 2021)

Generation X athletes reflect a more traditional branding approach, prioritizing stability, professionalism, and long-term partnerships. Their adherence to structured and consistent branding strategies highlights the value of reliability and trust in fostering enduring relationships between athletes and brands. (Baker et al., 2022). These insights resonate with established notions of relationship marketing, where trust and authenticity play central roles. (Fournier, 1998)

Generation Y athletes combine traditional and modern approaches, emphasizing visibility, innovation, and multi-channel storytelling while maintaining an authentic connection with their audiences. (Manoli, 2024) This generation's media-savvy nature allows them to strategically amplify

their brand impact across digital platforms while leveraging their personal narratives to resonate with diverse audiences. Their ability to adapt to new media landscapes demonstrates the multifaceted role of athletes in modern branding efforts. (Santomier, 2008)

Overall, the findings emphasize the evolving dynamics of athlete branding shaped by generational values, technological advancements, and societal expectations. By bridging the insights from prior research with the study's results, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of how global companies and athletes can develop effective branding strategies tailored to diverse generational preferences. (Arai et al., 2014)

## **6 Conclusions**

### **6.1 Key Findings**

This study highlights how athlete branding is a process molded greatly by culture, technology, and society, cultured mainly from one generation to another. The involvement of Generation X, Y, and Z in the study shows the very different perceptions these generations hold about ways of working in branding partnerships. Generation Z athletes focus on authenticity as an essential tool in reinforcing their values, which makes social media play a central role in sustaining direct and real-time engagement with their audiences. They demand free-will over-the-partnership decisions, ensuring that campaigns reflect their identity and the causes they care about. On the other hand, Generation X reads stability, professionalism, and long-term partnerships with branding as themselves in terms of career achievements and traditions of the sport. The projects reflect their legacy and reinforce the cultural weight of their discipline. At the same time, Generation Y is somewhere in-between, combining traditional and modern techniques while leveraging their media-savvy and innovative approaches to execute powerful, multi-platform campaigns that engage with audiences. They maintain the balance of modern branding demands with a gaze toward visibility and credible storytelling that still resonates emotionally with audiences. The insights underscore the value of tailoring branding strategies to the generational preferences of the athlete and those

same preferences of their audience while providing insight into the more general evolution of athlete branding in a changing societal and technological landscape.

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

The study results provide practical recommendations for marketers and companies working alongside athletes. Each generation requires tailored brand strategies to guarantee effective partnerships. Generation Z rewards transparency and creativity; Generation X, on the contrary, appreciates dependability and tradition. Generation Y backs up extraordinary down-to-earth campaigns across media platforms. With Generation Z, social media acts as the hero in athlete branding, where timely engagements and relatable user-generated content would act as critical success factors. Long-term encouragements for collaboration are especially important among Generation X, who would welcome brands establishing long-standing associations that cut across the athlete's career accomplishments and personal values for enhanced trust and credibility. Storytelling and emotional ties are important for Millennials and young athletes alike; hence, brands should engage audiences at a deeper level by creating campaigns that spotlight the athlete's life journey, values, and impact. Therefore, brands need to marry with whatever generation they are working in on account of, say, environmental and climate concerns that will draw in a greater number of athletes.

## **6.3 Recommendations for future research**

This study lays ground for a wide range of future investigations into the ever-changing scenario of athlete branding by identifying several areas that need an in-depth study. For research purposes, athletes can be selected from different geographical and cultural settings to comprehend global branding trends better. While this research focuses on qualitative methods, an infusion of quantitative methods can augment the study by getting different angles on consumer perceptions and the measurable effect of branding strategies. Another area that deserves attention is the influence of the emerging technologies of AI and augmented reality on athlete branding and audience participation. Longitudinal studies could be conducted to show the long-term effects that branding strategies have on an athlete's career and brand performance with respect to the sustainability of

the partnership. On the industry side, there could be an interesting exercise researching how athlete branding varies from one sector to another in sportswear, luxury goods, or technology, leading to solutions for companies with targeted markets. These angles would build upon this study's findings and further develop an understanding of athlete branding within a rapidly changing marketing domain.

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Thanks also to the people who preferred to remain anonymous.

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Figure 7. The research onion (Saunders et al. 2008:108)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview script

1- At what point in your career did you start being approached by brands for partnerships? (partnership)

2- In your opinion, how have collaborations between athletes and major companies evolved throughout your career? (collaborations, evolution)

3- What personal values do you consider most important when choosing the brands you collaborate with? (collaborate, personal values, choosing brands)

4- How do you assess the impact of your collaborations with brands on your personal image and professional career? (collaborations, personal image, impact)

5- Have the companies you've worked with allowed you creative freedom in how you represent their brands? (creative freedom)

6- How do you perceive the influence of social media on how athletes are represented by brands today? (influence, brand representation, social media)

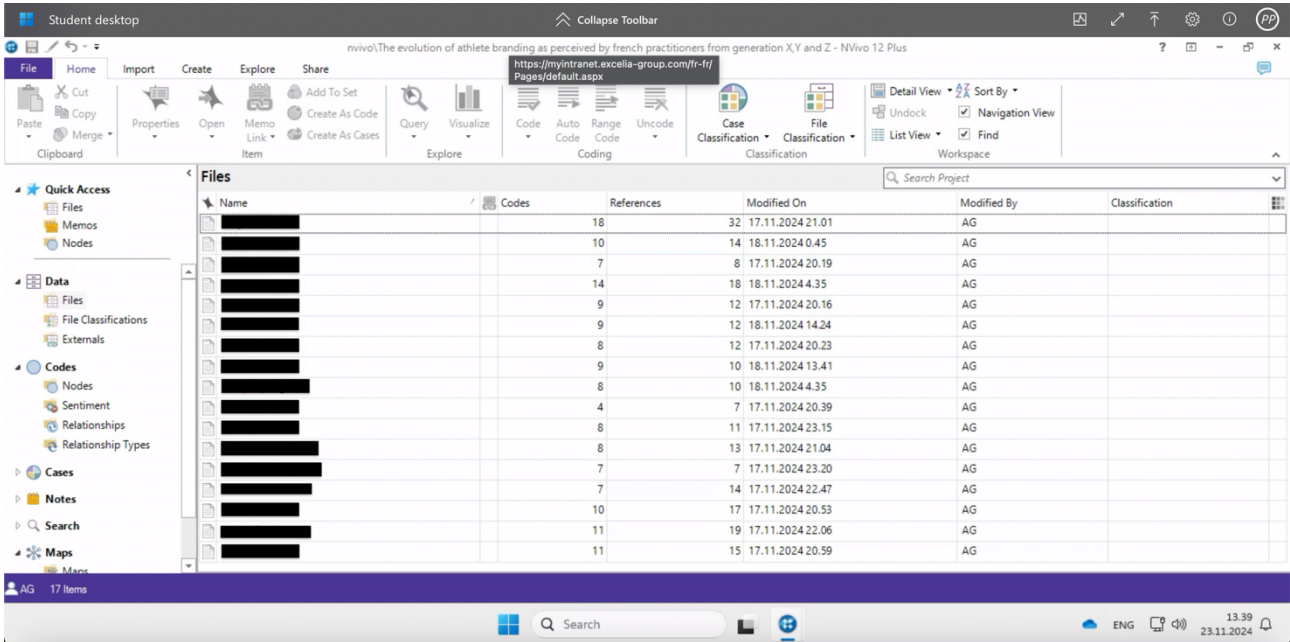
7- Do you think the role of athletes as brand ambassadors has changed in recent years? If so, how? (brand ambassador)

8- What criteria motivate you to accept or decline a partnership with a brand? (criteria)

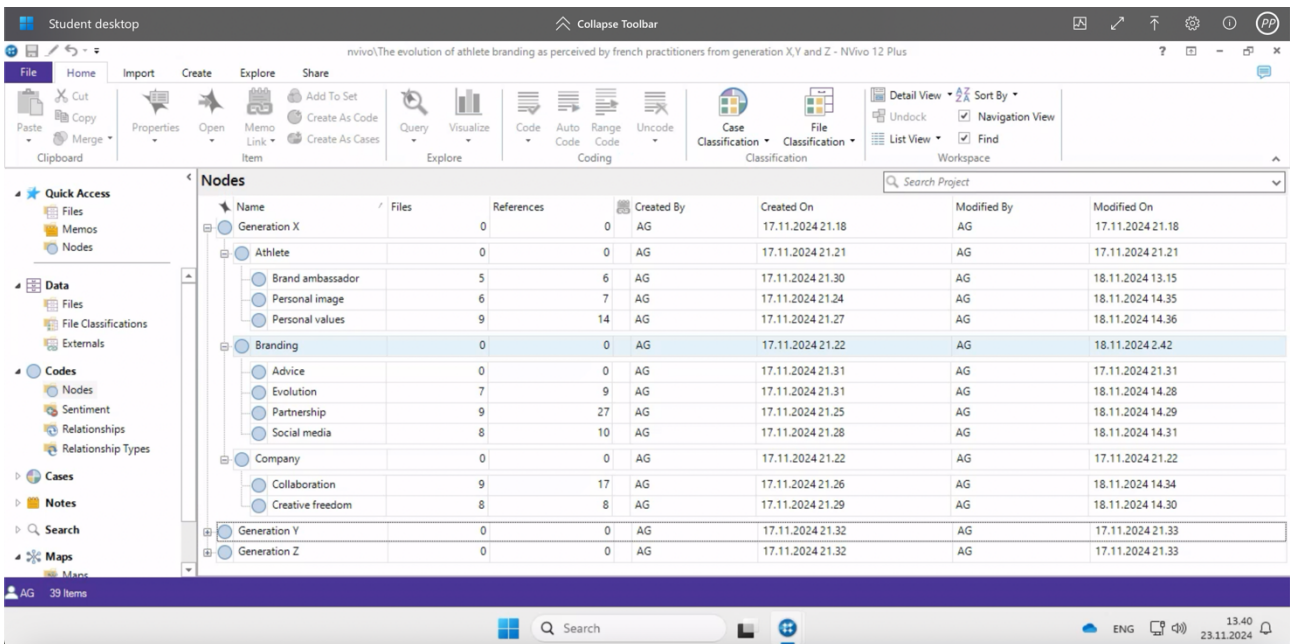
9- How have the expectations of major companies towards you as an athlete evolved since the beginning of your career? (expectation, evolution)

10- What advice would you give to young athletes who wish to develop their personal brand in collaboration with companies? (young athletes, advice)

**Appendix 2. A screenshot showing the Atletes uploaded as primary data on the NVivo12 program.**



**Appendix 3. A screenshot showing the Nodes created during data analysis phase (from the NVivo12 program).**



## Appendix 4. Quotes from interview to highlight the evidence of figure 3.

Interviews	Quotes
Appendix 4.1 Brand Ambassador	<p>“For me, even a small engagement, like attending a dinner with a local sponsor, would require time to refocus before a game.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Today, athletes represent not only their sport but also the values of the brands they endorse. They must be more cautious about what they say and do because their actions can have a massive impact on public opinion and the companies they represent. For example, past controversies—like racist comments or other scandals—could go relatively unnoticed. Now, such actions can lead to immediate backlash and loss of sponsorships” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Naturally, global events have followed one after another, and some sports have gained public sympathy as a result. However, long-term sports stars remain a risky target. There are more of them today than in the past, but a significant majority of attempts fail in the long run due to loss of form, injuries, and so on.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)</p> <p>“in the past, rugby icons were largely known within the rugby community.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“Athletes’ roles have changed significantly with increased media visibility and social media influence. They are no longer just brand ambassadors but are now seen as opinion leaders. This sometimes pushes them to speak out on societal issues, which can be challenging.” (Interviewee 8, 2024)</p>

	<p>“The primary role of an athlete is to perform and succeed in their sport. That’s what drives everything else, including sponsorships. However, some athletes may achieve less in terms of results but align perfectly with a brand’s values, making them just as valuable for representation. It’s also worth noting that some brands are less focused on victories and more on the story or culture of a team. For example, in German football, teams like St. Pauli have built their identity around their fans and values rather than winning titles. This allows brands to align with a different kind of narrative.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)</p>
Appendix 4.2 Personal Image	<p>“Being associated with top brands like Nike and Eden Park naturally elevates your image. These are premium brands, so being linked to them reflects positively on you. My focus was always on quality rather than quantity, and I believe that helped shape a premium perception of my image.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)</p> <p>“Collaborations can have a significant impact, especially when the brand itself is highly prestigious. For instance, partnering with a brand like Nike or LVMH can elevate an athlete’s status and make them more recognizable globally.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“Focus on consistency and alignment with your values. Don’t accept every partnership just for financial gain; choose brands that align with who you are and what you represent. Also, personal relationships with sponsors can open doors to more opportunities than a purely transactional approach.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)</p> <p>“The first step was understanding the brand’s needs and ensuring alignment with the athlete’s image. For example, if a brand wanted frequent social media posts, we ensured it fit within the player’s strategy and image.</p>

	<p>Successful collaborations require clear alignment.” (Interviewee 8, 2024)</p> <p>“Partnering with larger, non-sports brands allowed me to gain recognition beyond rugby. For instance, collaborating with brands like Nike, Sothys, or Daniel Hechter helped elevate my visibility and gave a more well-rounded image of me as an athlete.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“The athlete’s image remains impactful for a few years after retirement, especially if it aligns with the brand’s values.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>It’s hard to quantify the benefits of these collaborations. Ultimately, they are secondary to sports performance. The most important thing was to be the best rugby player I could be, as that was my primary focus. Collaborations were a by-product of my on-field performance, and they only became possible because of my athletic achievements. (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
Appendix 4.3 Personal Values	<p>“For me, the brand’s values and alignment with my own principles would be key considerations.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“The first factor is alignment with my values.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“I wouldn’t represent a brand that doesn’t reflect my principles or that I don’t use myself.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“The most important thing is understanding what the player wants from the partnership. For me, the first priority was the quality of the equipment. For example, with Nike, I chose them because their shoes were</p>

practically custom-made to fit my needs. Nike was also a leader in technical apparel, so the decision was easy. Beyond the technical side, I valued the relationships I had with the people behind the brands. For instance, my collaboration with Eden Park wasn't just about the brand—it was about its history, its elegance in rugby, and the quality of its products. I built a strong connection with the people behind the brand, like Véronique Valette, and that relationship became a reason to stay loyal to them, even when I had opportunities to earn more elsewhere.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“Personally, I was never subjected to choices that brands might have imposed on my image.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)

“Every athlete conveys certain values through their actions, interviews, and performances. Some athletes are known for their talent, others for their grit and determination. Brands look for athletes who align with their values, whether it's resilience, teamwork, or innovation.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“It often depends on their personal values and the brand's image. Some athletes prioritize working with brands that align with their beliefs, such as environmental sustainability or health and wellness.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“Building genuine relationships with sponsors is essential. Personal connections with someone at the company can often make a difference. Additionally, the financial aspect and shared values between the brand and the athlete play significant roles.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“Focus on consistency and alignment with your values. Don’t accept every partnership just for financial gain; choose brands that align with who you are and what you represent. Also, personal relationships with sponsors can open doors to more opportunities than a purely transactional approach.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“This varied by athlete. Some, like Nikola Karabatic, were very focused on the CSR values of companies, while others prioritized financial benefits to maximize their careers. Athletes like Romain Ntamack adopted more selective strategies, working only with premium brands to maintain a high-end image.” (Interviewee 8, 2024)

The primary criteria were notoriety and visibility. For players, being associated with a major brand was a source of pride. It also provided additional income in an era when sports were less professional, and salaries were significantly lower than today. (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“I don’t think there’s one right answer. It’s about ensuring there’s coherence between the athlete’s image and the partnership. Each player has different personalities and images, so it’s important to choose partnerships that align with these. I personally preferred medium- to long-term collaborations over one-off deals. Building a relationship with the brand was more meaningful to me. That said, for some athletes, financial compensation might be the primary factor, and that’s valid too. It really depends on the individual.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)

“I avoided partnerships involving alcohol because it didn’t align with my sport or values. Overall, I evaluated projects on a case-by-case basis, focusing on the image

	<p>the brand wanted to convey and whether it aligned with my principles.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“I valued relationships with companies that shared my principles and values. For me, it wasn’t just about financial compensation; I appreciated collaborations that resonated with my identity and had shared values” (interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 4.4 Evolution</b></p>	<p>“Previously, only the fans of your club or those who watched your matches knew about you” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“There are two ways to look at it. Throughout my career, I had relationships with companies primarily through my clubs. After home games, there were often opportunities to meet with business leaders, as it was part of our activities as players.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)</p> <p>“Sponsorship in sports has seen significant changes over the past 30 to 40 years. Initially, it was more about philanthropy or basic sponsorships with companies helping clubs out of goodwill. Over time, sponsorship evolved into a more structured approach, focusing on brand visibility and hospitality opportunities.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“Collaborations have become much more professionalized. Initially, sponsors would support athletes out of generosity without expecting much in return. Over time, it shifted to partnerships with specific visibility or promotional requirements. In the beginning, most sponsorships involved equipment, but for the best players, it evolved into financial contracts.” (mathiot)</p> <p>“Today, companies look at athletes not only for their current value but also for their potential after their</p>

	<p>sports career. In countries like the U.S. and the U.K., athletes are seen as assets who can contribute their experiences to the corporate world. In France, this perspective is relatively new but growing. Athletes are increasingly being valued for their ability to bring leadership, teamwork, and perseverance to businesses.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)</p> <p>“I don’t think they evolved significantly.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“I played during a time when I experienced amateurism, semi-professionalism, and eventually professionalism. My generation was part of the transition that brought professionalism to rugby” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“They evolved alongside rugby itself. About 25 years ago, rugby wasn’t as popular as it is today. Back then, it was a source of pride to be associated with a brand, as it marked the beginning of rugby’s marketing era. Collaborations often went beyond professional contracts, forming relationships built on mutual respect.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“Yes, because rugby’s image has evolved. As rugby became more popular, the players’ images also grew, making them attractive to companies that weren’t traditionally involved in rugby. Today, brands look for athletes who align with their values and serve as effective ambassadors for their image. This wasn’t the case in the past, as partnerships were often limited to rugby-specific companies.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 4.5 Partnership</b></p>	<p>“I was sponsored by Asics, but only for shoes” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p>

“typically target international players” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“I also value long-term contracts over short-term deals. Continuity helps athletes build a stronger association with a brand, creating a more impactful partnership.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“Most of the time, that happens when you start playing for the French national team. For me, it was around 2001 or 2002, at about 20 years old. Before that, I was playing for Brive and Agen, where I had my first selection with the national team. That’s when brands like Nike, Adidas, and Eden Park approached me.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“they were exclusively with sports or sportswear brands. No brands from cosmetics or high fashion approached me.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“For the most part, they were tied to the club rather than directly to me. The exception was Andros, where the relationship became more personal and long-term.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“The most important thing is understanding what the player wants from the partnership. For me, the first priority was the quality of the equipment. For example, with Nike, I chose them because their shoes were practically custom-made to fit my needs. Nike was also a leader in technical apparel, so the decision was easy. Beyond the technical side, I valued the relationships I had with the people behind the brands. For instance, my collaboration with Eden Park wasn’t just about the brand—it was about its history, its elegance in rugby, and the quality of its products. I built a strong connection with the people behind the brand, like

Véronique Valette, and that relationship became a reason to stay loyal to them, even when I had opportunities to earn more elsewhere.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“At the beginning of your career, you take what’s available—you don’t have the luxury of choice. As your career progresses and your notoriety grows, you start setting boundaries. For example, you might consider where the brand manufactures its products or its commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). But early on, these considerations often take a backseat to the practical need for sponsorships. It’s a matter of finding the balance between aligning with your values and taking opportunities that support your career.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“In my case, it happened midway through my career when I joined Stade Toulousain. At that time in 1999, depending on the players’ popularity, each had a different contract with the equipment supplier. Rarely would anyone get a solo ad; up to three players would receive individual compensation, but beyond that—often the option chosen by the brand—the players’ image was used for free when more than three were featured.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)

“It happened relatively late for me, as I’m from a generation where individual sponsorships were not as common. Partnerships were typically collective, tied to teams or clubs. However, one of my first personal experiences came after an injury when I had to wear a helmet. A brand called Gilbert, known for its rugby balls and helmets, approached me. This was in the first third of my career. I collaborated with them for about a year, doing photo shoots, catalogs, and a conference on player safety and the benefits of wearing a helmet. But since I didn’t enjoy playing with a helmet, I eventually

stopped wearing it after fulfilling my commitments to the brand.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“Others may choose partnerships based on financial opportunities, especially early in their careers when resources are limited. However, as athletes gain experience and recognition, they can afford to be more selective, focusing on long-term relationships that align with their values.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“From the very beginning of my career, but it was more me reaching out to sponsors rather than them coming to me. Since I wasn’t a “star,” I had to actively seek sponsorships to finance my season and make myself attractive to brands.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“Golf attracts sponsors from various industries beyond sports, including insurance companies and local businesses. This diversification is advantageous for players as it broadens opportunities.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“For athletes: Collaborating with prestigious brands enhances their image and gives them a premium aura. Conversely, working with less reputable brands, like Lidl, might provide financial benefits but adds little value to their image.” (Interviewee 8, 2024)

At first, it took a long time for teams and players to attract sponsorships. The shift began with the progressive media coverage of sports, starting with the arrival of television, which allowed events to be broadcasted. Television became a powerful communication tool, and sponsors started taking an interest in players, initially in the most popular sports like football in Europe. Other sports later followed, learning from football's experience. Over time, brands

began to see the value of associating their image with teams and players to gain visibility through jerseys and, eventually, individual athletes.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“Yes, there were changes. At one point, non-sport-related contracts were almost as important as athletic ones because brands had more money than clubs and could pay players well. However, only a few players benefitted from this.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“I recall debates about equipment, especially regarding boots. Some players signed individual contracts with brands, while national teams or clubs wanted everyone to use their official sponsor’s gear. Boots were considered essential tools of the trade, and players often preferred certain brands for comfort and performance. This became one of the first examples of players leveraging personal endorsements for additional income.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“Sports equipment brands were particularly active in trying to develop their image and made proposals to players. Some brands also insisted on exclusive contracts, requiring athletes not to work with competing brands. It was all about supply and demand.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“It depends on whether you want to stay in the spotlight or not. Some athletes want to maintain their notoriety after their careers, while others prefer to step back. Personally, I believe in balancing exposure with professionalism. Only a few athletes, like Michael Jordan, manage to maintain their brand value across generations. For most, it’s about leveraging their current popularity to build something sustainable for the future.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

For purely sports-related partnerships, such as sponsorships with equipment providers, it started early. Later, for broader partnerships, it was when I began to establish myself at a higher level. I'd say the turning point was the 2007 Rugby World Cup. Representing the national team brought more visibility, and since it was a World Cup held in France, it attracted a lot of interest from partners." (Interviewee 11, 2024)

"When you are involved in partnerships, there's an expectation to maintain a high level of performance on the field to justify the association." (Interviewee 11, 2024)

"I worked with an agent. Later, I partnered with someone from the media and television industry who specialized in broader visibility beyond sports. Eventually, I co-founded a company in collaboration with an agency, Broadstory, because this area interested me. From the start, though, I always sought professional support." (Interviewee 11, 2024)

"I kept several partnerships. Retirement often brings more availability, which can appeal to brands. These collaborations can also involve internal corporate events rather than just external promotion." (Interviewee 11, 2024)

As rugby's image evolved and its popularity grew, the interest from brands also increased. Back then, the brands interested in partnering were typically those already linked to the sport or its environment. We didn't see multinational corporations or companies outside the sports domain. For example, brands like Nike or Peugeot, which partnered with Stade Toulousain, were

	<p>already involved in rugby through club or federation sponsorships.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“Values were always closely tied to sports performance. When you perform well, attract media attention, and play for a winning team (as I did), it’s easier to gain visibility and draw interest from brands. Media exposure naturally brings partnerships” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“money was never the primary motivator. It was about sharing values and ensuring that the brand aligned with who I was. At the time, luxury brands were not involved in rugby as they are now. Most partnerships were limited to brands associated with the federation or clubs. I only accepted partnerships that made sense for both parties—it had to be a win-win situation.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“No, I didn’t. I come from a time when rugby was still amateur, and even during my professional career, it hadn’t reached the level of media and commercial influence it has today” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 4.6 Social media</b></p>	<p>“There has been a natural evolution, accelerated by the rise of social media” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media has become an additional communication and revenue channel. While it can amplify an athlete’s brand, it requires careful management to maintain credibility and avoid overexposure.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)</p> <p>“It seems to me that projects with athletes are well-scripted—either supporting the start of a story they hope to sustain or relying on something spectacular, focusing on movement and enthusiasm, which attracts” the interest of social media storytellers eager to build</p>

loyalty across broad audience categories.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)

“Social media has given athletes unprecedented control over their personal brand and how they represent sponsors. It allows them to directly engage with fans, showcase their personalities, and build a narrative around their careers. However, social media also comes with challenges. Negative comments or controversies can quickly escalate. That’s why many athletes and brands now collaborate on digital strategies to ensure a consistent and positive image.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“Social media has completely transformed the dynamic. It’s now a simple and efficient way for athletes to give their sponsors visibility. However, it can sometimes lead to athletes overloading themselves with incoherent partnerships.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“Social media is now a major factor. It directly influences contract value. However, poor management (e.g., too many ads) can harm an athlete’s image. Athletes must balance monetization with authenticity to keep their audience engaged.” (interviewee 8, 2024)

“The professionalization of sports also played a big role. Football turned professional earlier, and rugby followed suit, leading brands to invest more in players as their notoriety grew. Social media amplified this trend even further. For players who use it wisely, social media has become both a communication tool and a significant source of income.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“I’m not personally active on social media, but I know it’s widely used, particularly by younger generations. It seems to be an effective tool for communication and branding. However, I believe it’s crucial to be cautious

	<p>of the negative aspects of social media, as being constantly exposed can have unintended consequences.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media has grown exponentially and has become a massive communication tool. It’s an extension of traditional advertisements in sports or fashion magazines. Athletes with large social media followings can significantly impact brand promotion. Social media accelerates brand visibility and creates opportunities to connect with audiences in a way that was previously impossible.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“With the rise of social media and greater media coverage, athletes are much more visible than before—especially in rugby, which has grown significantly in France” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
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### Appendix 5. Quotes from interview to highlight the evidence of figure 4.

Interviews	Quotes
<b>Appendix 5.1 Brand ambassador</b>	<p>“Yes, the visibility of sports like rugby has grown significantly, which has increased brand interest. The more visible an athlete or sport, the more brands are interested in collaborating. Factors like national team performance and club success also play a role. However, the key is that partnerships now involve more than just promoting a product—they require embodying the brand’s values both on and off the field.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p>
<b>Appendix 5.2 Personal image</b>	<p>“Athletes need to be selective. Accepting too many or inappropriate partnerships can dilute your image. For instance, I refused partnerships with alcohol brands or</p>

	<p>products that didn't align with my values, like a "miracle cure" for hangovers. Collaborations should resonate with who you are. It's also important to consider the narrative you can create with a brand. For example, I struggled to craft a story around car sponsorships because I'm not passionate about cars. Ultimately, I think it's essential to decline partnerships that don't align with your values, even if they're lucrative." (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>"These collaborations put me in the spotlight, increasing my visibility and allowing me to build a reputation. They also opened the door for renegotiations with existing sponsors or attracting potential new ones. However, I always prioritized my on-field performance. My main focus was performing well in the French national team, as everything stemmed from that. It's crucial to ensure that the foundation remains on the field, and not the other way around." (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 5.3 Personal values</b></p>	<p>"Dupont is a perfect candidate because he represents traditional and sporting values." (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>"Grégory Alldritt represents the SNCF (French National Railway Company), which aligns with eco-friendly values. On the other hand, he also works with Range Rover, a brand with a completely different image" (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>"I prefer collaborations that make sense and have a story behind them. Toward the end of my career, I co-created a sports drink with spirulina and other healthy ingredients. I wanted the partnership to reflect my values and provide meaning. Long-term projects are more interesting to me than one-off deals. For instance, I had a one-off campaign with a brand before the 2011 Rugby World Cup, but it didn't go anywhere afterward. I found that disappointing." (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p>

“This is something I’ve thought about a lot. In a partnership, there needs to be mutual benefit: the brand should gain something, and so should the athlete. First, it’s important to understand the intentions on both sides. What are we trying to achieve with this partnership? Is it solely about sports, or does it involve communication as well? For me, alignment of values is crucial. Does the brand share values that resonate with mine, or are there significant differences? I believe sports can be a medium to convey broader ideas, even beyond the realm of sports. I’d like to explore partnerships that allow me to communicate about other issues, such as environmental causes, even with companies that aren’t directly linked to sports.”

(Interviewee 15, 2024)

“Several factors influence my decision. The first is the human connection—the relationship with the team behind the brand is crucial. I also consider the brand’s values, history, and communication style. Another important factor is the brand’s audience reach. If a partnership allows me to amplify my voice and communicate about topics I care about, such as environmental causes, it becomes more appealing. The opportunity to reach a larger audience through the brand’s platform is a significant advantage in such collaborations.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)

“the most important value has always been continuity. I prioritized long-term collaborations based on trust rather than one-off campaigns or short-term advertisements.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)

“It must align with my personal, family, and athletic values. For instance, I avoided promoting alcohol or products I didn’t personally use.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)

**Appendix 5.4 Evolution**

“Companies now look beyond the immediate value of an athlete's performance. They consider the athlete's potential for future contributions, such as leadership skills or values they can bring into the corporate world after retirement. Some organizations, like those led by former Olympian Laura Flessel, are actively bridging the gap between sports and business, helping athletes transition into corporate roles.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“When I started, in the early 2000s, partnerships were often qualitative and well-structured. Brands would pay athletes and run campaigns. Over time, especially with the rise of social media, the focus shifted to quantity rather than quality. Today, athletes are often approached through platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn to promote specific products, but the financial aspect of partnerships has diminished. Social media has diluted the value of partnerships; instead of large, meaningful deals, it's now more common to see small, transactional arrangements.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)

“Since my victory there are ongoing discussions, but for now, nothing has materialized.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)

“One of the biggest changes is in what companies expect from athletes, particularly when it comes to communication and especially communication through social media. If you look back twenty or thirty years, sponsorship was largely about putting a logo on a jersey and being satisfied that the athlete performed well and represented the company's colors. That approach has completely changed. Today, social media platforms are indispensable tools. It's very common for sponsorship contracts to include requirements for athletes to share marketing campaigns created by the brands because these platforms are powerful for reaching a wide audience. I've observed this evolution, especially among

	<p>close friends, though it hasn't directly impacted me." (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>"I believe they've evolved significantly. The demands on athletes have increased, especially due to social media and the growing media coverage of rugby. Between 2011 and 2019, around the time of the last World Cup, there was a noticeable shift. Companies began expecting more active involvement from athletes, which marked an important turning point." (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p> <p>"There's definitely been an increase in demands, particularly in terms of media and social media presence. Today, athletes are paid for posts and social media content rather than just traditional ads." (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 5.5 Partnership</b></p>	<p>"I was approached by Nike when I was about 16 or 17 years old. At that time, many players at Stade Toulousain were sponsored by Nike. There was someone named Robert Labatut, who was close to Philippe Laurent, Nike's rugby representative. Robert mentioned me, and I was offered a contract that included unlimited cleats, tennis shoes, and some Nike gear. That partnership started around 16-17 years old and lasted until I was about 33 or 34. My last season, I no longer had a contract for gear." (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>"Personally, I've never had a sponsor. For the past ten years, I've worked in a company that sponsors athletes in sports, but my role is in engineering. For me, sports have always been something I pursued alongside my career as an engineer. I've never had any sponsorship contracts, neither from my employer nor from other brands." (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>"This is something I've thought about a lot. In a partnership, there needs to be mutual benefit: the</p>

brand should gain something, and so should the athlete. First, it's important to understand the intentions on both sides. What are we trying to achieve with this partnership? Is it solely about sports, or does it involve communication as well? For me, alignment of values is crucial. Does the brand share values that resonate with mine, or are there significant differences? I believe sports can be a medium to convey broader ideas, even beyond the realm of sports. I'd like to explore partnerships that allow me to communicate about other issues, such as environmental causes, even with companies that aren't directly linked to sports." (Interviewee 15, 2024)

"It varies greatly depending on the individual. Sponsorship is not an end goal—it's a means that allows some athletes to secure financial stability. In trail running and endurance sports, it's rare to find athletes who rely solely on their sport as their primary source of income, unlike in other disciplines. Beyond financial support, sponsorships can offer valuable opportunities. For instance, in my job, I've worked closely with athletes to develop products, and those collaborations have sometimes turned into strong, long-lasting personal relationships." (Interviewee 15, 2024)

"Several factors influence my decision. The first is the human connection—the relationship with the team behind the brand is crucial. I also consider the brand's values, history, and communication style. Another important factor is the brand's audience reach. If a partnership allows me to amplify my voice and communicate about topics I care about, such as environmental causes, it becomes more appealing. The opportunity to reach a larger audience through the brand's platform is a significant advantage in such collaborations." (Interviewee 15, 2024)

	<p>“It happened once I started playing for the French national team. That was the turning point.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p> <p>“The partnership also had to be flexible enough to accommodate my training schedule. I prioritized long-term contracts—one or two years minimum—over short campaigns. I believe an athlete needs to be consistently associated with a brand for the collaboration to have a real impact.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 5.6 Social media</b></p>	<p>“When I started, in the early 2000s, partnerships were often qualitative and well-structured. Brands would pay athletes and run campaigns. Over time, especially with the rise of social media, the focus shifted to quantity rather than quality. Today, athletes are often approached through platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn to promote specific products, but the financial aspect of partnerships has diminished. Social media has diluted the value of partnerships; instead of large, meaningful deals, it’s now more common to see small, transactional arrangements.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media has exponentially increased athletes' visibility. It’s now a major driver of brand collaborations and can significantly amplify the impact of partnerships. However, it also requires careful management. For example, brands often specify the frequency of posts or stories as part of the contract. Social media can be a double-edged sword: while it offers more opportunities, it demands consistency and authenticity to maintain credibility.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>“One of the biggest changes is in what companies expect from athletes, particularly when it comes to communication and especially communication through social media” (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p>

	<p>“Today, social media platforms are indispensable tools. It’s very common for sponsorship contracts to include requirements for athletes to share marketing campaigns created by the brands because these platforms are powerful for reaching a wide audience.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media platforms give athletes a communication channel where they can express themselves more authentically.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>“The key is to stay centered on rugby. Fans might want a glimpse into your life behind the scenes, but it’s important to be cautious. Oversharing can backfire, as followers may not share the same lifestyle or means. Maintaining balance between personal and professional life is essential.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 5.7 Collaboration</b></p>	<p>“Brands see an opportunity to associate with those traits and offer direct contracts outside the club’s agreements” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“When I started, in the early 2000s, partnerships were often qualitative and well-structured. Brands would pay athletes and run campaigns. Over time, especially with the rise of social media, the focus shifted to quantity rather than quality. Today, athletes are often approached through platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn to promote specific products, but the financial aspect of partnerships has diminished. Social media has diluted the value of partnerships; instead of large, meaningful deals, it’s now more common to see small, transactional arrangements.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>“I worked with Nike, Serge Blanco, Land Rover, and others. Most of them were related to the sports industry.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>

	<p>“No, most were related to the sports industry.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p>Appendix 5.8 Creative freedom</p>	<p>“Generally, yes. Brands have their values and expectations, so as long as you align with them, you’re given some freedom. For instance, Nike required us to wear their gear in specific contexts like on the rugby field, but there weren’t restrictions in private life as long as photos didn’t surface. Clubs like Stade Toulousain, on the other hand, could be stricter—for example, requiring players to drive Peugeot vehicles to the stadium.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)</p> <p>“It depends on the brand. Some brands provide stricter guidelines, while others are more flexible. Social media platforms give athletes a communication channel where they can express themselves more authentically. While athletes often promote their sponsor brands, they can also communicate independently. If an athlete’s independent communication ever conflicts with a brand’s values, it might lead to renegotiations or adjustments in the partnership. However, overall, there’s a good amount of creative freedom for athletes in how they represent brands.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>“It depended on the situation. For example, I couldn’t have sponsorships that conflicted with the club’s primary sponsors. With Nike, things were fine, but with Land Rover and other car sponsors, there were more constraints. For instance, I couldn’t show up at the stadium driving a competitor’s car. Contracts had to be respected on both sides.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>

## Appendix 6. Quotes from interview to highlight the evidence of figure 5.

Interviews	Quotes
<p><b>Appendix 6.1 Brand ambassador</b></p>	<p>“looking at today’s generation of players, I’m impressed by their ability to juggle multiple commitments—like attending a Chanel fashion show on a Tuesday, visiting Adidas for new gear on Thursday, and still performing at their peak in a weekend match” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Only a select few can truly represent major brands” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Yes, absolutely. It has expanded significantly, especially with brands from outside the traditional sports sector, like cosmetics and fashion, getting involved. Sports inspire lifestyle trends, and athletes are now seen as influencers beyond their sport. This crossover has broadened the scope of brand collaborations.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)</p> <p>“Today’s athletes, especially in sports like rugby, have become much more visible to the general public. Players like Antoine Dupont or Romain Ntamack have transcended rugby audiences to become mainstream figures.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“Today, thanks to media exposure and social platforms, players have a much broader reach. This has elevated the role of athletes as global ambassadors for their sports and the brands they represent.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p>

“Athletes have been given a bigger say in how they want to be portrayed through these collaborations and are lot more involved in the process of creating these collaborations speaks to how the role has evolved.

Athletes are no longer just putting their face and names on brands in different forms of collaborations but they are a lot more hands on with everything that happens behind the scenes of creating these collaborations”  
(Interviewee 12, 2024)

“The role of athletes as ambassadors has evolved significantly, particularly thanks to social media. It’s now easier for athletes to represent a brand and promote it. Before the Internet era, options were more limited. Now, athletes can promote their image themselves, strengthening their role as brand ambassadors.”  
(Interviewee 16, 2024)

“Yes, representing a brand was almost taboo in rugby in the past. Now, it’s becoming an important financial opportunity, especially as the sport gains popularity.”  
(Interviewee 17, 2024)

“Yes, as rugby has gained more visibility and importance, more players are attracting brand interest.”  
(Interviewee 9, 2024)

“Today, an athlete’s role is more significant and engaging. When an athlete partners with a brand, it creates a deep connection, tied not just to their performance but also to their behavior on and off the field. This makes the stakes higher for both parties. Any misstep by the athlete or the brand can have major repercussions. As such, the collaboration must be carefully considered to ensure alignment in values and expectations.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)

	<p>“Absolutely. Today, it’s similar to how models used to walk the runway for fashion designers or pose in ads. Athletes now create their own “world” for certain brands” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“Athletes are now key communicators, showcasing the products they use, from clothing to cars, music, and technology. Rugby players have become major influencers and attract considerable interest from brands.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“Players now are seen as stars, representing not just the sport but broader cultural and commercial interests.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“The role has changed because society has changed. Younger audiences are increasingly connected through social media rather than traditional TV. Everything moves faster now. Brands expect ambassadors to be reactive and present, particularly after a game or event. The focus is on being timely and relevant because, after a few days, the interest fades.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.2 Personal image</b></p>	<p>“Many young athletes today prioritize their image over their performance, which is a mistake” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“On the flip side, many young athletes use sponsorships as a means to support their training and dedicate more time to their sport. Brands benefit from associating with promising talent, while athletes gain the financial stability to focus on their performance.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“So far the collaborations I’ve made with brands have really enhanced my image as an athlete particularly to my fans and on social media.” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p>

	<p>“I’ve been fortunate to collaborate with renowned brands in the equestrian world, such as CWD and DADA Sport. These partnerships have provided me with significant visibility, particularly through advertising campaigns and on social media. In recent years, these sponsorship deals with major brands have opened the door to other partnership opportunities, which have had a very positive impact on both my personal image and professional career.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“Collaborations are primarily financially motivated. However, excessive or poorly aligned partnerships can harm an athlete’s reputation.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“Well-known athletes like Antoine Dupont attract prestigious brands that enhance their image. Lesser-known athletes may accept more compromises to secure partnerships.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.3 Personal values</b></p>	<p>“Athletes today also have the ability to shape their public personas through social media. Many have clear narratives, whether it’s sharing their training routines, giving personal insights, or championing social causes. Brands align themselves with these narratives to create a cohesive image.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“As a Christian man, I cannot be involved in anything that goes against my religious beliefs. And also certain things that are a bit more personal to for example, I would refuse to collaborate with a food company that practices animal cruelty” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“I don’t reject a lot of opportunities because of what each collaborations could potentially lead to, however I think the main reason I would decline collaborations would be if the collaboration or collaborating company did not align with my personal values or went strongly</p>

	<p>against certain things I believe in.” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“For me, several values are essential when choosing brands to collaborate with. Most of the brands I’ve partnered with in recent years are committed to environmental values, which are very important to me. Additionally, they prioritize 100% French manufacturing, which is another value that I hold dear” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“Respect, being straightforward with the brand and vice versa, and fostering a constructive collaboration that promotes a positive image for both the athlete and the brand.” (Interviewee 4, 2024)</p> <p>“it’s essential to ensure that the values conveyed by the brand align with the athlete’s own values.” (Interviewee 4, 2024)</p> <p>“Alignment with the sport and the athlete's image. For instance, I wouldn’t consider collaborating with an alcohol brand because it doesn’t align with rugby’s values.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“The utility of the product or service being offered and whether it aligns with my personal values.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“It’s crucial to understand the brand, its goals, and ensure it aligns with my values before committing.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.4 advice</b></p>	<p>“Focus on your sport first and foremost. Success on the field will naturally attract brands” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p>

“For most athletes, it’s important to build a strong foundation in their sport, and the sponsorships will follow.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“stay true to your values and surround yourself with the right people to guide you. Having a solid support system is key to developing a personal brand that aligns with your principles and resonates with companies.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“First and foremost, focus on your sport. Performance is what attracts brands—it’s your achievements on the field that open doors. There’s no point in chasing partnerships before you’ve established yourself. Once opportunities arise, it’s important to surround yourself with the right people, such as a good lawyer, to ensure your contracts are fair and align with your long-term goals. Be careful with your choices, as poor decisions early in your career can have lasting repercussions.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)

“If the question is whether an athlete can align with a leading company in its field and incorporate their identity through complementary collections to products already familiar to the public, I’d say success depends on being supported by a team of designers capable of projecting the envisioned idea. This ensures that the identity can evolve while remaining recognizable, aiming for consistent lines or colors that are coherent enough to become a lasting signature.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)

“The first priority is always performance. Athletes should focus on excelling in their sport because success naturally attracts opportunities. When it comes to partnerships, athletes should stay true to themselves. Authenticity is key—trying to project a false image can be exhausting and unsustainable. Lastly, surround

yourself with professionals, such as lawyers or agents, who can help you navigate contracts and make informed decisions. This ensures that the partnerships you enter into align with your long-term goals, both on and off the field.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“Ensure that brands you collaborate with align with your personality and morals. Don’t do things only because of the financial benefits” (Interviewee 12, 2024)

“Stay focused on your performance above all else. Good results will naturally attract sponsors. Build your projects carefully and present them with passion. Relationships are key; a single sponsor can lead to many more opportunities.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“My advice to young athletes would be to embody values that are important in today’s world, such as environmental commitment or social responsibility. It’s also essential to know how to create and convey an authentic message, which will help them build their personal brand and attract companies that share the same values.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)

“Focus on performance first and foremost. Brand partnerships come naturally when you’re performing at your best. Don’t rush into accepting every offer—prioritize quality over quantity. It’s also important to understand the terms of your contracts and to have a clear sense of what aligns with your values. Additionally, while agents can handle the legal and financial aspects, it’s beneficial for the athlete to engage directly with brands initially to gauge compatibility.” (Interviewee 7, 2024)

“Today, it’s crucial to pay attention to a brand’s values, especially regarding sustainability. Athletes should think

long-term, avoid incoherent collaborations, and partner with companies that align with their beliefs.”

(Interviewee 8, 2024)

“Prioritize collaborations that match your values and avoid making decisions based solely on financial gain. Athletic performance should remain the main focus.”

(Interviewee 17, 2024)

“My first piece of advice would be to focus on their sport and performance. Results naturally attract sponsors. I’d also recommend working with a good lawyer who can negotiate contracts and ensure that those around you are working in your best interests. Finally, young athletes should be mindful of their actions and choices, especially on social media. Poor decisions can have long-term consequences, so it’s crucial to remain vigilant and align their image with their values.” (Interviewee 10, 2024)

“Carefully select brands, considering their utility and alignment with your goals. Work with trusted individuals, like agents, to guide you.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)

“My advice would be to stay authentic and true to your principles. Sincerity is what matters most in any form of communication. Focus on what you do well and don’t try to force yourself into roles or skills that don’t align with your nature. It’s important to surround yourself with experts in areas where you might lack expertise, such as social media or communication strategies. Your personal brand is built on your strengths, so avoid spreading yourself too thin trying to master everything. By staying true to yourself and focusing on your

	<p>strengths, you can build a personal brand that resonates authentically with others.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)</p> <p>“Choose partnerships that resonate with you and align with your values. My advice is to avoid relying solely on intermediaries. The initial contact with a brand should ideally involve the athlete directly to understand the project and establish a connection. Once that’s clear, an agent can take over for contractual and legal matters. Having direct involvement helps the athlete make informed decisions and build a more genuine relationship with the brand.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p> <p>“The most important thing is to focus on being the best athlete you can be. Success on the field is what attracts brands. Without it, everything else falls apart. After that, your behavior, values, principles, and authenticity will determine how brands perceive you. Always prioritize athletic excellence because it’s the foundation for everything else, including sponsorships and partnerships.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p> <p>“The most important advice I can give is to stay true to yourself. Don’t base your decisions solely on the paycheck but rather on your convictions. Build your brand around what you believe in and what you’re passionate about. Also, make sure you’re surrounded by the right people who can guide you and support you in your journey.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.5 Evolution</b></p>	<p>“For example, today’s generation—players like Antoine Dupont or Grégory Alldritt—have personal image contracts” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“They’ve even created their own image rights companies to manage direct deals with brands like Louis Vuitton” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p>

“Today’s players handle much more without losing their performance edge.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“Companies now look beyond the immediate value of an athlete's performance. They consider the athlete's potential for future contributions, such as leadership skills or values they can bring into the corporate world after retirement. Some organizations, like those led by former Olympian Laura Flessel, are actively bridging the gap between sports and business, helping athletes transition into corporate roles.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)

“In rugby specifically, the past decade has seen a shift towards individual sponsorships, largely driven by the rise of social media. These platforms enable brands to work with individual athletes who can promote products directly to their followers. This has fundamentally changed how sponsorships operate, allowing for more targeted and personalized marketing strategies.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)

“Massively. Because of how big the sporting world has become and the level of athletes that are being produced now, big brands and companies want to associate themselves with these athletes. Simply the evolution of it being just sports brands to now big car companies, restaurants, luxury brands and more shows how much these collaborations have grown throughout the years” (Interviewee 12, 2024)

“The international competition starts young—around age 14. French golfers often need to play in 7-8 international tournaments a year to remain competitive, which is very costly. Going to the U.S. offers athletic scholarships that significantly reduce the

financial burden of these pursuits.” (Interviewee 14, 2024)

“Collaborations between athletes and major companies have evolved significantly in recent years as sports have become essential in people's lives. Sports are a source of emotions, and today, companies want to be associated with those emotions. For instance, Léon Marchand is now sponsored by LVMH through the Louis Vuitton brand, and Formula 1 athletes represent major corporations. This evolution is something I've observed during my career: brands now seek visibility through sports, which has become an important market.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)

“The role of athletes as ambassadors has evolved significantly, particularly thanks to social media. It's now easier for athletes to represent a brand and promote it. before the Internet era, options were more limited. Now, athletes can promote their image themselves, strengthening their role as brand ambassadors.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)

“Personally, I haven't noticed a significant change in companies' expectations of me as an athlete, apart from an increased demand for presence at events or on social media. However, so far, my personal experience hasn't been profoundly affected by these changes.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)

“The biggest change is the exposure athletes get on social media.” (Interviewee 4, 2024)

“As new, younger players emerged, brands would shift their focus to those who carried more visibility and potential.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)

	<p>“There’s definitely been an increase in demands, particularly in terms of media and social media presence. Today, athletes are paid for posts and social media content rather than just traditional ads.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.6 Partnership</b></p>	<p>“This trend is especially noticeable in rugby and football, where social media presence is a significant factor in partnerships.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“In high school. Rugby is really big in South African schools so once you start playing well and start getting invited to camps for the national youth teams, smaller companies and brands begin to approach you. For me, that was around when I was 15 or 16” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“I don’t reject a lot of opportunities because of what each collaborations could potentially lead to, however I think the main reason I would decline collaborations would be if the collaboration or collaborating company did not align with my personal values or went strongly against certain things I believe in.” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“I received my first partnership contract offers at the age of 14, when I started competing for the French national team and participating more frequently in international competitions. This gave me greater visibility.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“Several criteria motivate me to accept a collaboration. First, the brand’s image and how it’s perceived by the public are crucial. The brand’s sustainability also plays a role. What might lead me to decline a contract are specific constraints imposed in the agreement. Some</p>

	<p>brands require stricter commitments than others, which can deter me from accepting.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“The values of the company and its engagement with the public (through social media, advertisements, etc.).” (Interviewee 4, 2024)</p> <p>“Brands usually begin reaching out once athletes play their first professional matches, as these provide the necessary media visibility.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“Young players are usually approached through their clubs, which manage relationships with brands. Individual partnerships often begin after players train or play professionally.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)</p> <p>“High-level sports constantly demand reinvention, and partnerships rarely last a lifetime; having one for the duration of your career is already a privilege.” (Interviewee 2, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.7 Social media</b></p>	<p>“Social media is now central to how athletes are represented” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media has created two types of athletes: the “sandwich athlete,” who takes every partnership opportunity without much thought, and the athlete who chooses partnerships carefully and strategically. For example, Romain Taofifénuā is very selective and works with high-quality brands like Garmin and Adidas.” (Interviewee 3, 2024)</p> <p>“In rugby specifically, the past decade has seen a shift towards individual sponsorships, largely driven by the rise of social media. These platforms enable brands to work with individual athletes who can promote products directly to their followers. This has fundamentally changed how sponsorships operate,</p>

	<p>allowing for more targeted and personalized marketing strategies.” (Interviewee 6, 2024)</p> <p>“Social media has forced brands to become more creative and innovative on how they portray athletes. It has also allowed for healthy competition between brands as well as helping grow the fanbases of athletes by compelling people who would have no interest otherwise to look into these athletes simply because they are related with a certain brand” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“Today, social media has taken a central role in sponsorships. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have transformed the way brands represent their ambassadors. They can regularly and quickly create content with their athletes at a lower cost, such as reels or short videos, which resonate strongly with audiences.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“Personally, I haven’t noticed a significant change in companies’ expectations of me as an athlete, apart from an increased demand for presence at events or on social media. However, so far, my personal experience hasn’t been profoundly affected by these changes.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“I think the role of social media is crucial because it allows athletes to be highlighted by the brands they represent through shared values. It also helps brands attract more people to consume their products by leveraging the athlete's image. Social media is the first real springboard for reaching a wider audience.” (Interviewee 4, 2024)</p>
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“The biggest change is the exposure athletes get on social media.” (Interviewee 4, 2024)

“growing social media presence increase a brand's desire to collaborate.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)

“Social media can damage an athlete’s credibility more than enhance it, particularly if they engage in too many unaligned collaborations.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)

“Social media has overtaken traditional advertising. It allows brands to reach specific audiences, particularly younger ones, and has become an essential tool for athlete partnerships.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)

“I mostly observe as a consumer, not as a content creator, because I don’t produce content on social media. Over the past decade, I’ve seen how social media has created opportunities for athletes to become brand ambassadors, even without top-tier athletic performance. Today, in trail running and other sports, it’s possible to secure a contract with brands based primarily on communication skills and social media influence rather than athletic results. This has diversified the way sponsorships work, creating space for athletes who excel in communication even if they aren’t top performers in competition.” (Interviewee 15, 2024)

“Social media has been transformative, significantly amplifying athletes’ images. It’s now tied closely to an athlete’s visibility and income. Social media has become a growth accelerator for both brands and collaborations, making partnerships much more impactful.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)

	<p>“Social media is now just as significant as television, if not more so. It provides a direct platform to reach audiences. A player with 500,000 to a million followers can be more valuable to a brand than a television ad. Social media enables brands to publish, analyze, and promote their content in a way that’s efficient and impactful.” (Interviewee 5, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.8 Collaboration</b></p>	<p>“It’s an essential source of revenue, and in some cases, athletes earn more from sponsorships than from their salaries” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Being an athlete means stepping into the role of someone who constantly pushes out of their comfort zone. Success comes from the need to continually rediscover oneself, as often as possible. This adventurous mindset is also a tribute to exploration and regeneration. Being adaptable in a world that never stops evolving will be the Holy Grail for a company seeking notoriety.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)</p> <p>“A company can draw on the values of different winning temperaments. It can freely use an infinite range of natural, urban, or fictional spaces where the chosen athlete embodies a healthy body and a healthy mind—the ideal figure that every advertising target would want to associate with the product endorsed by the brand.” (Interviewee 13, 2024)</p> <p>“Collaborating with brands has helped open the door for more collaborations with bigger brands and will only benefit me in the future for even more collaborations.” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“Not much in all honesty. As a younger athlete I think brands and companies understand not to put too much on our plates when it comes to collaborating, they’ve kept everything quite straightforward with me. For example, I would just have to post stuff on my social</p>

	<p>media, promote things through friends and family etc” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“The better an athlete performs, the more brands take interest. Improved performance and growing social media presence increase a brand's desire to collaborate.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“Early in an athlete’s career, companies typically focus on image use. As the athlete’s career progresses, partnerships evolve into collaborations involving messaging and shared values. Toward the end of a career, and even in retirement, the focus shifts to what the athlete has learned from their sport and how they can represent those values. Companies treat athletes differently depending on whether they are just starting out, at their peak, or retired.” (Interviewee 11, 2024)</p>
<p><b>Appendix 6.9 Creative freedom</b></p>	<p>“Antoine Dupont’s famous Louis Vuitton photoshoot—where he wore a bathrobe—might not appeal to everyone, but it worked for him and didn’t damage his image.” (Interviewee 1, 2024)</p> <p>“Unfortunately not yet as I haven’t reached that point in my career yet but it’s definitely something I would like incorporated in future collaborations” (Interviewee 12, 2024)</p> <p>“Most of the brands I’ve collaborated with have given me considerable creative freedom when creating content for social media, whether it’s stories or posts. Of course, there are guidelines to follow, especially regarding the frequency of posts, but I’ve always had the freedom to represent the brands in my own way.” (Interviewee 16, 2024)</p> <p>“Not really. Brands often have strict editorial guidelines and specific processes for how athletes should</p>

	<p>represent them, especially on social media.” (Interviewee 17, 2024)</p> <p>“Yes, to some extent. Brands often provide products tailored to athletes’ needs in exchange for visibility on social media.” (Interviewee 9, 2024)</p>
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