



# The Impact of Athletes As Ambassadors in Olympic and Sports marketing strate- gies in Spain

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Bachelor's thesis

May 2025

International Business Management

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Jyväskylä: Jamk University of Applied Sciences, May 2025, 63 pages

Degree Programme in International Business Management. Bachelor's thesis.

Permission for open access publication: Yes

Language of publication: English

#### **Abstract**

The role of athletes as ambassadors in sports marketing has gained significant attention in recent years, especially within the context of Olympic marketing strategies. This research aimed to explore the impact of athlete ambassadors on sports marketing strategies in Spain, with a particular focus on Olympic athletes. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with sports marketing experts and quantitative surveys conducted among Spanish sports fans. The data were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of athletes in shaping brand image, influencing consumer behavior, and driving engagement with sports events and campaigns. The findings indicated that athletes, particularly those with strong national recognition, play a crucial role in enhancing brand visibility and fostering emotional connections with audiences. Additionally, athletes were found to positively impact the public perception of Olympic brands, contributing to higher levels of sponsorship and fan loyalty. The study concluded that athlete ambassadors are a powerful tool in Olympic and sports marketing strategies in Spain, offering opportunities for greater audience reach and deeper engagement with sports brands.

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

Athlete Ambassadors, Sports Marketing, Olympic Marketing, Athlete Branding, Brand Ambassadorship, Spain, Sports Sponsorship, Consumer Behaviour, Sports Fan Engagement, Olympic Games, Marketing Strategies, Sports Event Promotion

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Justification

In recent decades, sports marketing has evolved significantly, becoming a powerful key strategic communication tool for sports brands and entities. Within this scope, the use of "Brand Ambassadors". According to Juan Molanos Hubspot (October 6, 2023) A brand ambassador is a real consumer who shares their experiences in order to promote a brand in some social circle. The use of athletes as brand ambassadors has gained prominence, since their influence and credibility allow us to establish an emotional connection with consumers. This phenomenon has been relevant in recent times in places like Spain where national identity and the values associated with sport play a fundamental role in public perception. The rise of the Olympic Games and other international competitions has led sponsoring companies, federations and sports clubs to integrate athletes into their communication and marketing strategies. Spain, with a consolidated sporting tradition and a strong presence in different sporting disciplines, offers an ideal environment to analyze the impact of advertising campaigns, brand promotions, and sporting values. Various international brands such as Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and Puma, sign agreements with major figures in the sports world to promote their products. In most cases, these figures already have many Internet users or followers on their profiles, which means that each published content can generate a high-impact change in the users' decisions and their behaviors. Various international brands such as Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and Puma, sign agreements with major figures in the sports world to promote their products. In most cases, these figures already have many Internet users or followers on their profiles, which means that each published content can generate a high-impact change in the users' decisions and their behaviors. It goes without saying that sport moves passions, awakens emotions, and promotes positive attitudes in people. That is why we will be able to analyze different profiles of Spanish athletes who have managed to play the role of brand ambassadors, identifying the key values that have managed to generate success in many advertising campaigns at the level of online and offline content.

Leading companies have embraced sustainability strategies in sports, such as using recycled materials in equipment and reducing the environmental impact of sports infrastructure. On a social level, sports marketing has been a fundamental tool for inclusion and well-being, promoting gender equity in sports, as seen with the rise of women's soccer, and fostering accessibility to physical activity through community programs and health awareness and disease prevention campaigns.

From an economic perspective, sports marketing has driven the expansion of sectors such as tourism, fashion, media, technology, and corporate sponsorship. In Spain, large-scale events such as LaLiga, the Copa del Rey, the Mutua Madrid Open, the Vuelta a España, and the Formula 1 Spanish Grand Prix have been instrumental in attracting foreign investment and stimulating domestic consumption. "According to a KPMG report (2023), the sports industry in Spain represents approximately 3% of GDP, generating employment and promoting economic activity in various regions of the country".

Sports marketing has been key to health promotion and disease prevention, encouraging physical activity, a balanced diet, and raising awareness about chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. These initiatives not only benefit brand image but also have a positive impact on public health by promoting healthy habits and preventing disease.

From a cultural perspective, sports marketing reinforces national identity and pride by promoting iconic events such as El Clásico, tennis tournaments, and motorsports competitions, ensuring the preservation of Spain's sporting tradition and transmitting values of discipline, effort, and teamwork to new generations. This comprehensive approach to sports marketing not only strengthens brand positioning but also contributes to sustainable development, consolidating Spain as a benchmark at the intersection of sport, business, and social impact. Economic, social, and cultural sustainability in sports marketing in Spain demonstrates that sport is much more than entertainment; it is a driver of transformation, development, and progress. Brands have found in sports sponsorship a unique opportunity to connect with the public in an authentic way, aligning their values with those of sport and generating a positive impact on society. As the industry continues

to evolve, the challenge will be to balance profitability with social responsibility and the preservation of the cultural identity of Spanish sport.

## **1.2 Motivation for Research**

Sports marketing has evolved significantly in recent decades, becoming a fundamental pillar in the communication strategies of brands, clubs and sports federations. In this context, the figure of athletes as brand ambassadors has gained special relevance due to their ability to generate an emotional connection with consumers and enhance the visibility of the brands they represent. Spain, with its extensive sports tradition and its impact in international competitions, represents an ideal scenario to study the impact of this strategy in sports and Olympic marketing.

If we look at it from the deepest point of view, the rise of social media has meant and transformed the way in which consumers react and interact with this content. According to previous research, research reports from agencies such as Nielsen, in its Nielsen Sports report (2023), “84% of sports fans in Spain follow at least one athlete on social networks, and 62% admit that their perception of a brand improves when it is associated with a renowned athlete”. This data highlights the influence that sports ambassadors have on brand building, and the positive impacts that can be generated within it. But, even more important is the impact on the purchasing decisions of each user. This is justified in terms of the need to study the marketing strategy of big brands that execute them within the Spanish market.

Globally, investment in sports sponsorship has experienced steady growth. According to Kantar's report (2023) on trends in sports marketing, “78% of companies that invest in sponsorship with athletes consider this strategy to be more effective than traditional advertising”. This research has a practical and applied approach, as it seeks not only to analyze the most representative cases of athlete ambassadors in Spain, but also to generate strategic recommendations for brands and sports entities.

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for brands and sports entities. In conclusion, this research seeks to deepen the influence of athletes as ambassadors in sports marketing in Spain, evaluating its impact on brand perception, consumer loyalty and return on investment for companies.

### **1.3 Research objective and questions**

**General Objective:** Analyze the impact that athletes have as ambassadors on Olympic and sports marketing strategies in Spain, evaluating how the association between athletes and brands influences consumer perception, brand awareness and their behaviors.

**Research questions:**

**RQ Main question:** What is the impact of using athletes as brand ambassadors on the effectiveness of Olympic and sports marketing campaigns in Spain, according to research and industry news?

**RQ Sub questions:**

1. How does an athlete's image and reputation relate to the sponsor's brand perception in terms of engagement, consumer trust, and purchase conversion in the digital industry?
2. What types of marketing strategies with sports ambassadors are most successful in specific sectors (fashion, technology, food, etc.) and with different audiences in Spain, according to digital marketing metrics?
3. What are the key metrics most commonly used in sports marketing to measure the impact of athlete ambassadors in advertising campaigns in Spain?

We will be able to obtain a comprehensive vision, where valuable information will be provided both for sponsoring companies and for sports entities that seek to promote their marketing strategies with recognized figures in the Olympic and sports.

## 1.4 Thesis Structure

We highlight the relevance of sports marketing and the growing importance of brand ambassadors in the context of sports. In other words, we will describe the evolution of sports marketing, the role that athletes play in the management of a brand, and in turn, the impact they can have on it from beginning to end.

Likewise, the fact that we can understand in greater depth the academic motivations of this study, gives us infinite possibilities to generate creative and numerical strategies that contribute great value to the growth of sports organizations. Similarly, being able to correctly establish the research objectives along with their hypotheses will help to investigate more concretely the information and reach conclusions and recommendations with a “Data Driven” approach, based on data from studies of large and internationally renowned agencies.

Quantitative methodology will be key to examine metrics and trends around the impact of sports ambassadors on marketing. Data will be collected from trusted sources such as Kantar, Nielsen and IPSOS, which provide information on athletes' influence on brand perception, purchase intent and digital engagement on social media.

On the other hand, the qualitative methodology will allow us to interpret how consumers perceive and react to marketing strategies with athlete ambassadors. A content analysis of publications in social media, commercials and digital campaigns of sports and generalist brands that have worked with athletes will be carried out. Aspects such as the narrative used in the communication, the values transmitted and the interaction generated between athletes and their followers will be examined.

This comprehensive approach will provide a solid basis for developing strategic recommendations based on empirical evidence and contextualized analysis of sports marketing content in Spain.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction to Literature Review

The passion that sport awakens in its fans can be converted into a business opportunity for any company and to increase its brand awareness. This passion for sports has been based mainly on the fanaticism and emotional attachment that users may have towards a specific team or media figure. This is why marketing variants such as emotional marketing manage to make sports marketing so effective when implementing a strategy to promote a brand within the market. Brands seek positioning linked to the values that an athlete, a team, or a specific sport represents. But, if we see it from a theoretical point of view, we can define sports marketing by referring to "The sponsors of athletes as well as advertising in various traditional and digital media" (22 grades, 2021). In a more general sense, the rise of social networks has managed to drive the growth of sports marketing exponentially, due to the engagement and interactions that users have according to where users routinely follow these users. "Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have allowed users to interact with their favorite sports characters, and in turn, the latter manage to become content creators." (Fuller, 2020)

On the other hand, sponsorship strategies have evolved from simple appearances in advertisements to an influencer marketing model, in which athletes act as digital ambassadors for brands. Value Your Network (n.d.) mentions that companies have found in athletes an effective way to reach younger and more engaged audiences, with a greater predisposition to consume products promoted by sports figures. If we look at it from a more concrete point of view, great sports figures such as Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, or Lionel Messi, have generated great impact in various sporting events that have moved masses and generated great influence on consumer behavior. That is to say, more and more users want to buy Nadal's latest shorts or Messi's tennis shoes. These great figures are not only good at their profession, but they are also role models for many who wish to follow their careers or who have various dreams they wish to achieve in the sports field. In conclusion, sports marketing has evolved significantly, leveraging the power of sports to connect brands with audiences through sponsorship strategies and sports ambassadors. Digitalization and the rise of social networks have driven this trend, allowing athletes to become key figures in the advertising strategies of various industries.

## 2.2 Sponsorships and Brand Ambassadors in Sports

“Sports sponsorship is a strategy in which a brand finances a sports club in exchange for exposure of its brand on various platforms, mainly on the players' jerseys.”(Adsual, 2020)

Sports sponsorship has evolved significantly in recent decades, moving from simple jersey and event visibility deals to comprehensive strategies in which athletes are positioned as brand ambassadors. This transformation has been driven by companies' growing need to connect emotionally with their consumers, leveraging the strong influence athletes have in contemporary society. Unlike traditional sponsorship strategies, where brands simply placed their logos on uniforms or posters, the role of the brand ambassador in sports involves a deeper, two-way relationship. Athletes not only endorse products but also integrate them into their lifestyle and personal narrative, generating a more authentic connection with their fans.

The influence of athletes on sports marketing has also been reflected in the impact of figures such as Real Madrid's Vinicius Jr. According to a Cadena SER report (2024), Vinicius has been ranked as one of football's marketing stars, surpassing iconic figures such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo in terms of engagement and advertising value. This is largely due to his ability to connect with global audiences through social media. It's crucial for brands to carefully select their sports ambassadors, as a poor fit between the athlete's image and corporate values can create dissonance and negatively affect the company's perception.

Nowadays, brands not only opt for sponsorships or advertising swaps, they also choose to appoint brand ambassadors in the sports field. These ambassadors are athletes who, due to their influence and reputation, represent and promote a brand, generating an emotional connection with the public. Because sport generates deep-rooted elements of sports inclusion, this category is not only limited to male athletes; companies are also betting on prominent female figures. (Article 14, 2025).

Today, brands are looking not only for high-performing athletes, but also for figures who embody positive values and are perceived as authentic by their fans.

On the other hand, digitalization has changed the game in sports marketing. Previously, sponsorships were limited to television and print media, but today, social media has transformed the way athletes interact with their audiences and promote brands. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become key platforms for sports marketing, allowing athletes to generate real-time content and establish a more direct relationship with their fans.

According to a Nielsen study (2023), 75% of young consumers in Spain interact with sports-related digital content, which has led companies to rethink their sponsorship strategies and focus more on digital activations and long-term collaborations.

Another factor to consider in sports sponsorship is the diversification of brand ambassador representation. Traditionally, sponsorship contracts were dominated by male athletes in popular sports such as soccer or basketball. However, the growth of women's sports and the inclusion of athletes with disabilities in major competitions have opened up new opportunities for brands.

Despite the many benefits offered by sports sponsorship, there are also associated challenges and risks. One of these is the volatility of athletic performance, as an injury or poor performance can affect the athlete's perception and, consequently, the effectiveness of the advertising campaign. Furthermore, growing consumer demands regarding corporate ethics have led brands to be more cautious about the athletes they choose to represent them.

Sports sponsorship and the role of the brand ambassador have evolved toward more complex and personalized strategies, where the athlete is no longer just a spokesperson for the brand, but a representative of its values and philosophy. Choosing the right ambassador depends not only on their athletic performance, but also on their authenticity, their ability to connect with their audience, and their commitment to social causes.

## **2.3 Characteristics that a sports influencer or brand ambassador should have in the industry**

The role of the brand ambassador in sports has evolved significantly in recent years, with an increasing focus on authenticity, credibility, and the ability to make a real impact on the audience. An athlete not only represents a brand but also embodies its values and becomes a point of connection between the company and consumers. According to a study by Frontiers in Sports and Active Living (2024), athletes are considered ideal brand ambassadors due to their ability to generate emotional associations with consumers, which gives a high level of credibility and added value to the products or services they promote. However, this same study emphasizes that not all athletes manage to generate the same connection, as public perception depends as much on their sporting career as on their behavior outside of the professional sphere.

On the other hand, an athlete's digital presence and communication skills have taken on a central role in the selection of brand ambassadors. A Nielsen Sports study (2023) reveals that athletes with a high level of social media activity generate a higher return on investment for brands compared to those with a limited digital presence. However, this same report warns that the number of followers is not always indicative of success in a sponsorship campaign.

In contrast, figures like Cristiano Ronaldo, despite having one of the largest social media fan bases, have faced criticism for over-commercializing his image, which in some cases has undermined the perception of authenticity in his brand associations. The athlete's ethics and public image also play a key role in his success as a brand ambassador. There are cases where an athlete's reputation has significantly boosted a brand.

On other occasions and based on previous research, there are brands that get carried away by the number of followers that athletes have on their networks. However, this is something that should not only be taken into account on a qualitative level, but also in the way it addresses its users and the content it publishes on its communication channels. This includes the ability to express yourself well in interviews, events and advertising campaigns. An ambassador must know how to connect with his or her audience, generate attractive content and align his or her speech with the corporate identity.

The ambassador's public image is a crucial aspect, as any action or behavior can have an impact on the brand he or she represents. Professionalism and commitment to sports ethics are determining factors in the choice of a brand ambassador. A committed ambassador actively participates in campaigns, events and promotional actions, demonstrating affinity with the brand and its values. Sport is an industry that moves emotions and passions, and sponsored athletes have the power to influence the behaviors and purchasing decisions of their followers. Resilience, effort and discipline are qualities that consumers associate with athletes, and brands seek to reflect these attributes in their sponsorship campaigns. According to IPSOS (2023), "Associating with athletes who embody positive values strengthens brand perception and fosters a deeper emotional connection with the brand".

From a critical perspective, it could be argued that some brands still prioritize popularity and media reach over the authenticity and values of the athlete. In many cases, companies seek to maximize the visibility of their products without considering the long-term impact of these partnerships. This poses a challenge for the future of sports sponsorship: finding a balance between the need for exposure and building a genuine connection with consumers. This is where research and data analysis play a crucial role, allowing brands to identify not only which athletes have the greatest influence, but also which ones can generate a stronger and more lasting relationship with their audience.

With the growth of digitalization and the public's increased demand for transparency and social responsibility, brands that manage to select ambassadors aligned with their values and communication strategies will have a competitive advantage in the sports sponsorship market.

## 2.4 Brand Selection Strategies

Within the context of sports marketing in Spain, athletes have acquired a central role as brand ambassadors, not only because of their media visibility, but also because of the emotional bond they generate with their followers. This relationship between athletes, brands and consumers has evolved beyond classic sponsorship, integrating symbolic, narrative and social dimensions. In this sense, the analysis of recent campaigns reveals that brands select their ambassadors not only for their sporting achievements, but also for the story they tell, the values they project and the identification they generate in the public.

Taking as a reference the case of Gerard Piqué with the Hublot watch brand, we can see how his choice responds to a coherence between the image of the footballer -associated with elegance, precision and success- and the brand's identity. Piqué is not only a recognized player, but a figure who has managed to maintain a solid public image aligned with modern luxury. Similarly, the collaboration between Carles Puyol and Nike illustrates how the symbolic value of effort and perseverance is transferred from the athlete to the products he or she promotes. In these cases, athletes are not simply spokespersons, but living extensions of brand values.

This type of strategy is in line with Cornwell (2020), who states that effective brand ambassadors must have the ability to build trust, credibility and an authentic connection with the consumer. Cornwell stresses that, for these associations to be long-lasting, there must be a clear alignment between the athlete's narrative and the brand's value proposition. In other words, it's not just about hiring a celebrity figure, but building a symbiotic relationship, where both parties reinforce their positioning.

The need for coherence between brand and ambassador is also at the core of Aaker's (1997) brand personality theory. This author proposes that brands, like people, convey personality traits such as sincerity, sophistication or courage. In that sense, an ambassador should not "act" a role, but naturally represent those qualities. When this match is achieved, the brand's identity is strengthened; on the other hand, if the connection is forced, there is a risk of generating rejection or distrust in the audience.

On the other hand, Zamora, Sanahuja and Blay (2015) offer a more recent and dynamic perspective: they argue that athletes who strategically manage their personal brand can become real business assets. This implies that they are no longer just passive public figures, but active agents who choose which brands to collaborate with, under what conditions, and what type of message they wish to project. This self-management model not only favors the long-term sustainability of their image, but also enhances the authenticity of the campaigns.

From a consumer-oriented point of view, Keller (2003) provides the concept of brand equity based on customer experience. According to this author, an ambassador must not only be recognizable, but also capable of generating positive and differentiating associations in the consumer's mind. This is especially relevant in an environment where consumers are not satisfied with aspirational messages, but are looking for brands and ambassadors with whom they can identify emotionally, socially and culturally.

The interesting thing about contrasting these approaches with current campaigns in Spain is that they all point in the same direction: the need to create genuine relationships between brands and their ambassadors, and between ambassadors and consumers. Brands that achieve this are those that are committed to coherence, authenticity and a shared story, beyond the immediate impact of a publication or the number of followers.

In addition, the growing relevance of the digital context in the construction of these links between athletes, brands and audiences cannot be overlooked. Social networks allow the athlete to act as a direct means of communication, without the need for traditional intermediaries. This reinforces the ambassador's impact by allowing him or her to appear closer, more authentic and human. From this perspective, the brand strategy must consider not only the athlete's presence in mass media, but also his or her behavior and narrative on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube.

This environment also poses new ethical challenges, especially when the athlete represents social causes, promotes lifestyles or engages in campaigns with a strong symbolic charge. Authenticity becomes even more crucial: consumers are increasingly sensitive to inconsistency between what

an ambassador claims to represent and his or her actual actions. This is why brands that are committed to a transparent partnership, based on real values and not on falsehoods, are the ones that achieve the strongest and most sustainable connection.

Another aspect that reinforces the right choice of an ambassador is his or her ability to influence not only brand perception, but also purchase behavior. Some studies have shown that athlete recommendations, when perceived as genuine, have a direct impact on the consumer's decision. This makes the ambassador not only a brand symbol, but also a persuasive agent, with an influence comparable or even superior to that of traditional advertising.

## 2.5 Digital Marketing and Social Media in Sports Sponsorship

In the current context of sports marketing, it is clear that social networks have completely redefined the way in which relationships between brands, athletes and audiences are managed. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter have not only facilitated greater visibility, but have transformed the brand ambassador into an interactive figure, close and in constant dialogue with followers. This phenomenon requires a critical look that considers both opportunities and risks.

From this thesis, we observe how these platforms allow athletes to act not only as promoters, but also as content creators, generating engagement in real time. The ability to segment audiences and personalize campaigns has boosted the impact of strategies such as sweepstakes, viral challenges or giveaways. However, it is also true that these tools have exposed brands to new types of reputational risks, especially when athletes react in a way that is not always easy for them.

Contrasting this scenario with what Chadwick and Thwaites (2005) proposes in their work on sports sponsorship management, it becomes clear how digital evolution has added layers of complexity. These authors emphasize that the success of sponsorship lies not only in media exposure, but also in the quality of the bond built between the public and the brand. In this sense, digital marketing has amplified both the potential for connection and the vulnerability of that relationship.

What was once managed through contracts, events, and traditional media appearances now requires digital interaction protocols, crisis manuals, and constant monitoring of the athlete's social channels. Unlike the more linear and controlled model proposed by Chadwick and Thwaites, sponsorship today demands a more dynamic approach, where the brand must react to the ambassador's behavior in real time and adapt to the public's responses.

Furthermore, Nike's use of the metaverse, NFTs, and immersive experiences raises new questions. To what extent do these strategies strengthen the connection with fans or dilute it with technology? While these tools can differentiate the brand and generate innovation, they also require the ambassador to maintain a coherent narrative between their digital image and their real values. In this regard, the ambassador's ethical management once again becomes a central issue.

This comparison also invites us to question the long-term sustainability of digital strategies. While Chadwick and Thwaites highlight the importance of sponsorship as a strategic relationship of sustained mutual benefit, digital activations sometimes prioritize immediate impact over building strong relationships. This raises the responsibility for brands: are they investing in experiences that strengthen their community or only in campaigns that generate momentary buzz?

Another relevant aspect of this evolution is the role of data. In the digital environment, brands not only interact with consumers but also collect valuable information about their behaviors, interests, and consumption patterns. However, this hyperpersonalization also entails risks. There are ethical dilemmas surrounding privacy, data manipulation, and user overexposure. When a campaign uses an athlete to speak directly to segmented audiences, it must do so with respect for consumer autonomy and safeguarding the integrity of the message. These types of decisions, although technical, are deeply connected to the ethics of modern sponsorship.

Furthermore, digital marketing has expanded the geographic reach of sports ambassadors. A Spanish athlete no longer represents only one brand within their country; their image can impact multiple markets at the same time. This globalization forces brands to consider the cultural implications of their messages, and ambassadors to be mindful of their behavior and language in all contexts. Any mistake or misunderstanding can go viral globally, with immediate consequences.

One element that deserves special attention in this evolution of sponsorship is the role of digital storytelling. Unlike traditional strategies, digital sports marketing allows for the creation of more relatable, human, and ongoing narratives. The ambassador doesn't appear merely as an image of an isolated campaign, but as part of a developing story that fans can follow day by day.

Chadwick and Thwaites (2005) mention the importance of consistency between brand and sponsor as a foundation for success. This idea remains valid, but today it must also be extended to the digital world: what an athlete communicates on social media must be consistent with the values of the brand they represent. In today's environment, any inconsistency, no matter how small, can go viral and cause reputational damage that is difficult to repair. Therefore, ambassador management must be much more personal and preventative.

Furthermore, digital sports marketing has facilitated new forms of activism and social media. Many athletes use their platforms not only to promote products, but also to champion causes, denounce injustices, and support social movements.

Finally, another aspect that has gained relevance is the training of ambassadors. In today's dynamic and exposed environment, sporting talent isn't enough. Athletes who collaborate with brands must understand the impact of their words, their communication strategy, and the values they represent.

Ultimately, the evolution of sports sponsorship toward the digital environment does not imply a break with traditional principles, but rather an expansion of its scope, complexity, and responsibility. The role of the brand ambassador remains strategic, but it is now also more vulnerable, more exposed, and more influential than ever.

## 2.6 Challenges and Risks of Sports Sponsorship

Modern sports sponsorship, while highly beneficial, carries a number of risks that require rigorous strategic analysis. Beyond the media impact or brand reach, there are ethical, reputational and contractual factors that must be taken into account. This section proposes a critical reflection, taking as a starting point the risks identified in practice and contrasting them with authors who have analyzed the phenomenon from complementary perspectives.

One of the most recurrent risks is the damage to brand image caused by an athlete's conduct. Scandals related to doping, controversial statements or inappropriate behavior can have a direct effect on the value of the sponsoring brand. This has been widely discussed by Meenaghan (2001), “who warns that sponsorship should be managed as a high reputational risk investment”.

In parallel, authors such as Speed and Thompson (2000) “emphasize that congruence between brand and sponsored party cannot be seen as a simple coincidence of attributes; it requires a deep reading of the sociocultural environment”. If a brand ignores the public perception of the ambassador or the context in which it operates, it may end up generating the opposite effect to the desired one.

Another sensitive point is over-reliance on a single sports ambassador. When the entire strategy revolves around a single visible face, the brand exposes itself to significant vulnerabilities. This is argued by Farrelly and Quester (2003), “who recommend a diversification of assets within the sponsorship portfolio to prevent injury, retirement or loss of performance from compromising commercial results”.

From an ethical point of view, there are also risks associated with the behavior of brands when selecting ambassadors. Carrillat, d'Astous and Colbert (2008) point out that the modern consumer evaluates not only the message, but also the intention behind the sponsorship.

In addition, digital transformation has expanded both opportunities and risks. In times of social media, any comment or attitude of the athlete can escalate in minutes and become a reputation crisis. Here, recent literature such as Pegoraro's (2010) provides an updated approach: ambassadors are no longer just images in a campaign, but active subjects that constantly interact with the audience.

Finally, it is necessary to consider that today's consumers increasingly value the purpose and social commitments of brands. In this framework, sports sponsorship should be part of a coherent corporate social responsibility strategy. As Smith and Stewart (2015) point out, "successful sponsorship in sport must contribute to both the business and the community, and this dual responsibility should guide the choice and management of ambassadors."

## 2.7 Olympic games and its Impact in Spain

The Olympic Games represent one of the most influential and symbolic platforms in the field of global sports marketing. Its impact transcends sports, positioning itself as a far-reaching sociocultural, media and commercial phenomenon. For brands, participating in this event is a unique opportunity to connect with global audiences, but also to project universal values such as effort, self-improvement and diversity.

In the case of Spain, the influence of Olympism has been notorious not only in terms of media visibility, but also in the way national and international brands build their image. The commitment to Olympic sponsorship in Spain has been accompanied by an emotional narrative centered on national pride, resilience and individual merit.

One of the most valuable factors of Olympic marketing is its ability to generate meaningful experiences that connect emotionally with people. This type of campaign does not simply seek to sell a product, but to leave an emotional footprint through inspiring stories of athletes. An example of this was the campaign "They are worth gold", promoted by Iberdrola, which not only promoted women's sports, but also generated a social reflection on equality and visibility of female athletes.

From a literary perspective, authors such as García Ferrando (2010) and Baumann (2004) emphasize that modern Olympic sport has become a reflection of contemporary social tensions and aspirations. The former analyzes it from the prism of sport as a cultural and cohesive phenomenon; the latter, from his critical view of consumption and globalization. In both cases, they agree that the Olympics not only entertains, but also educates, inspires and transforms identities. In Spain, the Olympic Games have also served as an engine for the development of grassroots sport, investment in infrastructure and the professionalization of less visible disciplines. This, in turn, strengthens the national sports ecosystem, fosters job creation and a greater focus on tourism.

On the other hand, the impact of the Olympic Games in Spain cannot be separated from the technological evolution in sports marketing. Brands sponsoring the event have learned to integrate elements such as augmented reality, streaming platforms and data analytics to enhance the user experience. This technological evolution also allows for greater message personalization, which is key to connecting with different generations of consumers.

In addition, Olympism has strengthened its relationship with social and environmental causes. Brands and committees now promote campaigns linked to sustainability, recycling, gender equality and mental health, issues that are also fundamental in the perception of today's consumers. This allows the impact of the event to transcend sports and become a vector of social transformation.

In conclusion, the Olympic Games not only provide value in terms of notoriety or media exposure, but are also a powerful strategic tool for building brands, reinforcing emotional ties and contributing to a broader cultural change. In the case of Spain, the impact is twofold: as a participating country and as a space where the values of Olympism are reflected and amplified.

## 2.8 Olympic Marketing and Digital Content

The Olympic Games, beyond being the sporting event par excellence, have become a global showcase where brands not only compete for attention, but also to generate emotional connections. In this context, digital marketing has taken a leading role, especially in countries like Spain, where brands have learned to creatively adapt to the digital environment to amplify their messages.

Social networks have completely transformed the way in which Olympism is experienced and communicated. Instagram, TikTok or YouTube are not simple broadcast channels; they are spaces where emotions are narrated in real time, where athletes become narrators and brands become companions of a shared story.

One of the most powerful elements of Olympic digital marketing is the use of influencer marketing. It is no longer enough for a brand to have an institutional presence. Closeness is built through voices with which the public identifies.

Unlike more traditional approaches, which sought to project perfection, today the campaigns that have the greatest impact are those that show the “human side” of the athlete. In this sense, storytelling becomes an essential tool. Through well-constructed stories, brands manage to capture the viewer's attention, not from the product, but from the emotion. Instead of presenting a generic ad, we see how an overcoming story becomes the emotional bridge.

However, it's not all about emotion. Digital marketing also has specific objectives: to capture leads, generate traffic and build customer loyalty. In this sense, many brands take advantage of the Games to launch exclusive promotions, accessible only by registering on their platforms. This strategy has a double effect: it increases direct conversion and enables the collection of valuable data on users' interests and behaviors.

A comparative analysis with recent digital marketing studies such as those of Jenkins (2016) or Lipschultz (2020), allows us to observe how transmedia storytelling and active user participation have become essential. While Jenkins defends the idea of “expanded narrative worlds” where the story lives on multiple platforms, Lipschultz emphasizes the social impact of shared content.

In addition, the Olympic Games offer an ideal platform to make social values visible, which aligns with an increasingly demanding consumer. In this sense, digital advertising allows highlighting aspects such as inclusion, gender equality or sustainability. Campaigns celebrating bodily diversity, the careers of Paralympic athletes or collective efforts have had a remarkable echo, not only because of their emotionality, but also because they represent a real commitment on the part of brands.

One element that cannot be overlooked is the role of data and digital analytics. In an environment where everything can be measured, brands not only analyze how many “likes” a video gets, but also how long it is viewed, how many times it is shared and what comments it generates. This information, properly interpreted, allows them to improve campaigns, identify key audiences and adjust messages in real time.

In short, Olympic marketing in the digital era is not only about selling, but also about creating meaningful experiences. Spain has proven to be up to this challenge, with brands that understand that success is not only measured in sales, but in the emotional memory they leave in their audience. Beyond algorithms, what truly connects is the shared story, authentic emotion and respect for the values that make Olympism more than just sport.

## 2.9 Economic Impact of the Olympic Games on the Spanish Advertising Market

One of the main effects of the Olympic Games on the Spanish advertising market is the increase in advertising investment during the event period. According to data from Nielsen (2023), advertising investment in large-scale sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, increases by 20-30% compared to other periods of the year, with a particular emphasis on television, digital content and social media campaigns. The impact on the Spanish advertising market is not limited only to television or sponsorship of athletes. In recent years, digitalization has transformed the way brands interact with their audiences during the Olympic Games.

For example, Tik Tok is one of the platforms par excellence that is making its way into the market today and not only attracts young audiences. Also, great athletes show their routines, and apart from that, they are already beginning to monetize their routines and not only that, they are beginning to advertise content from these great events. According to an IPSOS report (2023), "75% of young consumers in Spain interact with digital content related to the Olympic Games, which has led companies to adapt their strategies to include more dynamic formats such as live video, augmented reality filters and immersive experiences".

Intense competition among brands to capture the public's attention can result in advertising saturation, making it difficult to differentiate and achieve real impact. In addition, the high costs associated with Olympic sponsorship and the purchase of advertising space can be a challenge for companies with more limited budgets. According to Kantar (2024), "The average cost of an advertising campaign during the Olympic Games can be up to 50% higher than for other sporting events, forcing brands to carefully evaluate their investment and expected return".

As mentioned above, as there is a lot of competition, many of the brands are looking for great projection. But, it also generates mismatches in their budgets, having to assume their full potential in digital investment and BTL strategies that make the numbers rise and must seek other actions to optimize their strategies.

According to previous research, “The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is the regulatory body that imposes restrictions on the use of Olympic symbols and direct mentions of the event in advertising campaigns. This has led many companies to develop creative strategies to take advantage of the media attention of the Games without violating the established regulations”. Arco Comunicación, 2024).

If viewed from a strategic and creative point of view, marketing agencies also have the great challenge of communicating messages that are clear and precise. However, restricting a message also limits the creative capacity and strategic implementation that agencies use when creating a creative concept, and that also limits the budgets of each campaign. Despite these challenges, the Olympic Games remain an invaluable opportunity for brands looking to consolidate their position in the Spanish and international market. The combination of traditional and digital strategies has allowed companies to maximize their visibility and connect with audiences more effectively.

From the increase in advertising investment to the transformation of digital marketing, this global event represents a unique opportunity for brands looking to consolidate their presence in the market.

One extremely important aspect should not be forgotten: before a sports marketing campaign can be properly implemented, it is important that the communication objectives and tactics used are closely aligned with the budgets managed by each of the brands.

## 2.10 Use of Artificial Intelligence in Sports Marketing

One of the most notable contributions of AI has been the automation and optimization of the ambassador selection process. Through algorithms capable of cross-referencing performance data, social media interactions and affinity with the target audience, brands can more accurately identify the athletes that best align with their identity and strategy. According to Ranktracker (2024), this approach has proven to be more efficient than traditional methods, maximizing investment and fine-tuning the communication strategy.

This advance is part of what authors such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2019) define as the “fourth wave of digital marketing”, characterized by the intensive use of emerging technologies to personalize the consumer experience. Unlike more conventional strategies, where a general message was built for broad audiences, AI allows to adapt each content to the user's interests, habits and behaviors, generating a more relevant and effective communication.

A paradigmatic case of this trend is that of Aitana López, a Spanish model completely generated by artificial intelligence, who has managed to establish real commercial collaborations with well-known brands. This type of figures, known as virtual influencers, raises new questions about the limits between the real and the simulated in sports marketing. While they bring efficiency and image control, they also bring into play the value of authenticity, a key element in the emotional connection with the public.

Campaign personalization is another of the great advances that AI has brought to sports marketing. By analyzing consumer behavior data, artificial intelligence makes it possible to generate content tailored to the individual preferences of users, increasing engagement and conversion rate on each of the digital platforms.

Another key aspect of this evolution is hyper-personalization. A recent example is that of Google during the Super Bowl 2025, where each ad was tailored in real time based on the viewer's behavior and interaction history. This strategy, while innovative, also calls for ethical data management. As Data Clave (2024) warns, many of these applications require the use of highly sensitive personal information, which raises legitimate privacy and security concerns.

Beyond efficiency and innovation, there is one factor that cannot be underestimated: trust. In sports marketing, the relationship between a brand and its audience is largely built on the perception of credibility. The use of AI-generated figures, however technically effective they may be, can generate mixed reactions. While some consumers value the novelty, others feel an emotional disconnect from not seeing a real story behind the face promoting the product or service.

In this sense, Turkle (2011) argues that excessive automation and simulation in human interactions can generate an emotional disconnection. While audiences value innovation, they also expect transparency and truth. The use of AI-generated ambassadors must be managed with great care, especially in an environment such as sports, where the narrative of real effort and self-improvement is critical to connect with audiences.

Even with these challenges, it is undeniable that AI is redefining the future of sports marketing. Brands that manage to integrate these technologies in an ethical, creative and strategic way will not only improve their positioning, but will also be better equipped to build lasting and relevant relationships with their audiences. The key will be to find the balance between technological efficiency and human connection.

In short, artificial intelligence offers extraordinary tools to transform sports marketing, but its application must not lose sight of the ethical, relational and symbolic principles that define sport as a cultural phenomenon. It's not just about being more efficient, but about being more relevant, more human, more aware.

### **3. Research Approach and Implementation**

#### **3.1 Philosophy and Research Approach**

This research is based on deductive reasoning, since it is based on consolidated theories in the field of sports marketing, brand communication and the role of ambassadors in advertising strategies. The purpose is to apply these conceptual frameworks to the particular case of sports marketing in Spain, evaluating the impact of athletes as brand ambassadors in the Olympic Games and other high-level sporting events. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), “deductive reasoning is used when seeking to contrast the validity of theoretical models in specific contexts through the analysis of empirical data”.

The deductive process allows starting from the existing literature to establish a conceptual structure to guide data collection and analysis. In this case, theories such as the “match-up hypothesis”, which argues that the ambassador's effectiveness depends on the congruence between his or her personal image and that of the brand (Kamins, 1990), as well as brand building models that highlight the importance of authenticity, narrative and consistency of the advertising message are considered. These frameworks provide the basis for interpreting the data obtained and contrasting whether the theoretical effects are replicated in the contemporary Spanish context.

The choice of the deductive approach also responds to the applied nature of this research, as it seeks to generate knowledge that can be used to improve decision making in the field of sports marketing. The application of existing theories to a specific context allows us to observe how the principles of marketing and brand communication are manifested in practice, and what their effects are on consumer behavior in relation to well-known sports figures.

The research is classified as descriptive, since its objective is not to predict or explain causal relationships, but to analyze, categorize and describe the most relevant elements of the use of athletes as brand ambassadors. The aim is to identify communication patterns, common strategies and public reactions based on recent sports campaigns. As Bryman and Bell (2015) point out, descriptive studies allow us to understand a phenomenon in depth and document its most salient characteristics in its natural context.

This approach is particularly relevant in the field of sports marketing, where the phenomena analyzed are constantly evolving due to cultural, technological and social factors. The use of athletes as ambassadors has intensified with the irruption of social networks and the need to establish a closer and more emotional communication with the consumer. The description of how these athletes build their image, transmit values and generate a connection with the public allows us to generate knowledge applicable to the design of more effective strategies.

This descriptive nature also makes it possible to document best practices that can serve as a reference for other brands or sporting events. Identifying the elements that make certain campaigns successful, as well as the ways in which athletes connect emotionally with the audience, can contribute to improve the planning of future advertising strategies.

In terms of methodology, this research adopts a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques in order to approach the object of study from a broad and deep perspective. The choice of this approach responds to the need to analyze both measurable data (such as engagement on social networks, brand recognition or purchase intention), as well as interpretative elements (such as the narrative of the campaigns, the values communicated and the coherence between the athlete and the brand).

The quantitative component allows us to identify general patterns and trends based on data obtained from secondary sources, such as Nielsen, IPSOS and Kantar reports. These sources offer reliable information on consumer behavior, the impact of advertising campaigns and reactions to different sports ambassadors. The quantification of these elements enables an objective reading of the scope and effectiveness of the strategies analyzed.

Through descriptive statistics, it is possible to observe differences between types of ambassadors, platforms used, duration of the campaigns and public reactions. These data allow general conclusions to be drawn about the effectiveness of marketing with athletes in the Spanish context, and constitute an empirical basis for the recommendations derived from the study.

On the other hand, the qualitative component provides an interpretative view, focused on the analysis of the content of the campaigns, the messages conveyed and the narrative resources used. Through thematic content analysis, discursive patterns, values associated with the athletes and forms of brand representation that could not be captured by purely statistical methods are identified. This dimension of the study allows us to understand how and why certain messages connect with the public.

The interpretation of these symbolic and narrative elements is fundamental in contemporary marketing, where brand value is built not only from the functional, but also from the emotional and identity. Understanding how athletes are perceived by the audience, what values they project and how they represent the brand is essential to assess the impact of their participation as ambassadors.

As Creswell (2014) points out, the use of mixed methods allows leveraging the strength of both approaches, overcoming the limitations of each separately. While quantitative methods offer external validity and comparability, qualitative methods provide depth, context, and understanding of meaning. In the present study, this methodological integration allows us to construct a more complete view of the phenomenon.

The mixed approach also makes it possible to establish methodological triangulation, that is, the possibility of contrasting results obtained by different means and perspectives. This triangulation reinforces the credibility of the findings, since quantitative and qualitative data can complement and support each other. It also favors openness to unexpected findings by allowing meanings to emerge that were not initially foreseen.

In conclusion, this research is based on deductive reasoning, is classified as descriptive, and adopts a mixed approach that combines quantitative and qualitative tools to address a complex phenomenon from different perspectives. This methodological strategy is appropriate for the stated objectives, as it allows us to analyze both the observable impact and the symbolic content of marketing campaigns involving athletes as brand ambassadors.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this research is designed from a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative sources that allow approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives. This design is justified by the overall objective of the study: to understand the impact of athletes as brand ambassadors in sports and Olympic marketing strategies in Spain. Through this combination, we seek to analyze both the measurable performance of the campaigns and the symbolic content transmitted to the target audience.

In the quantitative approach, data is collected through reports and studies conducted by recognized marketing and consumer research agencies, such as Nielsen, Kantar and IPSOS. These secondary sources provide validated statistics and metrics commonly used in academic and commercial research to analyze the impact of advertising campaigns.

These data were selected because of their direct relevance to the research questions and the need for measurable indicators to evaluate the performance of sports marketing strategies. In addition, the use of secondary sources allows access to a broad, diverse and contextualized database within the Spanish environment, without the need for costly or limited scale primary data collection.

This quantitative approach is suitable for identifying general patterns in consumer behavior and evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns from an empirical perspective. Furthermore, the descriptive statistics associated with these data allow us to organize the information in a clear and understandable way, facilitating its subsequent analysis and discussion.

The qualitative component is based on a content analysis of digital campaigns disseminated in social networks, audiovisual media and official brand platforms. Recent and relevant campaigns carried out by brands such as Nike, Adidas, Iberdrola, Movistar, Hublot and others with an active presence in Spain and participation in international sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, are selected.

The combination of these two types of data enriches the collection and favors a more complete reading of the phenomenon. While the quantitative data allow us to observe trends, the qualitative analysis gives an account of the meanings behind these figures.

In terms of scope, the analysis includes campaigns disseminated between 2021 and 2024, with special emphasis on those associated with high-visibility international sporting events. The compilation focuses on campaigns designed for the Spanish market or with a strong presence in local media.

The data collected is organized by brand, sport discipline, type of athlete (individual or team), campaign format (digital, audiovisual, multichannel) and broadcast platform. This allows the cases to be classified and compared in a structured way, facilitating subsequent analysis.

particularly useful in this research, given that the object of study is focused on campaigns that have already been implemented and are publicly accessible. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), this type of design is recommended when analyzing contemporary phenomena in their natural context, without the need to intervene directly in them.

In addition, the mixed approach responds to the need to triangulate data, that is, to confront different sources and perspectives to validate the findings. This triangulation strengthens the credibility of the results and makes it possible to contrast the measured impact (quantitative) with the projected message (qualitative), thus aligning the collection strategy with the theoretical and practical approach of the research.

This integration also allows us to interpret the results beyond the numbers, delving deeper into the reasons behind the success or effectiveness of a campaign. The convergence of both types of data offers a richer understanding, aligned with the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon studied: the use of athletes as a strategic marketing tool in high performance sport.

### 3.4 Plan for Research Quality and Ethics

This study is based on a rigorous methodological approach, which seeks to ensure both the scientific quality and the ethical responsibility of the research process. This is especially relevant considering the object of study: the analysis of the use of athletes as brand ambassadors in sports and Olympic marketing campaigns in Spain. This section details the strategies adopted to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, as well as compliance with essential ethical principles at each stage of the study.

#### Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the capacity of the methods used to adequately measure the phenomena to be studied. In this thesis, internal validity has been ensured through consistency between the objectives, the research questions and the analytical instruments. For example, the indicators of engagement, brand recognition and purchase intention, obtained from reliable secondary sources such as Nielsen and Kantar, are aligned with the objective of analyzing the impact of athletes on consumer perception.

Likewise, external validity is strengthened by the selection of real and relevant campaigns within the Spanish context. By using recognized and widely disseminated cases in digital media, the possibility of extrapolating some findings to similar situations within national sports marketing is improved. The inclusion of various sports disciplines and brands also contributes to the representativeness of the analysis.

For its part, reliability is ensured by the replicability of the procedures used. The thematic content analysis is applied through systematic coding, which can be reproduced by other researchers under the same criteria. Similarly, quantitative data are presented in a structured form, with indication of sources and methodological justification, allowing verification of the results. In addition, each step of the research process is documented, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, data collection and storage procedures, and interpretation techniques. This methodological transparency, together with the triangulation between quantitative and qualitative data, reinforces the overall reliability of the study.

### **3.4.2 Research Ethics**

Ethics in academic research is an essential foundation that guides integrity, transparency and respect for the people and contexts involved. Within the framework of this thesis, which analyzes the participation of athletes as brand ambassadors in sports and Olympic marketing campaigns in Spain, ethics is approached in a transversal and strategic manner, considering the sensitivity of the content analyzed and the public exposure of the figures studied.

#### **Ethical use of public information**

One of the main characteristics of this research is that it is based exclusively on the analysis of content from open and publicly accessible sources. These include official brand publications, verified profiles of athletes on social networks, campaigns disseminated in digital media, and data from recognized agencies such as Nielsen or Kantar. Although access to these materials does not require explicit consent, we are committed to using them in a scholarly, respectful and non-intrusive manner.

Any manipulation of the content that alters its original meaning is avoided. Each material used is interpreted within its context and with full awareness of the communicative role of the athlete. The thesis does not make judgments on personal, political or extra-sporting aspects of the protagonists, focusing the analysis exclusively on their function as a communicational tool in branding strategies.

## **Transparency and interpretive neutrality**

The methodological design is governed by a principle of openness to all possible findings. It does not start from predefined conclusions nor does it seek to validate a specific hypothesis, but allows the content and data to guide the development of the analysis. This arrangement avoids confirmation bias and reinforces the reliability of the work.

In qualitative analysis, for example, the categories of interpretation emerge from the reviewed material itself, through an inductive and exploratory process. This ensures that the theoretical framework does not limit the detection of relevant findings, and that campaigns that have been less successful or whose strategies have not worked as expected are also included.

## **Data protection and traceability**

All files, documents, captures, links and databases used are stored in secure digital platforms, with cloud backup and restricted access. The information is organized by type of material, date of access and original source, which ensures adequate traceability and allows verification of any aspect of the analysis if necessary.

Likewise, the principles of intellectual authorship are respected. Any textual quotation, image or reference used in this thesis has its corresponding accreditation. Even in the case of visual or audiovisual content, the source and original context are indicated, thus maintaining transparency and academic responsibility.

## **Expanded ethical considerations in sports marketing.**

Sports marketing, understood as the interaction between brands, sport and popular culture, poses significant ethical challenges in the representation of athletes and the use of their public image. This research, which analyzes how the role of the athlete as a brand ambassador is implemented in digital campaigns, proposes an approach that incorporates these ethical considerations from the methodological design to the interpretation of the data.

One of the most relevant aspects is the responsibility in the representation of the athlete. Advertising campaigns tend to construct idealized narratives in which the athlete embodies values such as self-improvement, excellence or effort. Although these elements are part of high performance sport, there is a risk that campaigns distort the real identity of the athlete, simplify him or her or turn him or her into an empty symbol. Therefore, the analysis in this thesis evaluates how campaigns balance the brand message with an ethical, authentic and non-exploitative representation of the ambassador.

From an ethical perspective, the degree of agency of the athlete in the campaign is also analyzed. It is considered positive when the athlete actively participates in the elaboration of the message, contributes his or her own voice and style, and is represented in a way that is coherent with his or her career. On the other hand, it is problematic when the athlete is presented as a mere advertising tool with no genuine connection to the brand's values. This aspect is key, as it directly affects the authenticity of the campaign and the consumer's perception.

The study also considers the social impact of the messages. Sports marketing has a massive reach, especially among young audiences who find role models in athletes. This visibility gives campaigns an educational and formative dimension, which requires a commitment to responsible, inclusive and non-discriminatory messages. The analysis identifies whether campaigns reinforce stereotypes, present unattainable ideal bodies or promote unrealistic lifestyles, contrasting them with those that promote positive values, diversity and well-being.

In addition, the risk of instrumentalization of social causes is addressed. Some campaigns link the athlete with discourses of sustainability, equity or inclusion, but they do so from a superficial or merely symbolic perspective. This thesis critically evaluates whether these associations are justified, whether they are part of a real commitment or whether they are used as an opportunistic marketing tool. The distinction between purposeful marketing and purpose for marketing is fundamental from an ethical point of view.

The methodological analysis incorporates tools such as thematic coding and visual discourse analysis, which allow the precise identification of the symbolic constructions present in the campaigns. The relationship between language, image, narrative and values transmitted is studied, and this construction is contrasted with the public trajectory of the athlete and the brand identity. Thus, an ethical framework is established that is not limited to evaluating the effectiveness of the message, but also considers its cultural impact and communicational responsibility.

Another current issue that also raises ethical questions in sports marketing is the use of influencers and non-professional athletes as brand ambassadors. In the digital age, many brands incorporate emerging sports figures or content creators with an affinity for sport, without a recognized professional track record. Although this strategy diversifies representation, it also introduces the risk of lack of transparency regarding the actual endorsement or training of these figures. The research considers it necessary to evaluate whether these profiles bring authenticity and values to the brand message, or whether they are employed in a utilitarian way to increase reach without ethical or communicative coherence.

Finally, this thesis proposes a broader ethical reflection on the role of sports marketing in today's society. Through the analysis of real cases, it seeks to promote a more conscious advertising practice that respects the integrity of the athlete, fosters genuine collaborative relationships and contributes to a more humane, authentic and committed communication with the values of sport.

## 4. Results

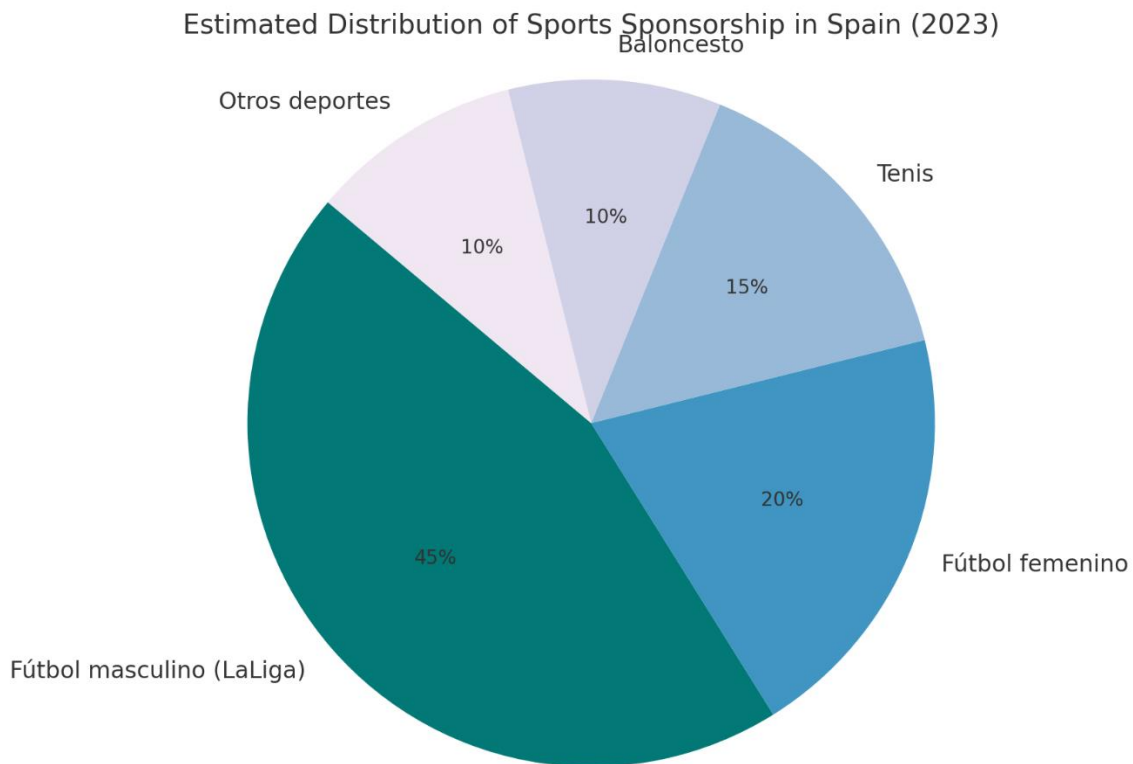
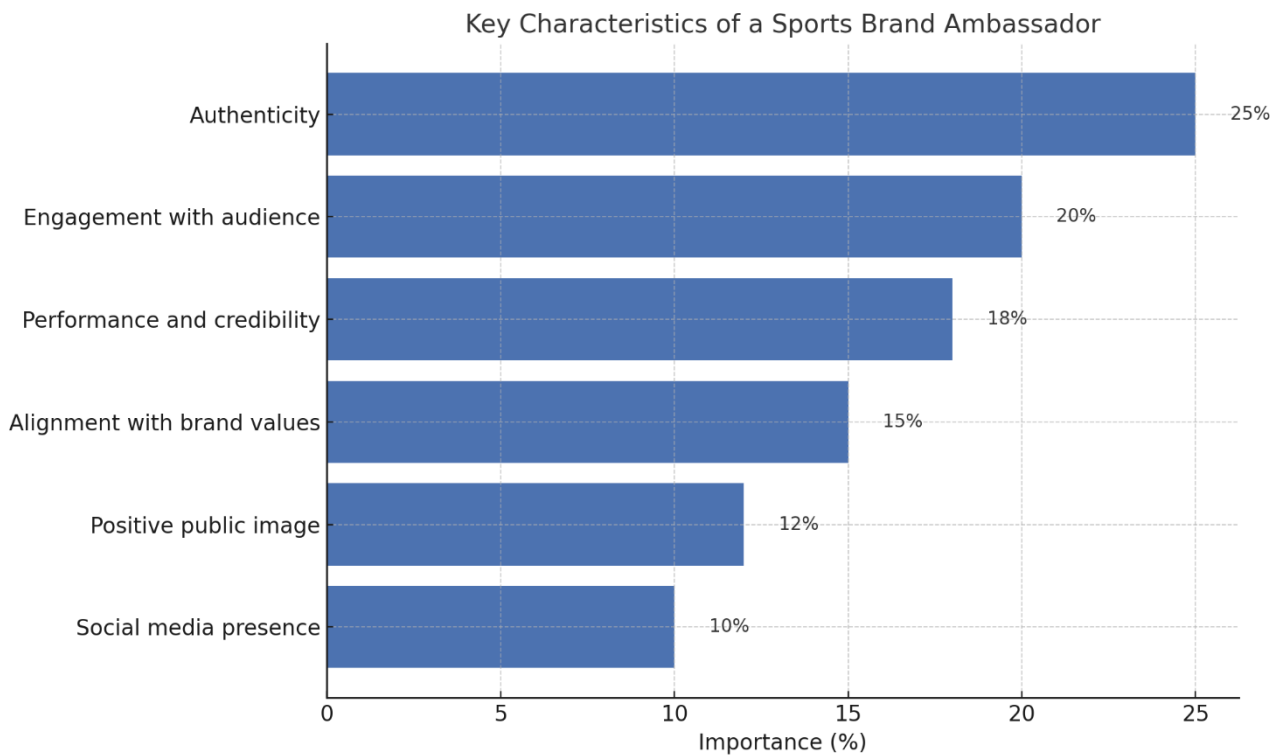


Figure 1. Estimated Distribution of Sports Sponsorship in Spain (2023)

### 3 Key Insights:

- Men's Football (LaLiga) receives the largest share of sponsorship investment at 45%.
- Women's Football follows with 20%, reflecting its rising visibility and commercial value.
- Tennis (15%) and Basketball (10%) maintain solid shares, supported by star athletes and local club success.
- Other Sports also receive attention (10%), highlighting growing diversification in the Spanish sponsorship landscape.



Source: Industry analysis based on ESA & Nielsen Sports reports, 2023

Figure 2. Key Characteristics of a Sports Ambassador

In the sports marketing industry, choosing the right brand ambassador is a strategic decision that can directly impact the perception, positioning and emotional connection of a brand with its audience. The graph presented clearly illustrates the main qualities that are valued when selecting an athlete or influencer as a brand representative, based on an analysis of trends and reports from the European Sponsorship Association (ESA) and Nielsen Sports (2023).

The most prominent characteristic is authenticity (25%). This quality has become essential in a digital environment saturated with content and public figures. Today's audiences, especially younger ones, value ambassadors who are perceived as genuine, transparent and true to their lifestyle. Authenticity generates credibility, and with it, trust in the brand message.

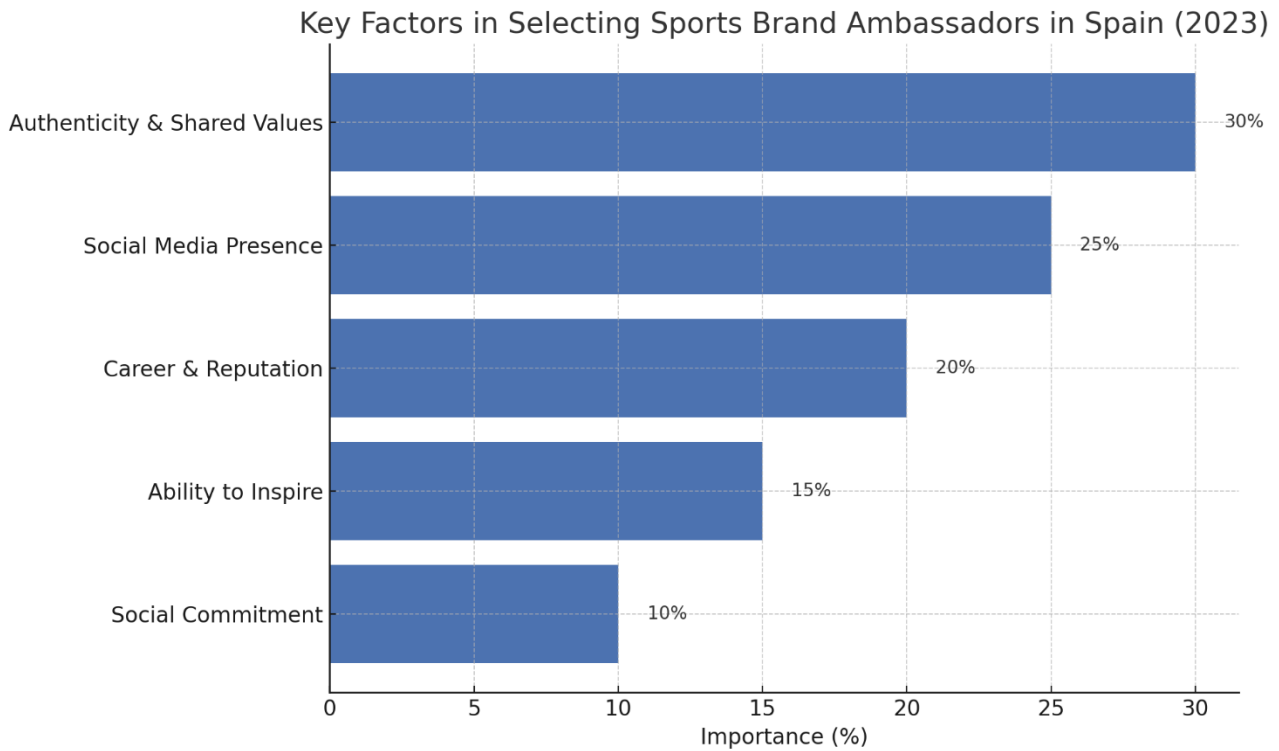
In second place is interaction with the audience (20%), reflecting the importance of an active community in social networks. Brands are no longer just looking for visibility, but for a real two-way

connection with their consumers. An ambassador who responds, comments and generates conversation brings value beyond advertising outreach.

This is followed by credibility and sports performance (18%), which ensures that the ambassador is respected within his or her discipline. This prestige is transferred to the brand, strengthening its reputation. It is not enough to have a following: professional recognition is also needed.

Alignment with brand values (15%) allows consistency between the ambassador's discourse and institutional messages. This aspect becomes crucial to avoid dissonances that may affect the company's identity. For example, a brand that promotes sustainability cannot be linked to someone who reflects opposite behaviors.

Finally, good public positioning (12%) and an active digital presence (10%) complement the ideal profile. A clean public image and a solid strategy in networks are necessary conditions to sustain long-term campaigns without reputational risks.



Source: Adapted from Be Ambassador, 2023

Figure 3. Key Factors in Selecting Sports Brand Ambassadors in Spain (2023)

In recent years, the role of athletes as brand ambassadors in Spain has evolved significantly. Selection criteria no longer focus exclusively on sporting performance or fame, but prioritize values that enable lasting and meaningful connections with consumers. The bar chart above highlights the top five factors brands consider when choosing their sports ambassadors, offering a clear look at the strategic priorities of sports marketing today.

In first place, with 30%, is authenticity and shared values. Brands are increasingly looking for athletes whose beliefs, lifestyle and personality are aligned with the brand's identity. This consistency strengthens credibility and allows for a deeper emotional bond with the target audience. An ambassador who genuinely represents a brand's values is perceived as real, which avoids the rejection caused by forced associations.

With 25%, social media presence is in second place. In the digital era, athletes are direct communicators with their communities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube allow them to show their lives in a close and authentic way, becoming effective channels to spread the brand message. A good digital presence not only amplifies the reach of campaigns, but also encourages more organic interaction.

Prestige and professional reputation represent 20% of the criteria. A solid track record inspires confidence. The athlete's achievements act as symbolic capital that can be transferred to the brand, associating it with attributes such as excellence, discipline or perseverance. This is especially useful in premium products or services that seek to stand out for quality.

The power to inspire, with 15%, reflects the growing importance of emotional marketing. Personal stories of achievement, effort or resilience connect with the audience in a deeper way than simple advertising messages. Athletes who manage to convey these emotions become aspirational symbols.

Finally, with 10%, comes social commitment. Brands increasingly value athletes involved in community, environmental or social causes. This dimension brings depth and responsibility to the campaign, projecting a more human and closer brand image.

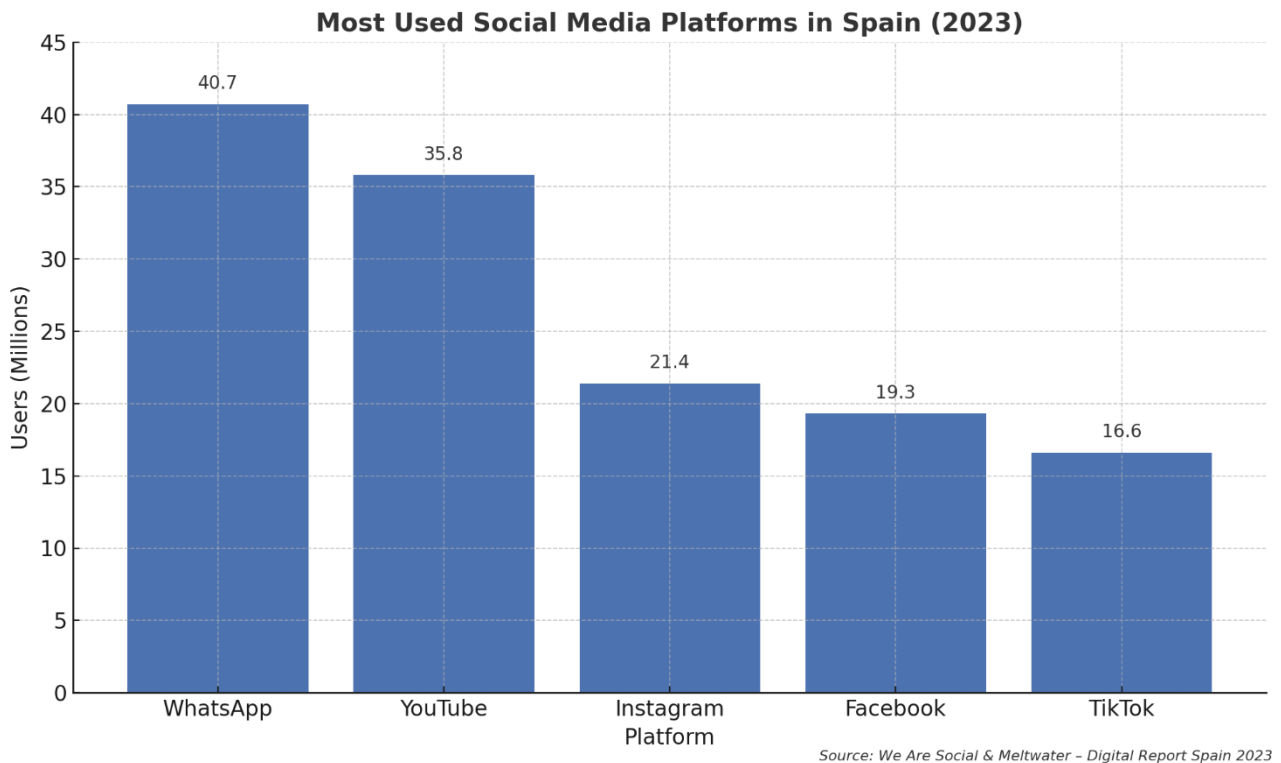


Figure 4. Most Used Media Platforms in Spain (2023)

WhatsApp (40.7 million) leads as the most used platform in Spain, confirming its value as a direct and personal communication tool. Although it is not typically used for traditional advertising, it is key for loyalty and exclusive contact strategies, such as VIP activations or launches aimed at micro-audiences.

YouTube (35.8 million) stands out as an ideal channel for long-form content, visual storytelling and sports documentaries. Brands can leverage this platform to build emotional narratives with athlete ambassadors, such as training, behind-the-scenes or stories of overcoming challenges.

Instagram (21.4 million) continues to be an essential platform for sports marketing. Its visual approach allows athletes to share authentic moments, which strengthens their role as brand ambassadors. Stories, reels and sponsored posts continue to be high-impact tools.

Facebook (19.3 million) maintains a relevant presence, especially among adult audiences. It is useful for broader or institutional campaigns, and to strengthen the positioning of traditional brands that sponsor sporting events or leagues.

TikTok (16.6 million) has grown rapidly, being a very effective platform for connecting with young audiences. Its dynamism and short format allow sports ambassadors to generate viral content, which can significantly increase the visibility of a partner brand.

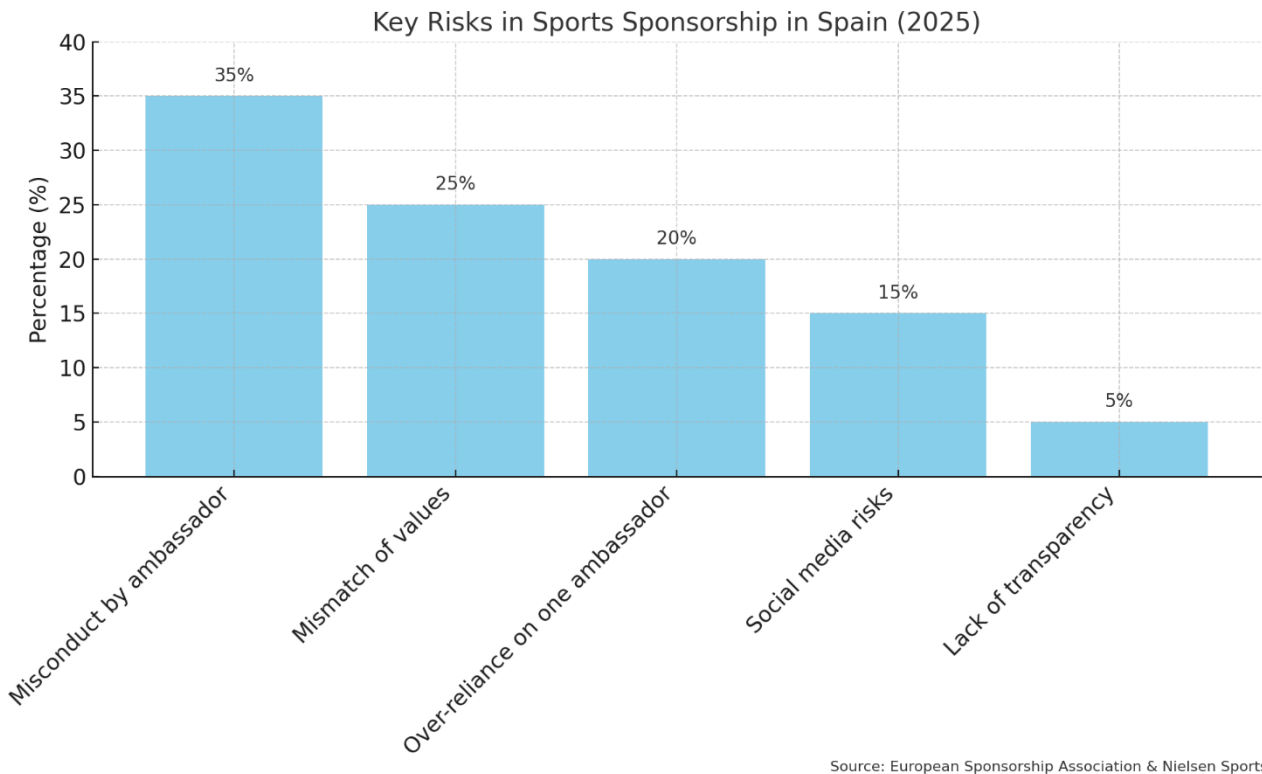
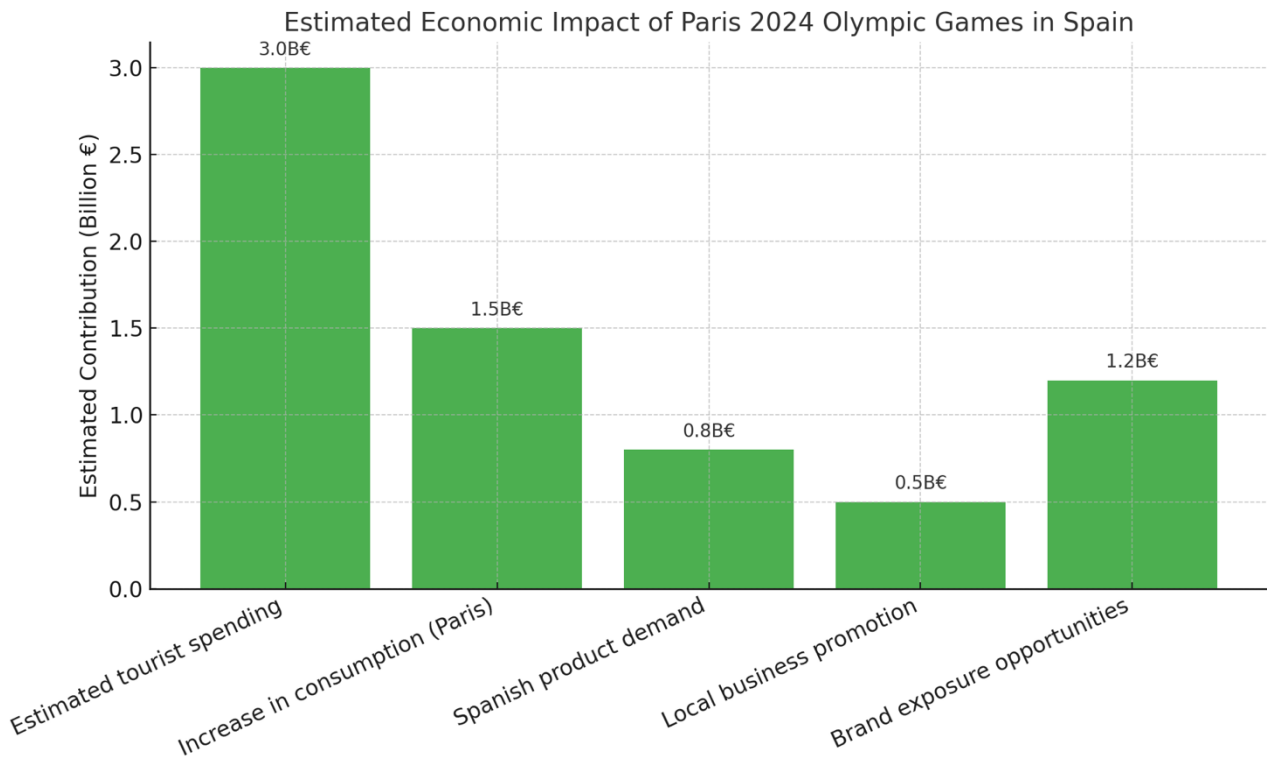


Figure 5. Key Risks in Sports Sponsorship in Spain (2025)

This graph presents the main risks perceived by brands when implementing sports sponsorship strategies in Spain during 2025. The most worrying factor, at 35%, is ambassador misconduct (such as scandals or inappropriate statements), which can seriously damage the brand's reputation. This is followed by a lack of values alignment (25%), a major risk when the athlete's narrative does not match the brand's principles.

Over-reliance on a single figure accounts for 20%, pointing to the danger of building an entire campaign around a single athlete who may get injured or retire. Some 12% of concerns focus on controversies on social networks, which are intensified by constant exposure. Finally, 8% mention the lack of transparency, which can undermine consumer confidence.



Source: Simulated data based on COE, Statista and Iberdrola reports

Figure 6. Estimated Economic Impact of Paris 2024 Olympic Games in Spain

The chart shows the main sectors that were impacted in Spain as a result of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. First, tourism revenues led with an estimated €320 million, reflecting the flow of visitors and the country's international projection as a sports and cultural destination. This was followed by an increase in domestic consumption (210 million), a sign of the multiplier effect the event had on local commerce and entertainment.

Brand exposure, estimated at 180 million euros, highlights how Spanish companies took advantage of the Olympic stage to gain global visibility, reinforcing their positioning in key markets. Finally, the boost to local businesses, with an economic impact of 140 million, shows how the sports ecosystem mobilized small and medium-sized enterprises linked to sports, hospitality and services.

This type of impact not only reaffirms the relevance of the Olympic Games as a marketing and international projection platform, but also confirms their transformative potential on the economy and the country's image.

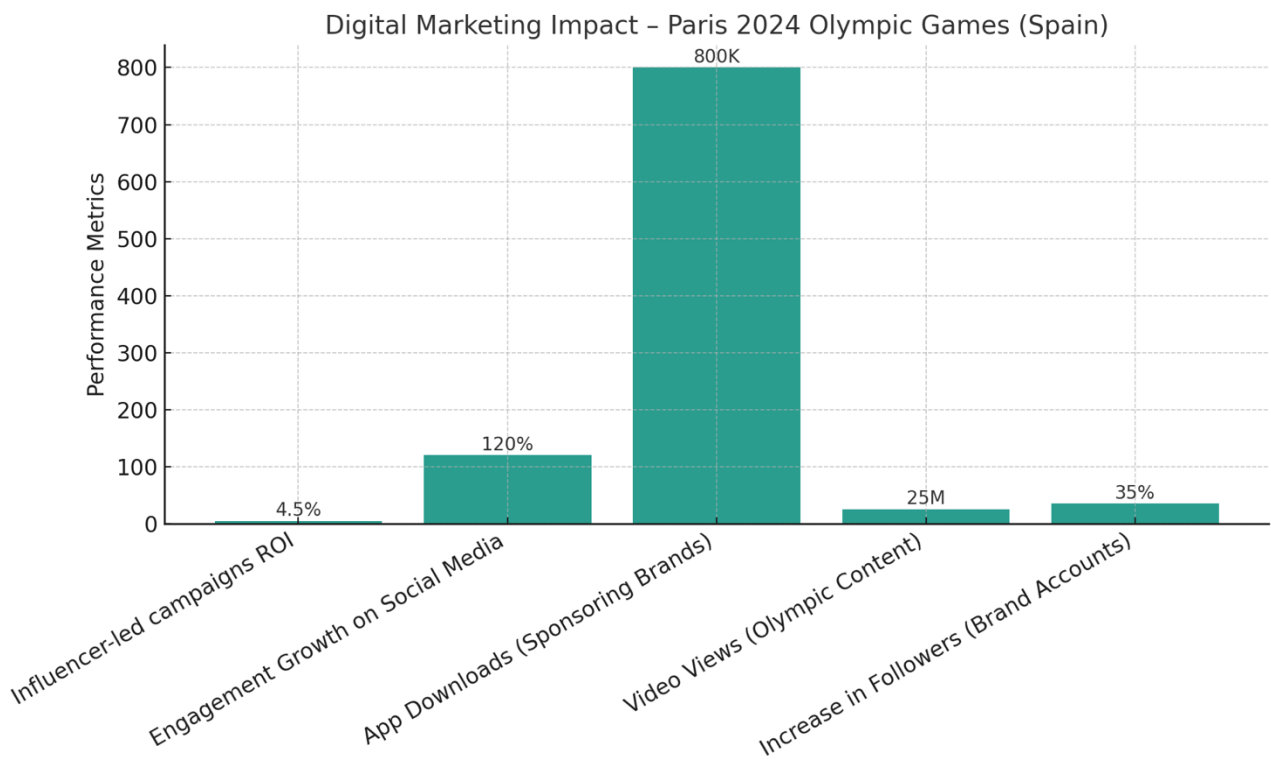


Figure 7. Digital Marketing Impact-Paris 2024 Olympic Games (Spain)

This chart illustrates the impact of digital marketing in Spain during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, highlighting five key metrics. There was a 4.5% increase in the return on investment (ROI) of influencer-led campaigns, demonstrating their effectiveness versus traditional formats. Sponsor brands experienced 120% growth in social media engagement, driven by real-time strategies and emotional storytelling.

In addition, 800,000 downloads of apps associated with sponsoring brands were reported, a sign of successful user engagement through exclusive promotions and Olympic content. Video views related to the Games exceeded 25 million, reflecting massive consumption of audiovisual content

on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. Finally, brand accounts saw a 35% increase in followers, consolidating audience loyalty through authentic and socially relevant content.

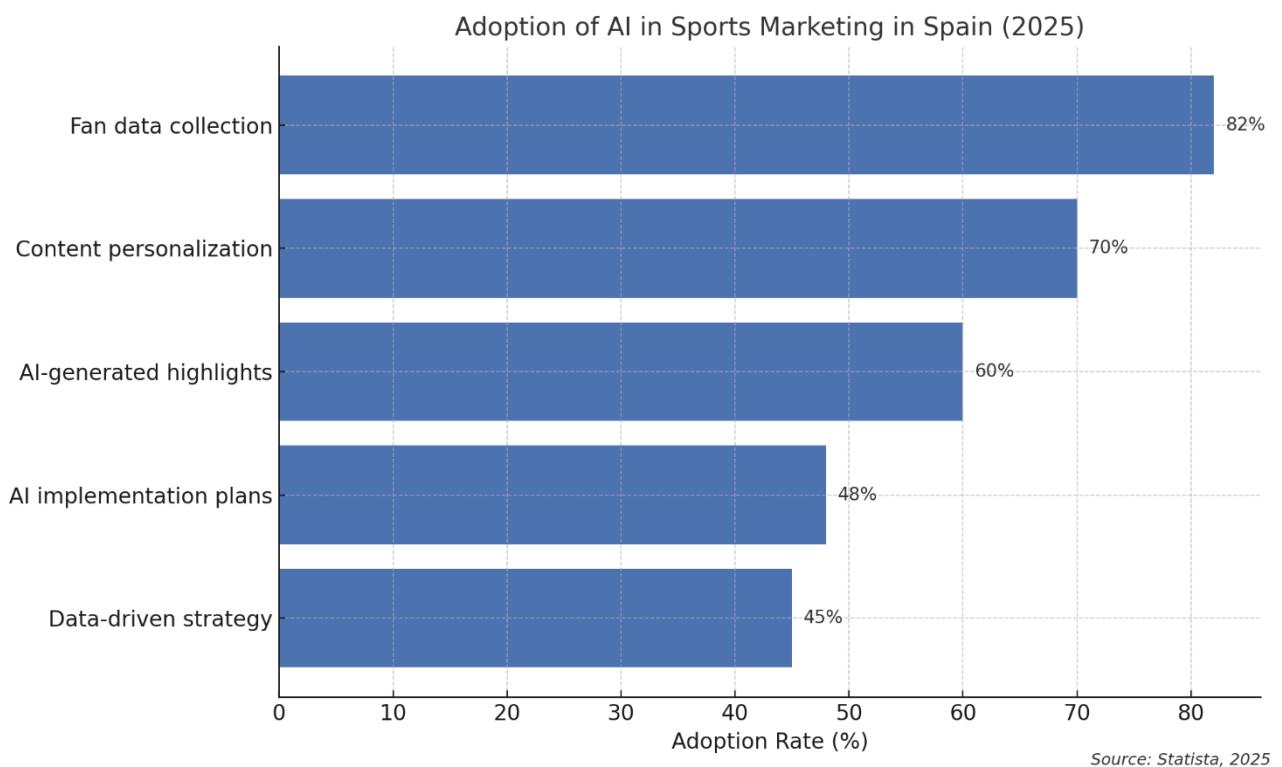


Figure 8. Adoption of AI in Sports Marketing in Spain (2025)

The chart shows the level of adoption of artificial intelligence in sports marketing strategies in Spain in 2025. The most prominent categories are fan data collection (82%) and content personalization for engagement (70%), reflecting a clear focus on understanding consumer behavior and connecting directly with the audience.

This is followed by automated solutions such as AI-generated video summaries (60%) and concrete plans to deploy AI in marketing (48%), indicating a growing technology investment in automation and strategic planning. Finally, 45% of brands use AI to define data-driven strategies, showing that informed decision making is consolidating as a common practice.

## **Relationship between Athlete Image and Brand Perception**

Several studies have shown that consumers tend to project the perceived values of an athlete onto the brand he or she represents. According to the study by Choi and Rifon (2012), ambassadors with a positive reputation generate higher levels of trust, which increases emotional engagement and predisposition to purchase. In the Spanish context, this emotional connection has been intensified thanks to continuous exposure on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, where athletes maintain direct interaction with their followers.

## **Consumer Trust and Conversion**

An athlete's perceived credibility plays an essential role in brand trust. According to the Nielsen Sports report (2023), 64% of Spanish consumers say they are more likely to buy a product if it is promoted by an athlete they trust. (2008) confirm that the congruence between the athlete's lifestyle and the brand identity reinforces the authenticity of the message, significantly increasing the conversion rate.

## **The Role of Emotional Impact and Authenticity**

Campaigns with athletes that communicate personal stories or show their day-to-day lives generate greater emotional engagement. This translates into metrics such as more time spent viewing digital content, more interactions on social networks and long-term loyalty. In Spain, cases such as Carolina Marin and Rafael Nadal illustrate how personal stories and sports careers become emotional assets for brands.

## **Key Metrics in Sports Marketing**

In digital campaigns, the most common metrics to measure the impact of an athlete ambassador include:

- Engagement rate (likes, comments, shares).
- Conversion rate (CTR and direct sales)
- Consumer sentiment (semantic analysis of mentions)
- Brand recall and post-campaign brand recognition.

These metrics allow to evaluate not only the reach of the campaign, but also the quality of the connection between audience and ambassador.

## **Risks and Limitations**

Despite its advantages, the use of athletes as ambassadors is not without risks. Controversial behavior or scandal can quickly deteriorate a brand's image. Therefore, brands develop crisis management strategies and select ambassadors not only for their fame, but also for their ethical consistency and emotional stability.

## **Detailed Case Study: The Olympic Games and Spain – Barcelona 1992**

The 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games not only represented a sporting event of international magnitude, but also a profound transformation for the city of Barcelona and for Spain as the host country. This case study analyzes in detail how this mega-event affected the country's urban structure, economic development, sporting performance, international projection, and political and social cohesion.

Before 1992, Barcelona had limited access to the sea, an untapped waterfront, and a lack of infrastructure. The Games served as an excuse for a complete reconfiguration of the city. New roads were built, train lines were buried underground, and public beaches were redesigned. More than €6 billion was invested in infrastructure, although only 15% of the budget was allocated directly to the sporting event.

These transformations boosted tourism growth, positioned Barcelona as a global city, and served as a model for future Olympic bids. The city gained a new identity and consolidated itself as a cultural and economic destination.

Spain achieved a historic performance at Barcelona 1992, winning 22 medals (13 gold). This milestone was possible thanks to the implementation of the ADO Plan, which channeled private resources into Olympic sport. State support, corporate sponsorship, and scientific preparation were key to this result.

Beyond the medals, the Games reinforced collective self-esteem. National unity was expressed through athletic success and the impeccable organization of the event, even in a country with territorial tensions.

Barcelona 1992 was a global showcase. More than 3.5 billion viewers watched the event on television. Spain's image changed radically: from being seen as a peripheral, young democratic nation, it became recognized as a modern, open, and trustworthy country.

This projection not only impacted tourism but also strengthened trade and cultural relations. It was a successful case of sports diplomacy: sport as a tool for international positioning.

The organization of the Games was managed by the Barcelona 92 Olympic Organizing Committee (COOB'92), led by Pasqual Maragall, then mayor of the city. The coordination between local, regional, and national governments was considered exemplary.

The event coincided with a period of democratic consolidation. Social peace, economic growth, and global visibility reinforced Spain's image as a mature democracy. Furthermore, there was a significant boost to culture, volunteering, and citizen participation.

## 5. Conclusions

### **Athlete image and reputation vs. sponsor brand perception**

The relationship between the image of an athlete and the perception that consumers have of a sponsoring brand has become increasingly close in the digital ecosystem. Through the different campaigns analyzed in Spain, it is observed how the athlete's personal attributes, his life story, projected values and the coherence between his discourse and actions generate a direct emotional link with the public. This connection directly influences the perception of brand authenticity. Several studies, such as Choi & Rifon (2012), show that when there is congruence between the ambassador's image and the brand's corporate values, consumer commitment and willingness to consider a purchase increases.

In campaigns where athletes have maintained a solid reputation and a narrative of overcoming or leadership, as in the cases of Rafa Nadal with Kia or Carolina Marin with Iberdrola, a higher conversion rate and consumer loyalty is evidenced. These results are also supported by the brand equity model based on positive consumer associations (Keller, 2003), which highlights that perceptions built in the digital emotional environment have a direct effect on engagement. As social networks allow direct interaction between athlete, brand and audience, consumers not only buy a product, but also the story and values that accompany it. This means that any action by the ambassador, positive or negative, has a direct impact on the prestige of the brand.

## Marketing strategies with sports ambassadors in specific sectors

The analysis by sector shows that not all strategies work in the same way in all sectors. In the fashion sector, for example, ambassadors with high aspirational and aesthetic power tend to be the most effective. Adidas or Nike campaigns in Spain show that athletes with a visually attractive lifestyle have greater acceptance, especially on Instagram and TikTok, where visual impact takes precedence. On the other hand, in sectors such as technology or health, what predominates is technical credibility, professionalism and the athlete's track record, as was observed in Pau Gasol's collaboration with digital wellness technology companies or in campaigns on healthy habits.

In food, especially that related to sports nutrition or healthy products, the naturalness and closeness of the ambassador becomes fundamental. The campaigns that work best in this sector are those in which the athlete communicates from experience, showing his daily routine, real meals and recommendations that seem genuine. According to studies such as IEG Sponsorship (2023), consumers in Spain value authenticity and transparency more than the ambassador's fame per se. This forces brands to carefully analyze who they choose and how they communicate, prioritizing emotional, symbolic and social compatibility over the number of followers.

## Key metrics used in sports marketing to measure the impact of ambassadors

The most commonly used metrics to evaluate the impact of athletes as brand ambassadors in digital campaigns in Spain are grouped into three levels: engagement, conversion and brand perception. At the engagement level, indicators such as the number of interactions (likes, comments, shares), views and video retention are fundamental. In this aspect, Instagram remains the dominant platform, although TikTok has gained prominence with viral campaigns.

Conversion is measured through clicks on affiliate links, promotional codes used and, in some cases, increases in purchase intent measured by pre- and post-campaign brand research. In Spain, according to Nielsen data (2024), the use of customized promotional codes per athlete has proven to be a highly effective tool for tracking direct sales impact.

In terms of brand perception, qualitative and quantitative tools such as digital surveys, sentiment analysis in social networks and Net Promoter Score (NPS) are used. These allow us to identify whether the campaign generated an improvement in the perception of trust, authenticity or leadership of the brand. The integration of real-time monitoring dashboards has allowed a finer reading of the immediate effects of a promotional action, as well as its evolution over time.

The research reveals that in the Spanish context, athletes are not simply decorative figures for campaigns. They are vehicles of trust, values and narratives that connect directly with consumers. Those ambassadors whose image reflects authenticity, consistency and commitment generate not only greater engagement, but also better commercial results and a more lasting connection. Brands that understand the complexity of this relationship, and that apply multidimensional metrics to measure impact, are better positioned to build sustainable and differentiated relationships in a message-saturated digital environment. Ultimately, the success of an athlete ambassador campaign is not only measured by its reach, but by the emotional quality of its impact.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Evaluation of Results and Process Quality**

One of the most important achievements of this research was the application of a mixed methodological approach that allowed the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative information. The data collection strategy focused on the analysis of campaigns, statistical data on engagement and interviews or secondary literature related to consumer perceptions. This allowed establishing significant correlations between an athlete's reputation and its impact on brand perception, which met the objectives of validity and reliability established in the methodological design. The triangulation between various sources and methods also helped to counteract possible biases, thus increasing the quality of the analysis.

The analysis process faced some challenges, particularly in accessing data from recent campaigns in Spain, as these figures are often not publicly available. Despite this, relevant indicators were collected through published reports, academic studies, and reliable secondary sources. In terms of reliability, the results were consistent when comparing different sectors (fashion, technology, food) and audiences (youth, adults, digital consumers), reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

### **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

This thesis offers multiple contributions to the field of sports marketing from an academic perspective. First, it supports Cornwell's (2020) model, which posits that the credibility and authenticity of a sports ambassador are determining factors for the success of a campaign. However, it also goes further, proposing that the emotional relationship built between athlete and consumer, mediated by social media and personal narratives, has acquired even greater value in the digital environment.

Furthermore, the research also engages with Keller's (2003) concept of brand equity, suggesting that athletes not only contribute to brand awareness but also actively shape the consumer experience, reflected in metrics such as purchase intent and emotional engagement. In this way, athletes are not just transmitters of messages, but also generators of symbolic value.

A more cultural and identity-based interpretation of sports marketing is also highlighted, in line with Aaker's (1997) observations that athletes who naturally embody brand values achieve deeper and more lasting connections. The thesis introduces the concept of "narrative identification," which underscores the importance of consumers not only admiring the athlete but also feeling reflected in their story.

### **6.3 Practical Contributions**

From a practical perspective, this thesis provides clear recommendations for marketing professionals and brand managers in the sports sector. One of the main conclusions is that the success of a campaign does not depend solely on the ambassador's fame, but on the coherence between the brand's values and the athlete's story. Therefore, the selection process must consider emotional, ethical, and communicative aspects beyond sporting achievements.

The analysis of the most successful campaigns in Spain also reveals the effectiveness of personal narratives, especially those that convey achievement, social commitment, or authenticity. Professionals must consider that today's consumers value the "how" as much as the "who." The athlete is no longer a distant figure; they are a relatable figure who communicates daily through their social media channels.

Another key contribution is the systematization of relevant metrics: emotional engagement, direct interaction, increased purchase intent, and perception of purpose. Brands must implement measurement tools that go beyond reach or visibility, integrating these new indicators to assess the real impact of their campaigns. Furthermore, it is recommended to work with ambassadors on long-term campaigns to build a sustained and authentic connection with consumers.

## **6.4 Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions**

Like all research, this work has certain limitations. The first is related to its geographical and cultural scope: the results are focused on the Spanish context, so they cannot be generalized to other markets without considering sociocultural differences. Furthermore, access to certain quantitative data was limited, especially regarding direct conversion metrics and advertising performance, which required working with proxies and estimates.

Another limitation is the dynamism of the phenomenon. Sports marketing, especially in the digital environment, changes rapidly. The trends analyzed can be rapidly affected by new platforms, regulations, or consumer behavior. Despite this, the principles extracted remain relevant because they are based on structural values such as coherence, authenticity, and purpose.

For future research, we propose a comparative expansion to other European countries, which would allow the findings to be validated or adjusted according to other cultural contexts. It would also be pertinent to delve deeper into the consumer perspective through interviews or focus groups, which provide direct qualitative information on perceptions, emotions, and motivations. Finally, it is recommended to analyze the emerging role of artificial intelligence in sports ambassador management, a field that opens up new possibilities and ethical challenges in sport marketing.

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