

Seeking sponsorships - Finnish combat sports athletes

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Degree programme	
International Business	
Thesis title	Number of pages and appendix pages
Seeking sponsorships – Finnish combat sports athletes	56 + 3
<p>The purpose of this thesis was to study how Finnish combat sports athletes can market themselves to successfully attract, seek, and obtain sponsorships. The process of a combat sports athlete marketing him/herself to successfully attract sponsors including methods, content, and used platforms were studied to answer the research question of the thesis. Moreover, the differences between the marketing activities used by Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes to seek sponsorships were studied. Lastly, the thesis tried to determine why companies decide to sponsor combat sports athletes by studying the motives and goals of companies sponsoring combat sports athletes.</p> <p>The theoretical framework was based on literature about sponsorships, sports sponsorships from the viewpoints of sponsees and sponsors, sponsorship in Finland, sponsorship contracts, the use of social media marketing, social media platforms, and athlete branding when seeking sponsorship. The theoretical framework was drafted to better understand the topics covered in this thesis.</p> <p>The study was carried out with the use of semi-structured interviews. Three Finnish and three foreign combat sports athletes that were sponsored at the time of the study or had been sponsored in the past were interviewed. In addition to the athletes, two Finnish companies that were sponsoring a Finnish combat sports athlete at the time of the study were interviewed. The interviews were analyzed qualitatively using comparative and thematic analysis.</p> <p>Based on the analyzed interview data and conclusions of the theoretical framework the key findings of this thesis were drafted. The findings revealed that content creation on social media channels, especially on Facebook and Instagram had been the main marketing activity that both Finnish and foreign athletes had used to attract and acquire sponsors. Finnish combat sports athletes were found to be more active and have a more strategic approach to their marketing activities. Furthermore, the research found that companies were sponsoring Finnish combat sports athletes because of a personal connection to and shared values with combat sports. Companies were looking to get positive visibility out of sponsoring a Finnish combat sports athlete. The results also indicated an athlete's brand, image, social media following, and reach and achievements in the represented sport to have an effect when the choice is being made by companies on who to sponsor.</p> <p>Recommendations for Finnish combat sports athletes were given based on the key findings and conclusions of this thesis. The recommendations included recommended marketing activities, content, platforms, and other actions that Finnish combat sports athletes should utilize while seeking sponsors.</p>	
Keywords	
Sponsorship, sports sponsorship, combat sports, social media marketing, athlete branding	

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1 Introduction

This is a research-based bachelor's thesis for the Degree Program in International business in the major specialization of marketing. The purpose of this thesis is to study how Finnish combat sports athletes can market themselves to successfully seek and obtain sponsorship. What goes into the process of marketing oneself to successfully attract sponsors? What kind of methods, content, and platforms are used to accomplish this? The differences between the marketing activities of Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes are also studied in this thesis. Lastly, the thesis tries to determine why companies decide to sponsor Finnish combat sports athletes, what are the motives, and what are the goals that companies aim to reach by sponsoring Finnish combat sports athletes.

In this chapter, the background of the thesis topic will be addressed to give the reader a general idea why this thesis was written. After the background is addressed the purpose and main objective of this thesis in the form of the research question and investigative questions are presented. The demarcation of the thesis topic will also be discussed in this chapter. Demarcation is followed by the presentation of the international aspect of this thesis, the Degree Programme of International Business in Haaga-Helia UAS requires the thesis to have an international aspect in it. Lastly, the benefits to all stakeholders related to the topic will be addressed, the risk management will be presented, and the key concepts will be discussed.

1.1 Background

Combat sports consist of sports such as judo, wrestling, karate, boxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), brazilian jiu-jitsu to name a few (Kamppailulajit.net 2020). Many Finnish combat sports athletes aim to compete on a high level in both, the national and international scene. Combat sports are individual sports which means that combat sports athletes do not have the access to similar funding as many team sports athletes have. Lack of funding is often the single most significant obstacle that combat sports athletes face during their careers. It is common in Finland that even professional athletes suffer from a lack of funding. Gabriel (28 December 2018a) explains that it is not possible for Finnish athletes to become the best in their sport without receiving financial support through partnerships such as sponsorship. Gabriel further explains that when athletes have to worry about their financials constantly their performance will suffer. Moreover, in the long-term athletes that are forced to have to a day job to pay for their bills while practicing professional sports can end up quitting their promising careers early on. (Gabriel 28 December 2018a.)

YLE carried out a survey in 2016 that studied the incomes of professional athletes in Finland from various sports including representatives of combat sports. According to the survey results, 64% of the 90 respondents received less than 1200€/month as a gross income, the poverty line in 2014 was 1190€/month as a net income. 5% of the respondents received 1200-2000€/month and 19% received 2000-3000€/month. Less than 3% of the respondents earned more than 4000€/month. The following two quotes are from combat sports athletes that took part in the survey: "I'm thinking all the time whether I should put money into travel fees to be able to participate in a competition abroad or if I should pay my rent. Usually, I have to take random work shifts (night shifts) to get enough money to be able to pay for travel fees and rent." (Combat sports athlete, participant of major competitions). "It is hard to practice professionally or even to eat in the way an athlete should." (National team combat sports athlete). The respondents of the survey clearly stated that the constant worry over income causes massive stress, and the stress has a significant negative effect on their performance in sports. The survey respondents concluded that sponsorships were the most important source of income for them. (Kössö 2016.)

If a Finnish combat sports athlete wants to be among the best in the world ranking, he/she must be able to train with and like the best. This means that the athletes must be able to both train and compete abroad as the combat sports circles are small in Finland. Finland is a small country and usually, the combat sports clubs and federations are also small and have limited resources. Often, the funding is not even close to being enough for an athlete to be able to train and compete abroad while maintaining financial stability to be able to live in a country like Finland.

1.2 Research question

As the main objective of this thesis is to find out how Finnish combat sports athletes can market themselves to attract and obtain sponsorship the research question (**RQ**) of the thesis asks the following: How can Finnish combat sports athletes market themselves to seek sponsorships?

The research question is further divided into 5 investigative questions.

1. What marketing activities have Finnish combat sports athletes used in the past to seek Sponsors successfully?
2. What marketing activities have foreign combat sports athletes used in the past to seek Sponsors successfully?
3. What are the differences in the sports sponsorship-seeking activities between Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes?

4. For what reasons have sports sponsors decided to sponsor a Finnish combat sports athlete?
5. What recommendations can be given to Finnish combat sports athletes about platforms, content, and implementation of marketing activities?

1.3 Demarcation

The aim of this thesis is to provide future and current professional combat sports athletes in Finland with recommendations on what kind of marketing methods, platforms, and content they should use to market themselves to obtain sponsorship. The recommendations presented in this thesis are given towards Finnish combat sports athletes that already are professional athletes or aim to become ones. This thesis will focus specifically on combat sports and Finnish combat sports athletes instead of focusing on other individual sports. Sponsorships will be discussed in detail in this thesis but only on individual athletes' and sponsoring companies' part, sponsorships of sports organizations or events are irrelevant to the topic of this thesis.

1.4 International aspect

The Degree Programme of International Business requires the thesis to have an international aspect in it. The international aspect in this thesis will be acquired by benchmarking foreign combat sports athletes' marketing activities, this is done by interviewing foreign combat sports athletes.

1.5 Benefits

This thesis will provide benefits for the current and future Finnish combat sports athletes, Finnish combat sports clubs and associations, companies looking to sponsor a combat sports athlete, and the author of the thesis. Finnish combat sports athletes will have a better understanding of the marketing activities and the steps that they must take to acquire sponsorships. By acquiring sponsorships, Finnish combat sports athletes can better focus on training and competing, and this way achieve better results in the domestic and international combat sports scene. Finnish combat sports clubs and Finnish combat sports associations will receive secondary benefits, as the clubs and federations will have well-funded athletes. Companies that might be considering acting as a sponsor for a combat sports athlete in the future will get a better idea of the benefits, they can receive by sponsoring a Finnish combat sports athlete. The author of the thesis will develop a deep knowledge of the topic of sports sponsorships.

1.6 Risk management

Possible risks that come with this thesis are time management, language barrier, inability to obtain access to sponsoring organizations, and the current Coronavirus situation. These risks will be managed by careful planning and by using digital channels to conduct interviews.

1.7 Key concepts

This chapter addresses the key concepts of this thesis that will come up repeatedly during the research. The chapter serves as a mini-dictionary for the reader.

Athlete branding is branding that is focused on an individual athlete, it can be seen as the use of different communication channels to reinforce the image of an individual's characteristics that make him/her stand out from others. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 56.)

Athlete sponsorship takes place when a company acts as a sponsor for a particular athlete. In athlete sponsorship, an athlete is often expected to advertise the sponsor's product(s) and increase the visibility of the product(s) image(s). (Irwin, Sutton & McCarthy 2008, 151.)

Combat sports are sports that are usually classified as competitive contact sports in which athletes usually fight or combat against each other while obeying certain pre-set rules. Judo, Boxing, mixed martial arts, and Karate are examples of combat sports. (Nidan.fi 2020.)

Property refers to a sponsored individual, event, activity, or organization that is being sponsored. (Cornwell 2014, 7).

Sponsee refers to a sponsored individual, event, activity, or organization that is being sponsored. (Cornwell 2014, 7).

Sponsor is a company or an organization that pays for the rights to market themselves and their products/services with the use of a sponsored property that is the owner of the rights. (Sponsorointi & Tapahtumat ry 2021).

Sponsorship refers to "Investing in a sports entity to support overall organizational objectives, marketing goals, and promotional strategies" (Shank 2009, 445).

Sports sponsorship is a marketing technique that is based on a relationship between a company and a sports property. The aim of sports sponsorship is to increase brand awareness and customer loyalty. (Optimy 2017.)

2 Sponsorship in combat sports

This chapter will discuss the key concepts, theories, and models included in the theoretical framework of this thesis. The key concepts of this chapter are related to sports sponsorship from the viewpoint of a sponsor and a sponsee. Concepts of sponsorship, sports sponsorship, sponsorship in combat sports, sponsorship contracts, sponsorship-related activities, use social media as a marketing platform, use of other marketing platforms, and athlete branding are addressed in this chapter.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual structure of the theoretical framework used for this thesis.

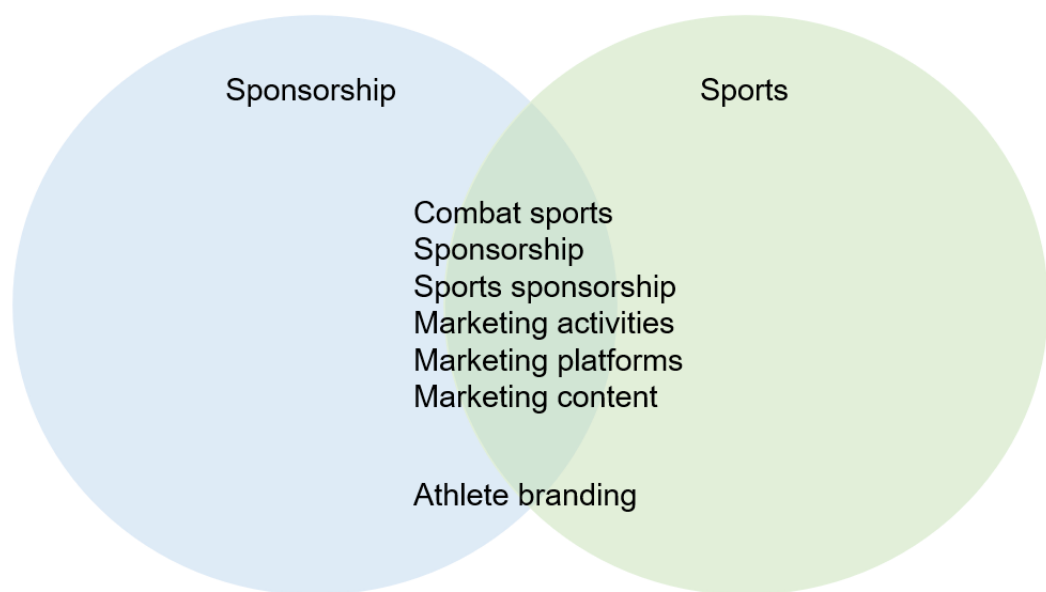


Figure 1. Sponsorship in combat sports

2.1 Combat sports

Combat sports are sports that are classified as competitive contact sports in which athletes usually fight or combat each other against each other while obeying certain pre-set rules. Some of the most know combat sports are judo, jiu jitsu, mixed martial arts, savate, and brazilian jiu jitsu. (Nidan.fi 2020.) According to Degerman (2017) around 200 different combat sports and their sub trends are practiced in Finland. It is common for people to think that combat sports promote violence, however in reality combat sports emphasize respect, discipline, self-control, humility, and patience among other things (St. Edwards University 2021).

2.2 Sponsorship as a concept

Fortunato (2013, 26) explains that it is hard to describe sponsorship with a single way as sponsorship as a concept lacks a clear definition.

Cornwell (2014, 15), states that “The word sponsorship has the basic meaning of one entity supporting or accepting responsibility in some way for another”. Cornwell further explains that sponsorship has been give many definitions by different authors, the definitions describe sponsorship as a trade between two parties in which one party receives financials and the other party receives exposure for their image. Lastly, Cornwell states that some definitions describe sponsorship as a marketing partnership. (Cornwell 2014, 15-16.)

In this thesis sponsorship and its use will be viewed from an athlete and sports point of view. Therefore, in the context of this thesis the best suiting concept of sponsorship comes from Irwin, Sutton & McCarthy. They describe sponsorship as a “Commercial agreement between two parties, of which one is a sport property, to exchange as well as promote their mutual resources and interests” (Irwin, Sutton & McCarthy 2008, 146).

2.2.1 Sponsorship is cooperation

The definitions of sponsorship cooperation are traditionally based on the perspective of a sponsor. Alaja however debates that nowadays the modern way of thinking requires that the definition should not only be looked at from the sponsors’ perspective but from the sponsees’ perspective as well. With the above information in mind Alaja has divided the basic elements of sponsorship cooperation into seven segments:

- Sponsorship cooperation is a cooperation between a sponsor and sponsee done for a reward.
- Sponsorship cooperation is a form of marketing communication for a company.
- For a sports property sponsorship cooperation is an asset that provides a competitive edge.
- A sponsoring company uses the sports property’s positive image for marketing communication purposes.
- A sports property receives financial or other tangible benefits from the sponsoring company.
- Sponsorship cooperation is mutually beneficial for the sponsor and sponsee.
- In practice sponsorship cooperation is being carried out in an ethically sustainable manner. (Alaja 2001, 23.)

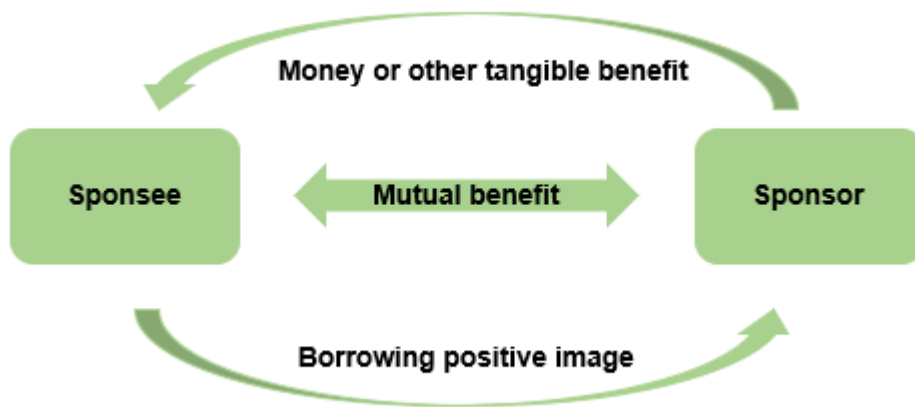


Figure 2. Basic elements of sponsorship (adapted from Alaja 2001, 23)

Valanko (2009, 187) states that the ability and willingness to combine and control certain types of thinking to be beneficial for both parties are practically what sponsorship cooperation is. Valanko further explains that at its best sponsorship is a process of mutual content creation by the sponsor and the sponsee designed for certain target groups and audiences. (Valanko 2009, 187.)

2.3 Sponsorship in sports

It is claimed that sponsorship can “touch the soul,” and “pull out heartstrings”, DeGaris (2015, 188) explains in his book that the quotes mentioned above are not entirely false. DeGaris further explains that sports supporters’ positive opinions towards sports can be magnified by well-functioning sports sponsorships. (DeGaris 2015, 188.)

Live sports attract large audiences, especially on a professional level but also on an amateur level. Tons of viewers can be gathered by professional sports which makes them a desirable sponsorship property in the eyes of large companies. Amateur sports may not attract as large audiences as professional sports however, it doesn’t mean that amateur sports should not be sponsored. Amateur sports offer a good opportunity to interact with local communities and businesses. (Baylis 2021a.)

According to Alaja & Forssell (2004,11), sports were first supported by sponsorships during the late 1800s. In 1861 an Australian catering business “Spiers & Pound” paid the fees of an Australian cricket tour for an English team. A brand called Bovril sponsored Nottingham Forest Football Club in 1898. Gillette sponsored baseball in 1910 and Coca-Cola acted as an Olympic sponsor already in 1928. (Alaja & Forssell 2004, 11.)

Over the years sports sponsorship has become a significant field of business. In 2012 global sponsorship rights expenses were valued at \$51.1 billion, sports sponsorship rights expenses accounted for a 69% of the whole portion. Other promotional marketing methods like advertising have been steadily being left behind by the increase of sponsorship spending which is another factor that signals the growth of sports sponsorship as a business. (DeGaris 2015, 186-187.)

Sports have become a product and a mainstream culture for many people. These changes have guided even bigger spending to sports, the increased spending and new opportunities presented by modern technology have molded sports into a significant phenomenon followed by large audiences. The popularity of sports and rapidly growing audiences have increased the sponsorship spending in sports drastically. (Itkonen, Kalervo and Matilainen 2007, 21.)

2.3.1 Sports sponsorship in Finland

Sport sponsorships have been practiced in Finland since the 1960s. In Finland sponsors provide sporting teams, -events, -facilities, -organizations, and individual athletes with financial and other support. (Gabriel 28 December 2018a.)

A sponsorship barometer done by Sponsor Insight and Sponsorointi & Tapahtumat ry in 2020 reveals that sponsorship is more important for Finnish companies in the 2020s than ever before. In 2020 a total of 203 million euros were spent on sponsorships in Finland. Compared to the year 2019 the total spending on sponsorship in Finland saw a major decline of 21.9%, mostly due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The decline of the total sponsorship spending led to a decline of 20.4% in sports sponsorship spending. Out of the total sum of 203 million euros, 129 million euros were spent on sports sponsorships. (Sponsor Insight 2021, 6 & 19.)

Sponsorship spending in Finland in 2020

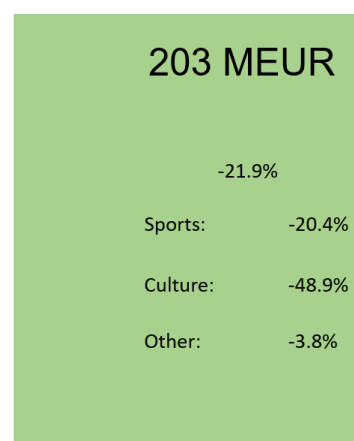
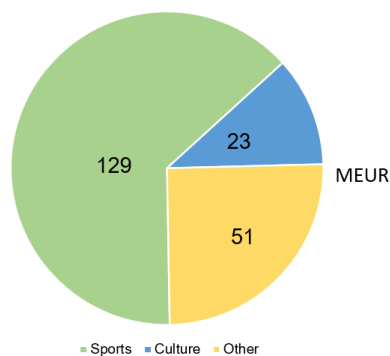


Image 1. Sponsorship spending in Finland (adapted from Sponsor Insight 2021, 5)

According to the same barometer the top 5 motives for companies to engage in sponsorship activities were the following: reinforcing brand/product name, increasing visibility, social responsibility, being linked to the profile/image of a sponsored athlete/event, and access to a specific audience (Sponsor Insight 2021, 17.)

Sports have been the main target of sponsorships in Finland for the last decade and the sports sponsorship spending in Finland has seen steady growth throughout the years till 2020 as shown in figure 3 below (Statista 2021).

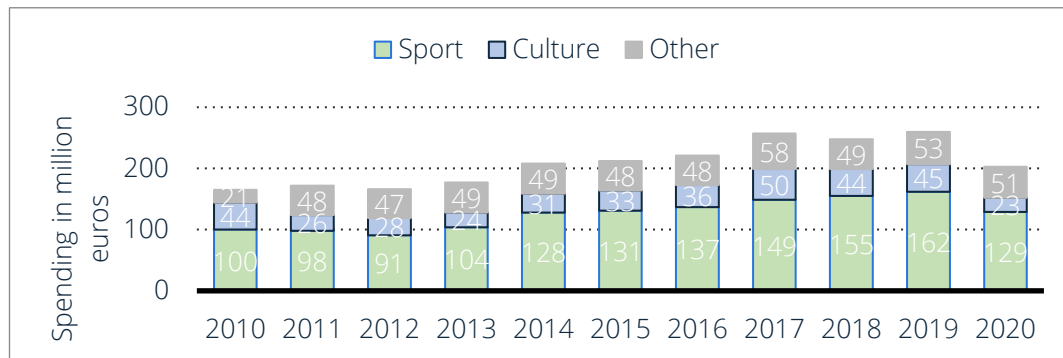


Figure 3. Sponsorship spending in Finland from 2010 to 2020, by type (adapted from Statista 2021)

Figure 3 shows a decline in sports sponsorship spending in 2020, this decline was caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. According to the sponsorship barometer conducted by Sponsor Insight in 2020 sponsorship spending will continue its growth in 2022, 68% of the companies that took part in the barometer will increase their sponsorship spending, 51% will maintain their spending as it is and 9% will decrease their sponsorship spending in 2022. (Sponsorship Insight 2021, 12.)

2.3.2 Sports sponsorship from Company's viewpoint

There are multiple reasons for companies to start practicing sports sponsorships. Some companies aim to engage with ideal consumers with the help of sponsorships and other companies use sponsorship to improve their relationship with the public in general. (Irwin & al. 2008, 163.)

Companies do not set their sights on becoming sponsors for athletes because they see them as an act of goodwill but instead, they see sports sponsorships as an investment that can benefit them in the future. Better recognition, increased sales and leads, enhanced reputation, and content for social media marketing are things that companies expect to receive through sponsorships. (Baylis 2021b.)

Irwin & al. (2008, 164) divide sports sponsors' sponsorship objectives into two dimensions, corporation-related objectives, and product- or brand-related objectives as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Common sport sponsorship objectives (adapted from Irwin & al. 2008, 164)

Corporation-Related Objectives	Product- or Brand-Related Objectives
Creating and growing public awareness.	Expand recognition on a target market.
Reinforce the image of the company.	Improve positioning on a target market.
Modify public opinions.	Block competitors.
Improve local relations.	Hike sales & market share.
New business opportunities.	
Increase the motivation of staff.	

Creating and growing public awareness around a sponsor and its products/brand is the first objective of **corporation-related sponsorship objectives**. When the goal is to create or grow public awareness around a business, sports can be used as an efficient tool of communication. A sports property that is well-known to the public can draw in masses of attention. **Reinforcing the image of the company** refers to every business wanting to pose a specific image to different audiences such as customers or shareholders. The image of a business can be reinforced when the business is sponsoring a sponsee that has a positive image, and this image is associated with the business because of their sponsorship cooperation. **Modifying public opinions**, when an ideal consumer is being exposed to a specific brand during specific events the consumer may start to see an association between the event and the brand and change his/her thoughts of the brand. **Improving local relations** can be done by sponsoring a local sports property such as an athlete. Sponsoring a local athlete sends the public a message that the business cares about the local community. **Increasing employee motivation and relation**, if a business manages to sponsor a sponsee that the employees of the business are interested in it can boost the motivation of the employees. (Irwin & al. 2008, 164-167.)

Product- and brand-related sponsorship objectives start with **expanding recognition on a target market** which comes down to choosing the right sport and/or athlete to sponsor. The chosen sport and/or the athlete must be able to resonate to the audiences of the market to expand recognition. **Improving positioning on a target market**, businesses have shifted their approaches to entering new markets, specific small groups are targeted with targeted with marketing efforts when trying to enter a market. Sports sponsorship is an ideal method for communication meant for small specific groups as long as the right sponsee is being sponsored that resonates within the market. **Hiking sales and market**

share on a target market, a right kind of sponsee can increase the sales of a business as the fans of the sponsee are likely to buy products associated with the sponsee. **Blocking competitors**, successful use of sponsorship as a promotional method can give a business an edge against their competitors as competitors cannot have an identical sponsorship. (Irwin & al. 2008, 167-169.)

2.3.3 Who do companies sponsor?

Companies get piles of sponsorship requests, and it takes some thinking and smart decision-making to choose whom to sponsor. Some companies want to be a part of big sponsorship projects and some smaller. Some are looking for national and international visibility through sponsorship and some are after local visibility. Some want to make long-lasting cooperation and for some, one year for cooperation is enough. Youth sports are the target for some companies, and some are only interested in professional sports. Sports that are seen as dangerous are ideal for certain companies and other companies only sponsor individual sports or team sports. Many variables have an effect on choosing whom to sponsor in every company. (Alaja 2001, 26.) Alaja (2001, 27-28) has developed a set of arguments for the selection process which are listed down below, if a sponsee is able to fulfill many of the requirements set by the arguments the more fitting the sponsee will be:

Operational principles: What kind of coverage is the sponsor looking to get? National, international, or local? Does the sponsee provide coverage for the wanted sector? How many sponsees is the sponsor looking for? One major sponsee or numerous smaller sponsees? What kind of a risks can be associated with the sponsee(s)? Is there a possibility for doping or violence, can these risks be contained? Risks related to the sport: doping risks and risks for violence. What type of length is the sponsor planning for their sponsorship; short or long, temporary, or fixed term? What level of sports should the sponsee represent; professional sports, youth sports, hobby sports, or disable sports? **Image connection:** If there is a connection between the images of a sponsor and their products and a possible sponsee it is a good base for sponsorship. For example, a professional boxer can have a good image connection with a company that produces and sells boxing gloves. **Consistency of target groups:** The better the target groups of the sponsor and sponsee meet on values, demographic factors, and socioeconomic features the better the base for sponsorship. **Social acceptability:** It is an absolute must for the sponsee to fill out standards of social acceptability, the side effects of sports such as the use of doping force companies to follow strict ethical guidelines when choosing a sponsee. **Probability of success:** Many companies want to sponsor winners, but the concept of winning has changed. Companies are looking to sponsor individuals that can win and practice wholesome and ethical sports. **Sponsees' features:** Does the sponsee have ideal features for

the sponsor? These features include fame, image, media coverage, popularity, previous references, ability to co-operate, possibilities for development, distinctiveness, and the ability to stand out from the competition. **Possibilities for sponsorship:** What can the sponsee offer for the sponsor: Standing out from others seeking sponsorship is crucial. **Contract technical manners:** Different things may form obstacles for closing a sponsorship deal such as ethical sections, the length of a contract, or renewal options of the contract. Alaja (2001, 27-28.)

2.3.4 Sports sponsorship from athletes' viewpoint

An athlete needs to find sponsors, one of the simplest reasons for this is the fact that practicing sports and competing on a professional level is quite expensive. Usually, every competition and training camp costs money, not to mention the travel, accommodation, nutrition, and other costs. To make financial matters even worse, it may be that a winning athlete does not even get paid for winning a competition. (Gabriel 28 December 2018b.)

Often on the athletes' part, the pros of having a sponsor are seen as funding which allows athletes to dedicate their time to practice their sport. Additional funding however is not the only benefit athletes can receive through sponsorship. Sponsorship can allow athletes to take part in more competitions and reach their goals. Moreover, athletes can receive access to better training facilities and training equipment through sponsorship. Athletes are prone to get injured during their careers, sponsorship can provide athletes with medical services. Lastly, once athletes have one sponsor, they can improve themselves in their sport and take part in more and possibly bigger events. Performing well in a major event can lead to the opportunity of obtaining additional sponsors. (Baylis 2021c.)

In figure 4 below the benefits of sponsorship for the sponsee are summarized. A sponsee receives financial or another type of compensation from a sponsor and in return, the sponsee provides the sponsor with intangible compensations such as their image or networks. (Valanko 2009,189.)

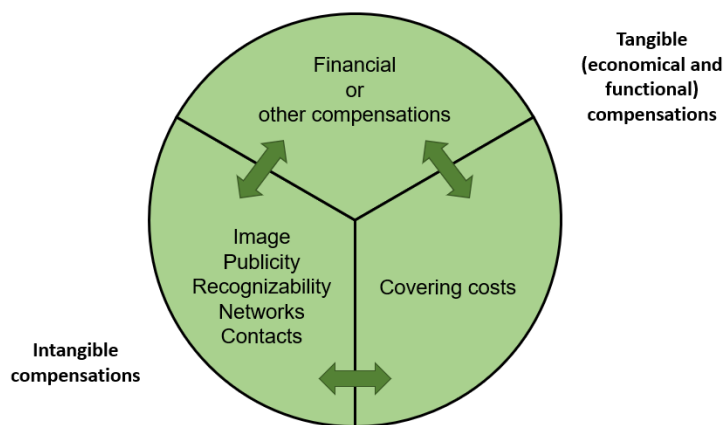


Figure 4. Benefits of sponsorship for sponsee (adapted from Valanko 2009, 189)

There is not a single specific form of sponsorship that is being practiced between companies and athletes. Sponsorship between a sponsoring company and an athlete can occur in the form of financial support which means a sponsee is provided with additional funding. Product support refers to a sponsee receiving training gear and equipment or sports supplements from his/her sponsor. Service supports consist of external services a sponsee may get through sponsorship such as private medical services. Affiliate support takes place when a sponsee gets paid for promoting the content of the sponsor's products on social media. Lastly when a sponsor pays a sponsee to use his/her name and image/brand to promote the sponsor and/or their products the sponsee is called an ambassador. (Baylis 2021c.)

2.3.5 Sponsorship activities

What are some of the typical activities that athletes may be requested to do by a sponsoring company? The activities can be very different and unique, and they always depend on the individual athlete. Wearing and promoting the sponsor's products, promoting the sponsor and/or their products on social media, appearing on the sponsor's social media platforms, appearing, and promoting the sponsor and/or their products in events. (Baylis 2021c.) Often in combat sports events, one can see company logos embroidered into the athletes' athletic wear and equipment and companies' logos and ads playing on screens in the arenas. Ekqvist (2014) explains that athletes can appear on television or radio, printed and digital advertising, networking events and seminars, and club or federation activities on behalf of or with the sponsor.

2.3.6 Sponsorship contracts

The contract between a sponsor and sponsee is the foundation of sponsorship. In the contract every obligation and right to something that binds these two parties are listed. From the sponsor's perspective marketing activities and marketing communicational rights are listed and from the sponsee's perspective, the financial or material aid(s) are listed on the contract. (Alaja & Forssell 2004, 24-25.)

According to Alaja (2001, 87), every single negotiated thing that is relevant to a sponsorship agreement should be stated in the sponsorship contract. A good sponsorship contract should include: the parties, the purpose, the duration, and the roles and the rights of the parties. As well as possible doping clause, method for solving conflicts, in case of financial support, the amounts and lastly the date and signatures. (Alaja 2001, 87.)

2.3.7 Risks in sponsorships

One of the reasons why companies engage in sponsorships is that they want to be associated with a certain athlete. There is always a risk when a sponsor ties a brand/company name to an individual. A sponsored athlete that ends up in a scandal of some sort can cause consumers to debate whether they should support the companies associated with the athlete. (Optimy 2019.) The international news organization, Reuters released an article in 2009 with the title "Tiger Woods scandal cost shareholders up to \$12 billion". It is said in the article that the shareholders of Tiger Woods' sponsors lost on estimate \$5 to \$12 billion due to Tiger Woods' sex scandal. (Reuters 2009.)

2.4 Sponsorship in combat sports

Combat sports carry the same sponsorship opportunities as other sports for both sponsors and sponsees. Combat sports offer many different sponsoring opportunities from sponsoring super star combat athletes competing in the big arenas at the highest level to sponsoring the operation of a local combat sports club. Companies can opt to sponsor an individual combat sports athlete, a combat sports club, a combat sports association, or a combat sports event such as a competition or training camp. The latter paragraphs of this chapter contain examples of different sponsorship cases in combat sports.

UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) is an MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) organization and the world's largest pay-per-view provider (UFC 2021). According to Gross (2019), UFC has been sponsored by Monster Energy for a long period. Monster Energy has the sole right to have their logo shown on the middle of the floor of the fighting area. Monster Energy pays between \$9 and \$10 million annually for the sponsorship deal with UFC.

Adidas, the world's second-largest sportswear manufacturer and one of the most well-known sports brands (Downes 2021) sponsors many international combat sports federations, such as International Judo Federation (IJF), European Judo Union (EJU), World Karate Federation (WKF), World Taekwondo Federation (WTF), International Taekwondo Federation (ITF). Adidas provides the federations and the athletes under the federations with training equipment and apparel. (Adidas Combat Sports 2021.)

Anthony Joshua, a professional British boxer was ranked 57th place in Forbes' 2020 celebrity 100 earnings. According to Forbes, Anthony Joshua is sponsored by Under Armour, Jaguar Land Rover, Beats, Sky Sports, and Hugo Boss. (Forbes 2020.) Christou (2018) estimates that the sponsorship deal with Jaguar Land Rover nets Joshua with \$1 million annually.

Finnish professional wrestler, Elias Kuosmanen is sponsored by Lidl Suomi, a supermarket chain that has operated in Finland since 2002 (Lidl Suomi 2021). Kuosmanen is part of Lidl's "All Stars" sponsorship program that supports Kuosmanen and other individual athletes financially, with sports supplements, nutrition counseling, and provides them with a community of individual athletes that give the athletes a sense of belonging to a team. In return, Kuosmanen can be found from pictures and videos on Lidl's social media channels and vice versa. (Lidl Suomi 2019.)

2.5 Obtaining sports sponsorship

Being proactive is a must when an athlete is in search of a sponsor. The search for a sponsor can be a competition as there are not one or two but numerous athletes seeking sponsors. Companies are primarily looking to sponsor athletes that are active and representative. Some things that are worth remembering for athletes when seeking a sponsor: not every company is an ideal fit as a sponsor for them, what are the athlete's values in life and sports, is there a company out there that shares these values? It is also good to remember that some companies are only looking to sponsor a very specific group of athletes. (Gabriel 28 December 2018b.) Both companies and individual athletes can suffer from the issue of finding a suitable partner for sponsorship. It is a common thought to approach companies that already have an active media presence however, it is reasonable to approach companies that are not yet veterans in sponsorship. When thinking about which companies to approach it is good to remember that ideally, the company would share a similar image and values with the athlete as already mentioned before in this thesis. Furthermore, approaching companies that have a positive mindset towards sports can be beneficial. (Alaja 2001, 62.)

Using all possible marketing channels increases the chances of an athlete getting noticed by possible sponsors. Social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, a personal blog, or a personal website are all good channels for an athlete to use to increase his/her visibility. More traditional methods can also be applied, events such as competitions, seminars, and fairs serve as a good platform for an athlete to market his/herself towards sponsors. An athlete may also try to use his/her own sports club or sports federation to get his/her message out, being part of the club's or federation's activity can also be used as a method to attract sponsors. (Ekqvist 2014.)

A sponsee has usually been the one to take the first step and approach a sponsor when seeking sponsors (Alaja 2001, 26). Before approaching any sponsors, an athlete should have an action plan. Many companies receive a lot of contact requests from athletes seeking sponsorships, to be noticed by the companies an athlete must be able to stand out from the crowd. Athletes seeking sponsors should let the company that he/she is contacting know who they are, which sport is the athlete representing, how does the athlete's track record in the represented sport look like and what is the athlete's aiming to accomplish in the future. It is crucial nowadays for athletes to think beforehand about what they can offer a sponsor in return for sponsorship. Increasing the visibility of the sponsor in social media, showcasing the sponsor's logo in the athlete's athletic wear, or working for the sponsor in some forms are all examples of activities that athletes could provide sponsors with. (Athlete Mktg 2019a.)

2.5.1 Role of social media in sponsorship search

Social media is an online platform for conversation, it can be used for making contacts and for creating awareness of a topic. The term "social media" refers to being social over the web. The use of social media comes with many perks, it's free to use, it contains an enormous number of users, it can increase one's visibility, and it makes it easy to engage and network with people. (Coles 2014, 4-5.)

Social media has gotten huge, there are over 3.8 billion active users of social media worldwide and ordinary people spend more than two hours on social media every day and have nine or more social media accounts. (Statusbrew 2021).

For athletes to make themselves more attractive towards sponsors and increase the chances of obtaining a sponsorship deal they should try and build an audience and name for themselves on social media (Gabriel 28 December 2018b). An article "Social Media for Athletes and Sponsorship" published in 2019 by Athlete Mktg agrees with Gabriel by stating that having an already built audience in social media can make an athlete stand out

from the numerous applications for sponsorship that sponsors receive. The article also highlights the usefulness of tools provided by social media that athletes can use to build this audience. (Athlete Mktg 2019b.)

In 2014 a total of 23 companies that sponsored combat sports athletes were asked “what are the three best things a fighter can do to get your attention?” Having a large social media fan base and engaging with one’s fans on social media were among the top of the list of replies from each company. (Vazquez 2014.) A similar study was held in 2018, Warrior Collective interviewed some of the top combat sports brands and athletes to find out what kind of combat sports athletes are companies looking to sponsor. All four of the interviewed companies mentioned that a large coverage and following in social media are big perks for a combat sports athlete looking to be sponsored. (Stuart 2018.)

Sirpa Tuomi, the marketing director of Neste, a Finnish oil refining and marketing company highlights the importance of athletes’ social media when seeking sponsorship in an article published by YLE in 2017. Tuomi gives three things that athletes aspiring to be sponsored must be able to check. The first thing is that athletes must have their social media channels in good shape. Not having social media channels or not posting content are both very big roadblocks for an athlete looking to be sponsored. The second thing is that athletes have to be willing to share their backgrounds and daily lives and create genuine and interesting content for their fans. Lastly, the coverage and following of the athletes’ social media. It is important that athletes have a versatile audience as that they are eager to create content for. (Kössö 2017.)

Lepistö (2020, 175) argues that modern-day athletes that are not willing to be active on social media run the risk of significantly diminishing their opportunities on obtaining certain partnerships. Lepistö further argues that the use of social media is such a significant concept that it is practically part of the job of being a professional athlete. Lepistö also describes social media as a key platform for utilizing sponsorships. (Lepistö 2020, 175.)

2.5.2 Social media platforms

Facebook was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook allows users to share ideas, opinions photos, and videos on the platform (Forbes 2021). According to Statista (2021), Facebook has 2.89 billion monthly active users which makes it the world’s largest social media platform. Personal pages and fan pages or in this case “athlete pages” can be created on Facebook. An athlete page allows athletes to separate their private and public information, the page also offers a great platform for building a fan base and engag-

ing with them. Furthermore, personal Facebook pages are not indexed into search engines, but athlete pages are which makes it easier for people to find them. (International Paralympic Committee 2014.) Content-wise Facebook recommends athletes to create behind-the-scenes material, videos, and Q&A sessions (Facebook 2015). 77% of Facebook users are aged between 34-49 which makes it an ideal platform for engaging with older people (Statusbrew 2021). Auvinen & Kuuluvainen (2017, 72) also state that Facebook is not popular among the younger people in Finland.

Instagram is a mobile application that can be used for sharing pictures and short videos. The images and videos often have descriptions that include hashtags (keywords) that are used to find content related to the hashtag(s). (Virtanen 2020, 21.) Instagram was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 (Instagram 2021). Instagram has over one billion monthly active users which makes it the third biggest social media platform in the world (Suciu 2019). 58% of Instagram users say their interest in a brand or product has peaked after seeing it on an Instagram story. 67% of Instagram's users are aged between 18 and 29 which makes it an ideal platform to engage with the younger population Instagram stories, reels, and carousel posts tend to get the most attention. (Statusbrew 2021.) Eagle (2019) recommends athletes to use Instagram to increase their overall visibility and make themselves more attractive to sponsors by creating authentic and visual content in the form of images videos, and Instagram stories.

Twitter was established in 2006 since its launch over 1.3 billion accounts have been created. In 2021 Twitter had 353 million monthly active users. (Statusbrew 2021.) Images and videos can be posted on Twitter, but the platform is heavily focused on text-based content or "tweets". The length of a tweet is limited to 240 characters. (Virtanen 2020, 31.) Because the nature of Twitter and tweets is intimate and interactive it offers athletes an effective platform to build an audience and attract sponsors effectively in the form of making and reacting to tweets (Pegoraro & Jinnah 2012, 86 & 94).

LinkedIn is the biggest professional network platform in the world, the platform has 774 million members from over 200 countries (LinkedIn 2021). LinkedIn was built for people to network with other people that share their ideologies (Coles 2014, 53). LinkedIn is filled with decision-makers of countless companies and as the service is built for networking it serves as a great platform for athletes to increase their visibility and engage with possible sponsors (Athlete Mktg 2019c).

YouTube is the second-largest search engine in the world, 2.2 billion people use YouTube every month, and more than one billion hours of YouTube content is being consumed every day. YouTube users represent all age groups evenly. (Statusbrew 2021.) YouTube serves as a good platform for athletes to share videos of giving people training tips, teaching techniques of their sport, showcasing their life as an athlete or making products reviews related to their sport, the options are limitless. (Baylis 2021c). According to Shalavi & Thomson (2019), the searches of “how-to sports” on YouTube more than doubled between 2016 and 2017.

TikTok is an application for creating and sharing short videos (Hermann 2019). The application was originally established in 2014 under the name Musical.ly. In 2016 another version of the application called “Douyin” was introduced on the Chinese market by Bytedance, a Chinese technology company. “Douyin” was presented to the rest of the world in 2017 under the name “TikTok”. 800 million users are using TikTok globally and the application has been named the fastest growing social media platform ever. TikTok is a good platform to engage with younger generations as the biggest user group is formed by teenagers. (Battisby 2020.) TikTok offers athletes a platform that makes it possible for their content to go viral, the platform is especially good for athletes to create content on that practice a sport that is not televised (Large 5 November 2020).

Snapchat is a mobile messaging app that was established in 2011. Users of Snapchat can send text, image, or video messages to other users; the recipients of the messages are only able to see the messages for a short while before the messages disappear forever. Snapchat users can also post “snap stories” which can be seen by followers for 24 hours before they disappear. (Bernazzani 2019.) According to Statista (2021), Snapchat had 293 million daily active users in the second quarter of 2021. Snapchat stories provide a good platform for athletes for posting an image or video content of their daily lives or training sessions for their followers. Snapchat stories can even be reflected to sports events, a certain moment during a competition can be significant in the moment but forgotten soon, Snapchat stories can evoke the same feeling in fans. (Billings, Qiao, Conlin & Nie 2015, 14-15.)

Personal website can be used as a platform for creating and sharing genuine and authentic content by athletes. Athletes can use their website to show followers their points of interest inside and outside of sports, and their personalities. The content that athletes create on other platforms such as social media can be twisted by others, but a personal web-

site gives athletes the possibility to act as a direct source for communication. Lastly, athletes can use their website to show their digital marketing abilities which can be appreciated by possible sponsors. (Lemmons 2021a.)

2.5.3 Social media content

Content for social media should be created in a unique way by every athlete and content should be made frequently instead of creating content every now and then. Athletes can use social media content to communicate their values to their audiences which makes it important for athletes to think about what kind of values they want to represent and what they want to communicate to their followers. One athlete may want to communicate about and promote a healthy lifestyle and another athlete might want to communicate about equality or environmental protection. Athletes have to decide if they are willing to give up their privacy and how much of their personal lives, they are willing to share. Allowing people to take a peek into athletes' private lives on social media tends to increase the interest in the athletes. Due to the busy schedule of many athletes, it can be beneficial for athletes to plan and create content for longer periods at a time. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 71-72.)

There is a limitless number of options for athletes to choose from when they are thinking about what to post on social media. Fitting content for athletes can consist of feelings during and after practice and competitions, guidance for nutrition and training, behind-the-scenes material, and Q&A sessions. The content should be genuine and come directly from the athletes themselves. It is also good to remember that different social media platforms inhabit different target groups. As mentioned earlier in this thesis Instagram and Snapchat have been popular among the younger generation in contrast to Facebook and Twitter which are used by older people. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 71-72.)

There are things that athletes should not post on social media. Content that is in one way or another sexist or racist, content that can misinterpret such as political or religious opinions, or personal content that can communicate an unwanted message such as pictures of drinking or smoking should not be posted. (Lemmons 2021b.)

2.5.4 Using athlete branding to attract sponsors

There are many ways to describe the term "brand". American Marketing Association has given brands the following description: "*A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other seller*" (Eagle, Czarnecka, Dahl & Lloyd 2021, 144). In sports, the definition of a brand is almost the

same except the word “seller” at the end of the definition is replaced with the word “sports organization” (Arai, Ko & Ross 2014). The concept of brands has changed, in the modern world brands come in many different forms and everything between high-end products and individual people can be a brand (Eagle & al. 2021, 144). Brands in sports cover individual athletes as they have a name, personality, and peculiar appearance (Arai & al. 2014). Athlete branding is branding that is focused on an individual athlete, at its core the idea is to communicate an individual athlete’s values that are based on their personality, background, position, and actions to a big audience. In other words, athlete branding can be seen as the use of different communication channels to reinforce the image of an individual’s characteristics that make him/her stand out from others. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 56.) Makwan Amirkhani, a Finnish MMA athlete offers a great example of a working athlete brand of a Finnish combat sports athlete. Huawei Finland named Amirkhani as their brand ambassador for “Honor” which is a sister brand of Huawei. According to the Head of marketing and communications of Huawei Finland it is important that their target groups can relate to their brand marketing. Amirkhani was chosen as the brand ambassador because he was seen as a suitable person to bring out the ideology of the brand and he represented mutual values with the brand. (Kauppalehti 2016.)

Auvinen & Kuuluvainen (2017, 67-71) explain that for building an athlete brand the **MABI model** (model of athlete brand image) can be used. Athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle are the three core factors that MABI consists of. The three core factors in turn are shaped by 10 sub-factors.

Athletic performance consists of the following sub-factors: Athletic expertise which refers to an athlete’s track record in the represented sport and the level of skills shown by the athlete in the respected sport. Athletic expertise are important factors that can make an athlete stand out from others and create awareness around the athlete. *Competition style* is the second sub-factor, and it covers an athlete’s style and performance in competitions. Some athletes’ have an aggressive competition style, and some are more relaxed. Competition style can be seen as an athlete’s brand message to consumers. The third sub-factor is *sportsmanship* which refers to an athlete’s behavior on and off sports. The ideologies of fair play and respect in sports are part of this sub-factor. Not promoting good sportsmanship can have severe negative factors on an athlete’s brand. *Rivalry*, the fourth and last sub-factor of athletic performance classify an athlete’s relationship with competitors. In combat sports, rivalry can be used to promote head-to-head competitions between athletes.

Attractive appearance refers to the appearance of an athlete. Athletes' bodies are often seen to represent good physical condition and athleticism. The appearance is also reflected in thoughts of determination and self-discipline which are often appreciated by consumers. An athlete's appearance plays role in the athlete's marketing efforts. *Features* are a sub-factor of attractive appearance, features of an athlete can make the public recognize the athlete easier. A specific hairstyle, tattoos, or being fashionable are examples of athletes' features. *Physical features* of an athlete are another sub-factor of attractive appearance. Physical features consist of athletes' physical qualifications, body language, and facial expressions.

Marketable lifestyle covers the following sub-factors that are related to athletes' lives outside of sports: *Life story* refers to the path an athlete has followed during his/her sports career. Values represented by an athlete can have connections to the chosen path. The life story is often a part of an athlete's brand message. Singular events of the life story may have a significant effect on the value of an athlete's brand. Events related to social responsibility and charitable causes are useful to use when building an athlete brand. The second sub-factor of marketable lifestyle is *role model*. In this context, role model refers to the ethical behavior of athletes. The public expects athletes to promote social responsibility, good behavior and to practice social norms. Athletes are trusted to act as role models for other people and if they fail to practice good social norms on or off sports, they are often more hardly judged for it compared to an average person. *Relationship efforts* are the last sub-factor of marketable lifestyle. The way athletes engage with their fans, sponsors, and the media are covered in relationship efforts. Social media has revolutionized athletes' relationship efforts. Athletes have been able to increase the value of their brands by growing their follower base. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 67-71.)

Each athlete's brand is different, and the brand that is being built by an athlete must be genuine (Lepistö 2020, 169).

Current day athletes cannot afford to overlook social media as explained earlier in this thesis. Social media is not directly addressed in the MABI model, but it should be an integrated part of an athlete's brand (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen 2017, 71). Lepistö (2020, 175) also states that social media is one of the core platforms for building an athlete brand.

The first objective of athlete branding is to create awareness, this task is made easier by the fact that sports are always a popular subject in the media and society. Being active towards the media (traditional or social) makes it easier for an athlete to grow his/her fan

base as media will keep the athlete relevant. Increasing the fan base will in return increase the interest of sponsors. (Kuuluvainen 12 July 2018.) Every single athlete can benefit from building an athlete brand in the form of increased partnerships. Different partnerships can provide athletes with financial aid and athletes with strong brands are likely to obtain partnerships more easily. (Lepistö 2020, 169.) Kuuluvainen (12 July 2018) states that an interesting and visible athlete is often seen as a more potent candidate for sponsorship collaboration. Kaminski (2020) explains that once an athlete has developed a personal brand, it is not only easier for companies to identify the athlete but also to see if the athlete's values and motivations are aligned with the company's set of values and motivations.

3 Research Methodology

This chapter explains the research design and the process of the research. In the sub-chapters, the data gathering methods, utilization of data, data analysis methods, and lastly the reliability and validity of the research are covered.

3.1 Research design

There are multiple ways to conduct a research study, one study can be based on interviews and another on surveys. Obtaining one specific research objective can mean conducting countless interviews while another objective can be obtained with simple research. All forms of research come with their pros and cons and there may be more than one suitable form of research to answer a specific research problem. A research design is used to successfully develop research. Research design is like a map that guides the researcher through research and points out the correct methods such as data collection and analysis methods. (Burns, Veeck & Bush 2017, 92.)

A research approach is needed for any research, the two main approaches are quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative research** as the name implies is used to obtain data that can be quantified in numbers. This data can be used to study relationships of different variables. A deductive approach is often used to develop the theory behind quantitative research this way the collected data can be used to test the legitimacy of the theory. Common research methods in quantitative research include surveys and questionnaires, while conducting qualitative research the researcher can opt to use a single or multiple methods to collect data. (Saunders & al. 2016, 165-168.) “How much”, “what proportion”, and “how often” questions can be answered with quantitative research (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011, 16). **Qualitative research** opposite to quantitative research is not focused on numbers but on words and/or images. Commonly an inductive approach is used to develop the theory of qualitative research, but it is not completely uncommon for a deductive approach to be used instead of it. Interviews are used as a data collection method in qualitative research to study the meaning that the research topic has for the participants of the study or the relationship that the participants have with the topic. Similar to quantitative research a single or multiple data collection methods can also be used in qualitative research. (Saunders & al. 2016, 165 & 168-169.) “How” and/or “why” questions can be answered through qualitative research (Hennink & al. 2011, 16).

Table 3. Key differences between qualitative and quantitative research (adapted from Hennink & al. 2011, 16)

	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Objective	Achieving an understanding of hidden motivations, reasons, and beliefs	Quantifying data and deducing results to a large amount of people.
Purpose	Answering to questions such as: Why? How? What is the process?	Counting, measuring, quantifying an issue. Answering “how much” and/or “how often” questions.
Data	Data is in the form of words.	Data is numerical.
Study population	Only a few hand-picked participants.	Broad sample size of exemplary cases.
Data collection methods	In-depth interviews, observation, group discussions.	Surveys and polls.
Analysis	Interpretive analysis.	Statistical analysis.
Outcome	Establishing a fundamental understanding, to identify and explain activity, behavior or beliefs.	Identifying averages and patterns in data. Deducing results to a large amount of people.

The research of this thesis was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, Finnish combat sports athletes were interviewed. During the second phase foreign combat sports athletes were interviewed and lastly, in phase three sponsoring companies were interviewed. After the interviews were held, the interview results of Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes were analyzed with the use of comparative analysis. The comparative analysis was followed by a qualitative thematic analysis of the results of all interview groups. The results of the analysis were used to answer the RQ and the IQs of this thesis. The phases of this research and the ties of the phases to the IQs of this thesis can be seen in figure 5 below.

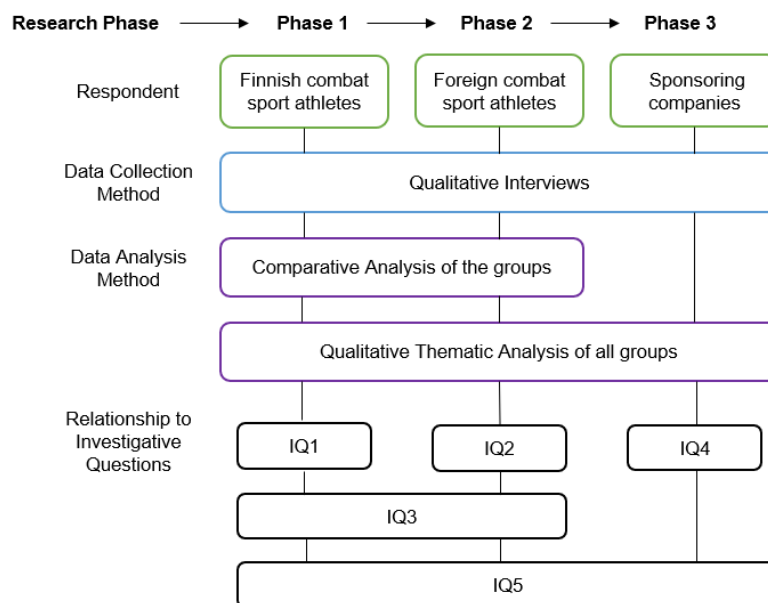


Figure 5. Research design

The research method used in this thesis for answering the RQ and the IQs was qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews were chosen as a research method as unique data on how Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes had acquired sponsors in the past and what actions had taken place and why they had taken place within the process of acquiring a sponsor were needed to answer the RQ and IQs of this thesis.

3.2 Data collection

The data for this research was collected with the use of semi-structured interviews as it was the most suitable method to acquire the needed data. Qualitative data was needed instead of quantitative data so structured interviews did not fit the purpose of the research. The use of in-depth interviews could have been a possibility but the use of themes and key questions that semi-structured interviews offer was seen as a more ideal approach for the data collection process and for a first-time interviewer.

Structured interviews are carried out with the use of questionnaires, each questionnaire includes the exact same questions. The questions of a structured interview questionnaire are identically presented to each interviewee and the answers are transcript identically by the interviewer. “Quantitative research interviews” is another term that can be used for structured interviews because the method provides the researcher with data that can be quantified. **Semi-structured interviews** or “qualitative research interviews” are commonly started with a list of themes and some key questions related to the themes of the research. The themes and questions are used as an interview guide by the interviewer during an interview. Semi-structured interviews are somewhat relaxed, the interviewer may leave out a theme or edit a question during an interview. **In-depth interviews** or **unstructured interviews** are informal. Instead of the interviewer following an interview guide the interviewees are allowed to talk openly about the topic of the interview. (Saunders & al. 2019, 437-438.)

As already mentioned the primary data of this research was collected through qualitative (semi-structured) interviews conducted with Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes that were sponsored at the time of the study or had been sponsored in the past. In addition to the athletes, two Finnish companies that sponsored a Finnish combat sports athlete at the time of the study were interviewed. Saunders & al. (2016, 394) state that when the researcher needs multiple or open-ended questions to be answered to collect the data a semi structured interview is a good method. Due to the Coronavirus situation at the time of the study, the interviews were held via Skype and Microsoft Teams video calls, and one interview was carried out via email. Two separate sets of interview questions were used to conduct the interviews, the questions can be found from the appendices (Appendix 2 & 3)

at the end of this thesis. Interviewed combat sports athletes were asked one set of questions (Appendix 2) and interviewed companies were asked another set of questions (Appendix 3).

3.3 Choosing interviewees

Vilkka (2021, chapter 5.2.3) explains that the purpose of the research must be remembered when selecting interviewees. Each research has a unique research problem, the interviewees should be selected based on the knowledge and personal experience they have regarding the research problem.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, unique data on how Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes have acquired sponsors in the past and what actions take place within the process of acquiring a sponsor was needed to answer the RQ and IQs of this thesis. To get the needed data the interviewees had to be combat sports athletes that were sponsored at the time of the study or had been sponsored in the past. Unique data was also needed on the part of sponsoring companies, the interviewed companies had to have experience in sponsoring a Finnish combat sports athlete.

In total six combat sports athletes and two companies that acted as a sponsor for a Finnish combat sports athlete at the time of the study were interviewed. The identity of the interviewed athletes, as well as the interviewed companies, are being kept anonymous as all interviewees were not willing to share their identities. From this point forward the interviewed athletes will be referred to as Athlete A, Athlete B, Athlete C, Athlete D, Athlete E, and athlete F. The interviewed companies will be referred to as Company X and Company Y.

Athlete A is a Finnish national team combat sports athlete. Athlete A was sponsored by four companies at the time of the study.

Athlete B is a Finnish national team combat sports athlete. Athlete B was sponsored by three companies at the time of the study.

Athlete C is a Finnish national team combat sports athlete. Athlete C was sponsored by seven companies at the time of the study.

Athlete D is an ex-Italian national team combat sports athlete. Athlete D was sponsored by six companies during his active sports career.

Athlete E is a Gambian national team combat sports athlete. Athlete E was sponsored by three companies at the time of the study.

Athlete F is a Dutch national team combat sports athlete. Athlete F was sponsored by one company at the time of the study.

Company X operates in the Finnish gym industry. The company provides its customer with fitness services that include personal training and nutrition coaching. The CEO of the company was interviewed for this research.

Company Y operates in the Finnish moving and logistics industry. One of the owners of the company who also is responsible for sports-related partnerships such as sponsorships was interviewed.

3.4 Data Analysis

To successfully solve a puzzle the pieces must be put together in a correct way, conducting an analysis on qualitative data has a similar ideology behind it. In this reference, the pieces of the puzzle serve as data, and it is the researcher's job to put the pieces of data together to understand and classify the data. (Saunders & al. 2019, 637.)

In qualitative research, there are two approaches to data analysis which are deductive and inductive. Using a deductive approach means that the data analysis along with the rest of the research design is based on predetermined theory. The inductive approach on the contrary is not based on existing data. The approach starts from data collection and the theory is based on the data that the researcher finds. (Saunders & al. 2016, 569 – 571.)

The processes of collecting and analyzing data in qualitative research are interactive. The analysis of the data does not begin after the needed data is collected but rather it already starts as the data is being collected. The researcher can pick up crucial links, themes, and patterns during data collection because of the interactive nature of data collection and analysis. This allows the researcher to reflect the themes of predetermined data to the collected data and make corrections before collecting more data if corrections are needed. (Saunders & al. 2016, 571.)

For research material to be analyzed it has to be transformed into an analyzable form. When the research material consists of interviews the recordings of the interviews must be transformed into text, this is done by transcribing the material. Transcribing interview

material into text gives the researcher a perception of how much material is needed for the research and makes it easier for the researcher to systematically analyze and classify the data. (Vilkka 2021, chapter 5.4.)

Thematic analysis is an essential form of qualitative data analysis that can be used to systematically analyze data and look for patterns or themes from the data. As explained earlier in this chapter data analysis in qualitative research can be approached inductively or deductively. While following a deductive approach the patterns and/or themes looked for in thematic analysis are based on predetermined theory. While following an inductive approach the themes and/or patterns are determined by the data obtained during data collection. (Saunders & al. 2016, 579.)

The data analysis methods used in this thesis were a comparative analysis between the data received from Finnish combat sports athletes and foreign combat sports athletes. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data received from all interview participants, Finnish combat sports athletes, foreign combat sports athletes, and sponsoring companies. A deductive approach was used in this thesis as the author had developed the needed knowledge of the topic to carry out the data collection and analysis during the creation of the theoretical framework.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are used to evaluate the quality of research. **Reliability** investigates the consistency of research. Reaching the same results by using the same specific research design multiple times means that the research can be considered reliable. **Validity** as the name suggests determines if the research is valid by the suitability of the used research methods, the truthfulness of the analysis and if the findings can be generalized. (Saunders & al. 2019, 213-214.)

Semi-structured interviews are non-standardized, and they can be seen as threats to the reliability of the research. The reliability in semi-structured interviews is closely associated with different **biases**. **Interviewer bias** refers to the effect that the interviewer's behavior during an interview such as tone of voice or facial expressions may have on the interviewees' answers. An interviewee may have a particular image of the interviewer which can cause **Interviewee** or **response bias**. Interviewee bias may lead to the interviewees not sharing information on a certain topic as they do not feel comfortable sharing the information with the interviewer. **Participation bias** can be caused by the length of an interview, an interviewee may change his/her mind about participating in an interview because

of participation bias. (Saunders & al. 2019, 447-448.) Thoughtfully planning semi-structured interviews can result in high **validity** as the interviewer can go back to a question during an interview to confirm or to ask more details about the question. (Saunders & al. 2019, 451).

A high level of reliability and validity in this thesis were ensured by careful planning and preparation by the author before the interviews. The author had developed a needed level of knowledge of the research topic during the creation of the theoretical framework of this thesis. Interview questions were well thought out and shaped and shared with the interviewees well before the interviews took place to ensure that the interviewees were prepared for the interviews. The relation of the interview questions to the theoretical framework can be found in the overlay matrix (appendix 1). The coronavirus set limitations on choosing the interview location, but the obstacle was overcome with the use of Skype and Microsoft Teams. The possibility of the author's presence causing a bias was neutralized by the author's calm behavior during the interviews.

4 Qualitative interview results

Chapter 4 addresses the collected data and the results of the qualitative interviews. The data was collected from three Finnish (athletes A, B & C), one Gambian (athlete D), one Italian (athlete E), and one Dutch (athlete F) national team combat sports athletes. All interviewed athletes were sponsored at the time of the interviews or had been sponsored in the past. In addition to interviewing athletes, two Finnish companies that sponsored a Finnish combat sports athlete at the time of the interviews were interviewed. After each interview, the interview data was transcribed to better study the data. Once all interviews were carried out and the interview data was transcribed a comparative analysis between the data received from Finnish combat sports athletes and foreign combat sports athletes was conducted. The comparative analysis was followed by a thematic analysis that was applied to interview data received from all interview participants.

4.1 Interview results of Finnish combat sports athletes

Topic questions

All interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes stated that the support they were receiving at the time of the interview and had received in the past through sponsorships was and had been crucial for their sports careers. Sponsorship had allowed them to fully focus on training and they had been able to participate in competitions and training camps both nationally and internationally without constant stress over their financial situations.

All interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes had received different types of support from their sponsors. The mutual modes of support for them were financial support and free access to training facilities and guided training. Furthermore, athletes A and B had received free athletic wear. Lastly, athletes B and C both had received free supplements.

The mutual way of repaying for sponsorship support among the interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes had been done by organizing training related to their sport for different stakeholders such as employees of a sponsoring company or customers of a sponsoring company. All interviewed athletes had also showcased the logos of their sponsoring companies on their athletic wear and their social media accounts and brought up the companies in the descriptions of their social media content. The athletes stated that they would be willing to do more in return for the support they have received from their sponsor as they have not wanted handouts. Athlete A stated that many companies are very lazy when it comes to asking the athlete to do something in return for the sponsorship.

When the athletes were asked why they thought that companies had started to sponsor them specifically the answers were mixed. Having a good track record in the represented sport, being open and honest, doing things in a genuine way and not copying others were mutual answers given by the interviewees. Moreover, standing out from the crowd, creating an image around oneself that shows the person's personality and not only the sports side of things were mutual comments. In addition to the previously mentioned, athlete A emphasized having a clear concept of what an athlete can offer companies as one of the key things.

The responses on how companies had benefited from sponsoring the interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes included increased and positive visibility and positive effects on the sponsors' public images. Athlete B believed that the image of one of her sponsoring companies had improved not only in the eyes of the public but also in the eyes of the employees of the company as they had seen that the company sponsored a promising young athlete.

All interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes were experienced in sponsorship and they had had multiple sponsors throughout their careers. It was stated by the interviewees that each sponsorship is always unique, and the contract lengths can vary from one year to a non-fixed term. According to the interviewees, the most common contract length for them however had been one year with a possibility to renew the contract. The agreeing parties, length of the contract, type of support, in case of financial support the amount, what the athlete is required to do in return, what the athlete is not allowed to do for example wear athleticwear of another brand, and terms for contract termination are usually included in sponsorship contracts according to the interviewees. Athlete A added that a clause about doping is often part of the contract, the clause states that the athlete is not allowed to use forbidden substances and if the athlete gets caught using one all the monetary support must be returned to the sponsor.

Core questions

Using social media marketing by creating content related to their sports careers and daily lives was the mutual answer from all interviewed athletes when asked what kind of marketing activities they had used to attract sponsors. Athlete B mentioned that creating a clear concept of what an athlete can offer a sponsor in return for sponsorship and approaching sponsors with emails built on the concept is also a useful marketing method. Athlete C highlighted the importance of using traditional methods and approaching possible sponsors in physical events such as competitions and having an honest conversation

with them about sponsorship possibilities. Athlete A believed that it is useful to do collaborations with content creators by visiting a podcast or being part of a YouTube video on someone else's channel that has a fitting audience.

Personal websites and various social media channels were the main platforms used by all Finnish interviewees for marketing activities. Facebook and Instagram were used actively to search for sponsors by all interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes. In addition to Instagram and Facebook athlete A also created content on TikTok. Athlete A commented TikTok saying that it will be the next big platform for athletes to get visibility on and encouraged athletes to start creating content on the platform.

The interviewed athletes had different opinions about different platforms. Personal website was believed to be good for having information about the athlete and his/her sports career all under one page by athlete A. Athlete A further explained that even though having a personal website can be useful it is not a must to have one in the modern world. Athlete B had stopped updating her website in 2020, she clarified that the personal website had been useful before the growth of social media but in the current world social media platforms have driven past personal websites. Athlete C believed that having a personal website is a better option for him than having an athlete page on Facebook as he can give the audience a wider perspective of himself on the website.

For posting content about my sports career, I use Facebook and Instagram. I'm more active on Instagram and I post not only sport-related content there but also content about my everyday life. For me, Facebook acts as a platform for more formal content. I have an athlete page on Facebook I created it so people can just effortlessly click "follow" to follow updates regarding my sports career. In my opinion older people usually use Facebook which is a good thing when seeking sponsors as they often form the ideal target group when the goal is to obtain a sponsor. -Athlete B.

I have an athlete page on Facebook, and I use that page to post content only related to my sports career. I post more thorough content on Facebook, for example, a complete recap of my day during a competition for contrast on Instagram I might just post a picture from the podium. For me, Facebook has been more valuable when it comes to sponsorships and other collaborations, and I think it's because the audience on Facebook is generally older than for example on Instagram. -Athlete A.

I post content on Facebook and Instagram although I'm more active on Instagram. I don't have a separate athlete page on Facebook, and I prefer to keep it that way. I

like the idea of being able to post content about my sports career and my life outside of sports on the same account, I think this way I can also offer people a more genuine picture of myself and make them realize that there is more to me than just sports. -Athlete C.

What came to social media content all the interviewed athletes emphasized the importance of being active in social media, posting regularly, and creating content around the athlete's sports career and personal life that is honest and genuine.

*Athletes should post content on both Facebook and Instagram and especially on Instagram that ordinary people can't comprehend. A couple of years ago I posted content about me losing weight for a competition its normal for other people doing combat sports to see someone wear 10 layers of clothing to sweat more but for my other followers it was **bizarre**, and they were very interested in it. Usually, **content that is very closely tied to my sport gets a lot of attention**. Also, content about my physique training tends to get a lot of visibility as people recognize the activity and can be amazed for example by the weights that I'm lifting. In a nutshell, **I think the best content is something that people can relate to or content that is strange and unknown for**. Creating and sharing content that opens the sport for people that don't know the sport is usually good. What else comes to content creation and posting social media I think it should be continuous and active so you could show that you're serious about it. The content should also be **genuine and authentic**, people can see when the content is done just because you must do it. -Athlete B.*

***I think many combat sports athletes go wrong from the get-go as they think that they are not special in any way.** I have for example posted a video on Instagram when I squat 200 kg, it's not an incredible thing in the combat sports circles but for an "outsider" to see something like this can be an eye-opening experience. **Combat sports athletes should remember when creating content that something normal for them can be extraordinary to someone else.** Instagram stories and Instagram highlights should be used for example doing my-day posts to allow people to have a peek in your daily life. People were very interested in my "my-day" content. **You have to find your own thing and make content out of it.** When creating content, it's important to let people know who you are as an individual and what can you offer. Honesty and being your genuine self are the keys and main things. Don't try to copy others and don't tell everyone that life is always wonderful, and that training is always fun because we all know that it's not always fun to wake up for training. -Athlete A.*

I believe that it is crucial to be active in social media and post frequently to get more visibility. Athletes should create content around their sports careers and at the same

*time let people know who they are as a person and as an athlete. **Letting people know your values and letting companies know who you are and what you can do for them is important**, so they get an idea if it is a profitable move on their part to start sponsoring you. Some companies want to sponsor an athlete for specific reasons, and they may not want visibility in return but being honest and open about yourself are the keys to attracting sponsors, you shouldn't just post the good things about you or focus on letting people know what you can do for them. **Letting the companies know who you are as a person is important because they may not be willing to sponsor someone they don't know**. After all, there is a risk that an individual for example would act foolishly in social media and then get bad publicity for him/herself and the company. -Athlete C.*

Having a large social media following was seen as an important factor when looking for sponsors by all interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes. According to the interviewees, the number of followers is a concrete number that can be leveraged when approaching and talking with possible sponsors. The number can be used to make possible sponsors realize the influence an athlete has on social media and approximately how many people will see the content. *"It can be a condition nowadays to have a certain number of followers to get sponsored in the first place. I remember an article of a track and field athlete who was denied the opportunity of getting sponsored by a certain company because he did not have enough followers on social media."* -Athlete B.

When the interviewees were asked if they believed that social media provides effective platforms for Finnish combat sports athletes to market themselves towards sponsors and make themselves more attractive towards sponsors, they all agreed that it does. Athlete A stated that social media platforms are specifically important for Finnish combat sports athletes as the sports are not that well known in Finland and don't tend to get a lot of visibility in traditional media compared to other sports. Athlete B believed that Facebook provides Finnish combat sports athletes with good tools to market themselves with and Instagram provides good opportunities that can be offered for companies. Athlete C saw social media as an effective marketing platform, but in his opinion, athletes should try to engage in face-to-face conversations with possible sponsors and not only use social media to attract them.

Athlete brand and branding is something that all interviewees had been building intentionally and unintentionally during their careers.

I have been trying to build a brand for myself with the content that I create and post that would send a message to people telling them that I'm a hard-working person

*who does not hide behind excuses. **I believe that having an athlete brand is useful when searching for sponsors as companies can look at you as a brand and think if they want to be associated with the brand or not.*** -Athlete A.

*I think I have been building a brand for myself since the beginning of my career as I try to make people see all sides of me instead of seeing me just as an athlete. **I think an athlete brand that brings out many interesting aspects of an athlete offers the athlete a competitive edge when looking for sponsors.*** -Athlete B.

*I believe an athlete brand is something that develops throughout your sports career, but I do see myself having an athlete brand. I think that when people have discussions about me, they know who I am, they know what I'm like and they see me as an athlete. **I believe that it is easier for people to recognize an athlete with a strong brand and for companies looking to sponsor an athlete it is easier to see if their values are in line with the athlete's values.*** -Athlete C.

Athlete A explained that the same things should be remembered when building an athlete brand as when creating content for social media: being honest and genuine, and bringing up core values. Athlete B agreed with athlete A and emphasized the importance of being oneself and bringing up core strengths and using the strengths as the foundation for the brand. Athlete C stated that it is important to build the brand in a way that it reflects the athlete as a person and his/her values.

The interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes were asked what Finnish combat sports athletes should do to make themselves more attractive and approachable towards sponsors. Athletes A and C emphasized the importance of having properly built Instagram and Facebook accounts. Athletes A and C further explained that if an athlete does not have solid social media accounts, then he/she can almost forget about acquiring a sponsor. Creating and sharing genuine and honest content and posting regularly was brought up by all interviewed athletes. Athlete B stated that athletes should try to bring up other aspects of themselves in addition to sports and make them visible to stand out from others. Athlete B elaborated that as combat sports don't usually have the same visibility as other sports especially in Finland athletes should try to make the companies take interest in them as persons in addition to the sport that they represent and their achievements. *"What athletes do, and who they are as persons should be at the core of their marketing."* - Athlete B. Athletes A and B encouraged athletes to apply for sponsorship programs such as Lidl All Stars, Valio Akatemia, R-team that companies offer for athletes.

According to athlete A Finnish combat sports athletes that are looking to get sponsored should not post drunken party pictures on social media or take strong political stands. Athlete B stated that athletes should not have an arrogant mindset even if they would be the best in the world in their sport when looking for sponsors. Athlete B further explained that athletes should not just ask to be sponsored because they are successful, instead, they should think about what they can offer sponsors in return for sponsorship. Athlete C said that athletes should not underrate themselves, they should be brave when searching and approaching sponsors.

Complementary questions

The interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes were asked if they have had any issues with sponsorship. Athlete A had had situations in which a company representative had engaged in a conversation with athlete A about possible sponsorship cooperation and gotten athlete A's hopes but after that, the representative had taken no action to take the process forward. Athlete B had had issues with one of her sponsors, the leadership in the sponsoring company had changed suddenly during their sponsorship cooperation. After the change of leadership, the length of athlete B's renewed sponsorship contract was changed from four years to one year. Athlete C had never had any issues with sponsorship or sponsors.

As the last question of the interview, the interviewees were asked if they had approached a sponsor or if a sponsoring company have approached them. All of the interviewees had approached sponsors and some sponsors had approached them. The interviewees believed that it is part of athletes' job to approach sponsors.

4.2 Interview results of foreign combat sports athletes

Topic questions

All interviewed foreign combat sports athletes stated that the support they were receiving at the time of the interview and had received in the past through sponsorships was and had been crucial for their sports careers. Sponsorship had allowed them to fully focus on training and they had been able to participate in competitions and training camps both nationally and internationally without constant stress over their financial situations.

I have numerous competitions every year, and the overall costs can go as high as 1000€ per competition. Flight tickets are not cheap and when you are aiming for the Olympics you have to tour around different competitions around the world to collect points to qualify for the Olympic games. Sponsorship has made the touring possible for me. -Athlete D.

The sponsorship support received by foreign combat sports athletes consisted of financial support, supplements, and athletic wear. Athlete D received and had only received financial support from all his sponsors. Athlete E received financial support, free supplements, and free athletic wear. Athlete F only received support in the form of free athletic wear. In return for receiving support from their sponsors, each athlete had done something different. Athlete D had done some work in a sports club as a coach and some basic maintenance work around the gym of the sports club. Athlete E had worn athletic wear from a specific brand and tried out new supplements. Athlete F had sewn the company logo on her athletic wear and promoted the name of the sponsoring company on her social media content.

When the interviewed athletes were asked why they thought companies had started to sponsor them specifically, they all brought up the same thing, having a relationship with the sponsors. The athletes knew the sponsors personally or someone from their inner circle knew or had a personal connection to the sponsors. Athlete E also believed that in addition to having a relationship with sponsor having a good track record in the represented sport had played a role in obtaining sponsors.

None of the athletes believed that their sponsors benefited in any visible way from sponsoring them.

All interviewed athletes had had sponsorship contracts that lasted for a year at a time and after the year the contracts were either renewed or canceled. According to the interviewees the agreeing parties, length of the contract, type of support, amount of money in case of financial support, what the athlete is supposed to do and not allowed to do, terms for termination of the contract are named in sponsorship contracts.

Core questions

Content creation on social media platforms and the use of word of mouth were the main marketing activities that the interviewed foreign athletes had used to attract sponsors. All the interviewed athletes stated that as their sponsors had come from closer circles, they had not put an extreme effort into marketing activities to search for additional sponsors.

All interviewed foreign athletes had used social media as their main marketing platform. Athlete D stated that he had never been very active on social media and that he only used Facebook. Athlete E had used Instagram and Facebook. Athlete F had mainly been using Instagram and Facebook related to her sports career. Athlete F was the only one of the interviewed athletes that had a separate athlete page on Facebook, athletes D and E

posted content of their daily lives and sports career using their personal accounts. None of the interviewed athletes had personal websites.

Content-wise the interviewed athletes created a mixture of content that consisted of text, images, and videos related to their daily lives on and off sports, results of competitions, and feelings during and after competitions or training camps. Athletes D and E stated that the content related directly to the sport they practice and especially to the results of competitions had received more attention from followers. Athlete D had received direct requests for partnerships through content shared on Facebook. Athlete F believed that created content should show an athlete's personality to make people understand what the athlete is like as a person and not just as an athlete. Athlete E emphasized the importance of posting regularly and creating quality content. *"I have learned from following other Italian athletes that practice the same sport as I do that you don't have to be the very best in your sport to create an audience and visibility for yourself if you create quality content."* - Athlete E. Athlete D explained that the content created by an athlete should bring out the athlete's personality, values and beliefs in addition to sports-related things to provide followers a bigger picture of the athlete as a person.

All foreign interviewees believed the number of followers on social media to be important when looking for sponsors. According to athlete F, companies are looking into athletes' social media profiles and the number of followers, and athletes with large social media followings can be seen as a more attractive property for sponsorship by companies. Athlete E explained that the number of followers on social media is a concrete number that an athlete can show to possible sponsors. *"Two of my colleagues from my sports club got a rapid increase of followers after they achieved something big in our sport. One of them won gold in the Olympics and the other one got a silver medal from World Championships. After the number of their followers on social media skyrocketed, both of them started to get a lot more requests for endorsements."* -Athlete E. Athlete D saw the potential of increased visibility through a large following. *"If the goal is to find a sponsor the more people follow an athlete the more visibility the athlete will have. Followers may also share the athlete's content forward which exposes it to even more visibility."* -Athlete D.

When the foreign athletes were asked if they saw social media as an effective platform to use for marketing themselves and attracting sponsors, they all answered that social media is a good stage for combat sports athletes to market themselves and seek sponsors. Athlete E believed that in the modern world social media is the only place where combat sports athletes can get their voice out.

Athlete branding and brand is something that none of the interviewed foreign athletes had tried to build intentionally. Athlete D explained that he has received a lot of comments about the subject saying that it would be very important for him to intentionally start building a brand around himself. Athlete D further explained that as he is a very successful athlete having a brand could create a lot more visibility around him and open new doors for cooperations. Athlete D stated that he had unintentionally already developed an athlete brand on Facebook as most his content was related to his sports career, and he believed that people see him as an athlete. Athlete D also recognized the opportunities an athlete brand can provide for athletes. Athlete D believed it is beneficial for athletes to build an athlete brand when searching for sponsors or other endorsements. Athlete E had generated a habit during his sports career to do everything that could be seen by others in a sportsmanlike and professional manner. At the same time, Athlete E had tried to bring out his personality and do things his way. Athlete F had no experience of athlete branding.

Athletes D and E saw having an athlete brand as a beneficial aspect when an athlete is in search of sponsors. Athlete E believed that having an athlete brand will make it easier for people to approach an athlete. *“When athletes bring themselves up and show people what kind of persons they are in addition to being athletes it can make it easier for people to relate to the athlete.”* – Athlete E.

Not only marketing themselves but marketing and opening the represented sport to the public was suggested by athletes D and E when they were asked what combat sports athletes can do to make themselves more attractive towards sponsors. *“Many people are clueless about combat sports and athletes should bring out the sport itself to make people understand what the sport is all about.”* -Athlete E.

Many individual sports under the umbrella term combat sports can be completely foreign to many people. Some combat sports are not visible in any media and there is no branding done on the sports. It would be important for combat sports athletes to bring up their sport and the rules of the sport to make people realize what the sport is all about. Once people know and understand the sport they will get interested in it and the athletes practicing the sport. Many combat sports are based on old values and the sports are very disciplined and communal, many of the athletes representing the sports share these values. The values are another thing that combat sports athletes should use in their marketing efforts. -Athlete D.

Athlete F recommended combat sports athletes to bring out themselves as persons instead of athletes. Being an athlete is only one aspect of an athlete's personality and persona.

When the interviewed foreign athletes were asked what combat sports athletes should not do when they are seeking sponsors, athlete D stated that athletes should behave professionally and when posting content, commenting on content, or taking a stand it should be done appropriately. Athlete D further explained that when posting content that gets a bad reputation or posting poor comments can put athletes in a bad light and make it harder for them to obtain sponsors. Athlete E argued that strong political opinions should not be promoted as when looking for sponsors the goal is to make people a positive link between the public and an athlete and politics is a topic that can easily split people into groups based on their opinions. Athlete F believed that athletes should not just ask for a handout but instead think of intuitive ways of doing something for a sponsor in return for sponsorship.

Complementary questions

The interviewed foreign combat sports athletes were asked if they had had any issues with sponsorship. None of the interviewees had had any real issues with sponsorship or sponsors.

As the last question of the interview, the athletes were asked if they had approached their sponsors or if sponsors had approached them. Athlete D had approached sponsors during his sports career and some sponsors had approached him and he believed that the process should go both ways. Athlete D further explained that an athlete should put some effort into finding sponsors but if a company wants to sponsor a specific athlete, then the company could make the first move. Athletes E and F also believed that athletes should approach sponsors. Both athletes E and F stated that in the modern world companies should also take responsibility for approaching athletes that they may want to sponsor.

4.3 Comparison of Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes' results

Topic questions

All interviewed Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes stated that the support they were receiving at the time of the interview and had received in the past through sponsorships was and had been crucial for their sports careers. All six interviewed athletes expressed that they would not have been able to develop their sports careers the way that they had without the support of sponsors. Both Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes had received support from their sponsors in more than one way. The interview results showed that the interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes had each received more diverse support than foreign athletes. From the foreign interviewees, athlete D had only re-

ceived financial support, and athlete F had only received free athletic wear. All Finnish interviewees had received at least financial support and access to training facilities and guided training.

Finnish combat sports athletes had seemingly done more in return for their sponsoring companies compared to interviewed foreign athletes. All interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes had held some sort of training related to their sport for different groups such as employees of a sponsoring company or customers of a sponsoring company. In addition to organizing training Finnish interviewees had showcased the logos of their sponsoring companies on their athletic wear and their social media accounts and mentioned the companies in the descriptions of their social media content. The interview results showed that interviewed foreign combat sports athletes had not done so much for their sponsors.

When the athletes were asked why they thought that companies had started to sponsor them specifically Finnish combat sports athletes brought up the following matters: their qualifications and characteristics such as having a good track record in the represented sport, being open and honest, doing things in a genuine way, not copying others, standing out from the crowd, and having an image that shows the person's personality and not only the sports side of things. The qualification of having a good track record in the represented sport was also brought up by athlete E of the foreign athletes. In comparison, foreign athletes stated that the companies had started sponsoring them because of personal relations with the companies.

According to statements by interviewed foreign athletes, they thought that their sponsors had not benefited from sponsoring them in any visible way. Finnish combat sports athletes believed that their sponsors had benefited by receiving an improved public company image and increased positive visibility.

Both Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes had typically had sponsorship contracts that lasted for a year a time. The contracts included the same content for Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes.

Core questions

According to the interview results, content creation on social media channels had been the main marketing activity that Finnish and foreign athletes had used to attract and acquire sponsors. Finnish combat sports athletes seemed to have been a lot more active with their marketing efforts compared to interviewed foreign athletes.

Finnish combat sports athletes had actively used personal websites and various social media channels as the main platforms for marketing activities. All Finnish interviewees had been using Facebook and Instagram actively to search for sponsors. Athlete A also created content in TikTok. In comparison, all interviewed foreign athletes had used social media as their main marketing platform but none of them had their personal websites and athletes D and E stated that they were not that active in social media. According to the interview results, Facebook and Instagram were the platforms used by all interviewed athletes Finnish and foreign, except for athlete D who only used Facebook. Based on the answers Finnish combat sports athletes had put more thought into selecting platforms for their marketing activities as they repeatedly brought up the fact that different platforms consisted of different target groups.

Athletes A and B of interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes had a separate athlete page on Facebook and they thought it to be beneficial when seeking sponsors. From the foreign athletes, only athlete F had a separate athlete page, athlete E believed that it is a good move to create an athlete account even though he did not have one.

Content wise the answers from interviewed Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes had many similarities. Finnish and foreign athletes both emphasized the importance of being active in social media, posting regularly, creating content around one's sports career and personal life that is honest and genuine. Interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes gave more descriptive answers compared to foreign athletes, according to the answers Finnish combat sports athletes had a better grasp of creating social media content and they have had a more strategic approach to it.

The number of followers in social media was recognized as an important factor when looking for sponsors by interviewed Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes.

When the interviewees were asked if they believed that social media provides effective platforms for combat sports athletes to market themselves towards sponsors and make themselves more attractive towards sponsors, they all agreed that it does.

Athlete brand and branding is something that all Finnish interviewees had been building intentionally and unintentionally during their careers. All interviewed Finnish athletes acknowledged the benefits of having an athlete brand when searching for sponsors. On the foreign interviewees' part, none of the interviewed athletes had intentionally tried to build an athlete brand. Athletes D and E had built an athlete brand unintentionally during their careers and athlete F had no experience with the topic. Athletes D and E saw having an athlete brand as a beneficial aspect when an athlete is in search of sponsors. Interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes seemed to have a better understanding of building and utilizing athlete brands according to the interview results.

The interviewed Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes were asked what combat sports athletes should do to make themselves more attractive and approachable towards sponsors. The answers from Finnish athletes were more focused on being visible and active on social media platforms and what type of social media content should be created. Foreign athletes emphasized the importance of making people more aware of the sport that an athlete practices. There was a similarity in athlete B's and F's answers as both recommended combat sports athletes to make people see them as persons rather than just athletes.

When the interviewed athletes were asked what combat sports athletes should not do when they are seeking sponsors there were a lot of similarities between the answers from Finnish and foreign interviewees. Athletes A and E stated that strong political opinions should not be shared by an athlete. Athletes B and F both believed that athletes should not just ask for handouts but instead come up with creative ways of repaying the support received from a sponsor.

Complementary questions

When asked if athletes had ever had any issues with sponsorships or sponsors the interviewed foreign athletes stated that they had never had any issues. From the interviewed Finnish combat sports athletes, athletes A and B had had some issues with sponsors.

As the last question of the interview, the interviewees were asked if they had approached sponsors or if sponsors had approached them. All Finnish interviewees had approached sponsors and some sponsors had approached them. Furthermore, Finnish interviewees believed that it is part of athletes' jobs to approach sponsors. On the foreign interviewees part all interviewees believed that athletes should be proactive and make the first step of contacting a company but in today's world companies could also reach out to athletes if they want to sponsor a specific athlete.

4.4 Interview results of companies

Topic questions

Both interviewed companies had a long history with sponsorship. Company X had been doing sponsorship for 15 years and company Y had its first sponsorship 25 years ago. Both companies acted as a sponsor because they wanted to do good for young athletes. *“At first we started acting as a sponsor purely because of a feeling-based decision. We wanted to fix some of the things by sponsoring that were not being handled correctly in the society such as funding for individual athletes and especially for combat sports athletes.”* – Company X.

Company X was prepared to sponsor 25 individual athletes at a time. In addition to sponsoring individual athletes, the company also sponsored team sports. Company Y sponsored around five individual athletes, the company also sponsored sports clubs. Company X had sponsored athletes in various ways during the past 15 years by providing their sponsees with financial support, free use of training facilities, free physique training, and free athletic wear. At the time of the interview company X only supported one of their sponsees financially. Financial support had always been company Y's main method of support for their sponsees.

What comes to sponsorship contracts company Y had usually set one year as the length for the contract and after one year the contracts are renegotiated. Company X suggested that all athletes should try to negotiate a two-year contract for them instead of a one-year contract. Company X further explained that one year is a short time and it can easily put pressure on the athlete. Also, if an athlete received physique training as part of a sponsorship, a year is a really short time to get anything done. For these reasons, sponsorship co-operation should be started with a two-year contract and after the first two years, there should be an option to renew the contract with another 2-year period according to company X. Representatives of companies X and Y explained that their sponsorship contracts contained basic things such as the agreeing parties, the length of the contract, type of support, in case of financial support the amount, and what athletes are supposed to do in return. Company X held values in a high position. Mutually represented values are listed in Company X's sponsorship contracts and if an athlete does not agree to live by those values the contract will not be signed.

Neither of the companies had strict or precise things that they wanted in return for sponsoring an athlete. Company X aimed to get local influence through their sponsees. Com-

pany X stated that their sponsees have to be active in social media and in one way or another bring the company name out. Furthermore, the sponsees have to be willing to be presented on Company X's website. Company Y expected their sponsees to wear the company logo on their athletic wear and/or on their social media channels and to bring up the company name on their social media content.

Core questions

When the companies were asked why they had chosen to sponsor a combat sports athlete the answers were mixed. For company X it had been a natural choice to start sponsoring a combat sports athlete because the CEO of the company had always had close ties to combat sports. *"When you are close a to certain sport it makes it easier for the athlete that practice the sport to approach you."* – Company X. Company Y also had a personal connection to combat sports and one of the reasons for sponsoring a combat sports athlete had come from the values of the sport. *"Fundamentally very many combat sports are built on great values, these values are implemented in national and international combat sports federations. The values of an athlete have to be in line with the values of our company, often combat sports athletes represent the same values as their sport does so it makes them an ideal fit."* – Company Y. According to company Y there are many interesting characters that practice combat sports.

Both companies X and Y had been trying to get positive visibility by sponsoring athletes and creating positive marketing around sponsorship acts.

Company X had recognized that they have benefited from sponsoring a combat sports athlete.

We have profiled our business to offer physique training facilities, not for the stereotypical weightlifters but everyone between Olympic medalists and elderly people in need of physical rehabilitation. Combat sports athletes are often versatile in sports, and they usually behave politely as many of the combat sports athletes are representing and living by the same values that the sport that they practice represents. Having these ideal combat sports athletes working out at our facilities posts a good image and improves our image and reinforces the profile that we have set for the company. Also, our company and the image of our company have become well known in the combat sports circles, if some parents are thinking about where to take their kid that practices combat sports for physique training, they often choose us." - Company X.

Company Y had sponsored a combat sports athlete that won a medal in the Olympic games in the past. After the Olympic games, the athlete had visited a meeting that company Y had with some of their clients. The clients had been very pleased to get to meet the athlete and it had evoked a lot of positive conversation around the company and the athlete.

When the interviewed companies were asked how they choose which athlete to sponsor the companies X and Y said the following: an athlete's brand, image, social media following, and reach and achievements in the represented sport all have an effect when the choice is being made on who to sponsor. In company Y a team within their marketing department screens the applications for sponsorship and the above-mentioned factors are parts of the screening process. According to company X, the biggest factor in choosing a sponsee are the athletes themselves, what are they like, what kind of image do they have and what kind of values do they support. Furthermore, athletes have to have social media accounts in check, they should compete internationally and be serious about their sports career and represent themselves in a good and professional manner not only in sporting events and during training but also in everyday life. If an athlete has a good brand and social media following, then the athlete does not have to be the very best in his/her sport to be sponsored by company X.

Company X and company Y both stated that social media and its platforms are the stages that current day combat sports athletes who want to attract sponsors should be seen and heard on. Company X: *"If I had to suggest one platform for athletes to use and be active on, I would say Instagram, but Facebook is also a good platform especially for reaching the older audience. Social media is the key nowadays."*

When asked what Finnish combat sports athletes could do to make themselves more attractive and approachable towards sponsors company Y stated that athletes should bring up their personalities and values. Company further explained that if an athlete is "a stereotypical shy and silent Finnish person" and has nothing to say then it can be impossible to attract or approach sponsors.

I think the athlete should first have some achievements on his/her sports cv. Secondly, get your social media channels in order so people want to and can tag you into contexts. Approach companies, it is unlikely that a company will come knocking when you represent a small sport. Think about which companies to approach, not every company is a good fit. Open up the sport you are practicing and make people understand the sport. Also, from my personal experiences, I have noticed that companies are expecting athletes to come up with ideas and ways of returning the favor

for sponsorship. Athletes should think of ways how they can benefit possible sponsors before they even approach them. As for the federations and clubs behind the athletes, I think they should start teaching the athletes about these things, how do you market and sell yourself. -Company X.

Both companies had similar answers which stated that athletes should avoid putting themselves in a bad light or cause a scene or a scandal related to them when they were asked what Finnish combat sports athletes should avoid doing when seeking sponsors.

Complementary questions

The interviewed companies were asked if they had had any issues with sponsorship. Neither of the companies has ever had any issues with sponsorship.

As the last question of the interview, the companies were asked if athletes should approach sponsors or if sponsors should approach athletes. *“I think if we go back in time then it had to be the athlete who made the first move, but in the current day I think it should also be the responsibility of companies. Companies should start to think if they could get visibility in platform X by using a sponsee as a messenger. The starting point still is that the athlete has to stand out somehow so he/she can even be identified by companies.” -Company X. “I believe that both parties could try and approach each other in theory but in practice, companies receive so many requests for sponsorship that it already takes time going through those not to mention if the company would dedicate its time in looking for a specific athlete, this being said I think athletes should be proactive and approach companies.” -Company Y.*

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents the key findings of this qualitative research. Recommendations for Finnish combat sports athletes and suggestions for further research are also addressed in this chapter. The recommendations are followed by discussion on the validity and reliability of the results and the research itself. Lastly, the author's learning process during the research is covered.

5.1 Key Findings

The first investigative question of this thesis asked the question of **what marketing activities Finnish combat sports athletes have used in the past to seek sponsors successfully**. The answer to the first investigative question was obtained through qualitative interviews with Finnish combat sports athletes. After analyzing the interview results of Finnish combat sports athletes, it became clear that social media marketing by creating content related to the interviewees' sports careers, daily lives, and personalities was the mutual method that all Finnish interviewees had used. Instagram and Facebook were the main social channels that Finnish combat sports athletes had been using. Facebook had been used for targeting older audiences and Instagram for the younger audience. Auvinen & Kuuluvainen had the same view towards the target audiences on the platforms in the theoretical framework. The use of social media channels and content creation on social media as a marketing method to attract sponsors was suggested by many authors such as Kössö, Lepistö, and Ekqvist in the theoretical framework of this thesis. Sending emails to companies, doing collaborations with content creators, and appearing on their YouTube videos or podcast, and approaching and engaging in conversation with possible sponsors in physical events such as competitions were other key marketing activities that Finnish combat sports athletes had used in the past to attract sponsors. The research found athlete brand and branding to be seen as valuable methods to make an athlete more attractive and approachable towards sponsors by Finnish interviewees. The importance of developing and having an athlete brand while seeking sponsors was emphasized by Lepistö, Kuuluvainen, and Kaminski in the theoretical framework of this thesis. The study found that all each Finnish interviewee had done their marketing activities based on their own knowhow.

The second investigative question aimed to resolve **what marketing activities foreign combat sports athletes have used in the past to seek sponsors successfully**. Identically to the first investigative question the answer for this question was obtained through qualitative interviews, this time with foreign combat sports athletes. Content creation on social media platforms and the use of word of mouth were the main marketing activities

that the interviewed foreign athletes had used to attract sponsors. According to the interview results, foreign athletes' sponsors had come from close circles and the athletes had not put an extreme effort into marketing activities to search for additional sponsors. Athlete brand and branding was found to be something that none of the interviewed foreign athletes had developed intentionally. Two of the three interviewed foreign athletes saw having an athlete brand as a beneficial aspect when a combat sports athlete is in search of sponsors. The athletes explained that having a strong brand can make it easier for people to approach and relate to an athlete when an athlete brings him/herself up and shows people what kind of a person he/she is in addition to being an athlete.

The third investigative question was set out to answer **what are the differences in the sports sponsorship-seeking activities between Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes are**. The data for answering the third investigative question was obtained by doing a comparative analysis between the interview results of Finnish combat sports athletes and foreign combat sports athletes. According to the interview results content creation on social media channels had been the main common marketing activity that both Finnish and foreign athletes had used to attract and acquire sponsors. Finnish combat sports athletes were found to be more active with their marketing efforts compared to interviewed foreign athletes. Finnish combat sports athletes had used personal websites in addition to various social media channels as the main platforms for marketing activities. Two of the interviewed Finnish athletes had an athlete page on Facebook and all three of them had been using Facebook and Instagram actively to search for sponsors and one of the athletes had also created content in TikTok. In comparison, all interviewed foreign athletes had used social media as their main marketing platform as well but none of them had their personal website and only one of them had an athlete page on Facebook. Interviewed foreign athletes stated that as their sponsors had come from close circles, they had not put an extreme effort into marketing activities to search for additional sponsors. According to the interview results, Facebook and Instagram were the platforms all interviewed athletes Finnish and foreign had used, except for athlete D who only used Facebook. Based on the answers Finnish combat sports athletes had put more thought into marketing themselves towards sponsors as they had had a more strategical approach to marketing activities and content on each platform.

The fourth investigative question had the goal of finding out **for what reasons have sports sponsors decided to sponsor a Finnish combat sports athlete**. This question was answered based on the interview results of sponsoring companies. The research found that the companies had been looking to help promising athletes and improve their public image through sponsorship. Improving the public image of a company was stated to

be one of the key objectives of sport sponsorship by Irwin & al. in the theoretical framework of this thesis. Companies X and Y both had personal relations to combat sports which had played a part in choosing a combat sports athlete as a sponsee. Another mutual reason the companies had for sponsoring a combat sports athlete was values. Many combat sports are built on values that are in line with the values of company X and Y. Combat sports athletes were found to commonly represent the same values as their sport which have made them ideal sponsees for companies Y and X. Common values and common mindset towards sports between a sponsor and sponsee were listed as a good starting point for a sponsorship in the theoretical framework of this thesis by Alaja. The research found an athletes' brand, image, social media following and reach, and achievements in the represented sport to have an effect when companies are choosing who to sponsor. The importance of an athletes' brand and brand image was also emphasized by Valanko, Lepistö, Kuuluvainen, and Kaminski in the theoretical framework of this thesis. Active use of social media and large social media following were also found to be important factors for companies X and Y when they are selecting sponsees. Valanko, Ekqvist, Gabriel, Vazquez, Stuart, Kössö, and Lepistö emphasized the importance of active use of social media and large social media following when seeking sponsorship in the theoretical framework.

Company X specified that when they choose their sponsees the biggest factors are the athlete themselves, what are they like and what kind of image do they have. The company also expected athletes to be serious about their sport and aim for international success, to have well-established social media accounts, to represent values that are in line with company X's values, and to behave professionally on and off sports. An interesting finding from company X's interview results revealed that athletes do not have to be the very best in their sport to be sponsored if they have a good brand, the right values, and well-established social media channels and influence on social media. Lepistö argued in the theoretical framework that an athlete that has a strong brand is a lot easier to sell to sponsors. The importance of having well-established social media accounts was emphasized by many authors such as Kössö, Lepistö, and Ekqvist in the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The fifth and last investigative question asked **what recommendations can be given about platforms, content, and implementation of marketing activities**. The data for this investigative question was obtained by conducting a thematic analysis of the interview results of all interviewed groups. As this investigative question consists of recommendations for Finnish combat sports athletes to search and obtain sponsorship the question is answered in the next chapter.

5.2 Recommendations for Finnish combat sports athletes

Based on the interview results of all respondents the first and one of the most important things for current and future Finnish combat sports athletes seeking sponsorships is to properly set up their social media accounts. The importance of having visibility, influence, and a large social media following was emphasized by all participants of this research. The use of social media is especially important for Finnish combat sports athletes as combat sports are not that well known in Finland and they are rarely seen in traditional media. Specifically, the importance of using Instagram and Facebook was highlighted repeatedly in the research. In addition to Facebook and Instagram other social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter can and should be utilized in the marketing activities when seeking sponsorships. Based on this research, creating an athlete page on Facebook, and developing a personal website are also recommended actions to take.

Finnish combat sports athletes seeking sponsorships should market themselves through social media by creating content related to their sports careers and daily lives. Sending out emails and doing collaborations with social media content creators by appearing on YouTube videos or podcasts are other recommended marketing activities. Social media has gotten huge in the modern world but more traditional marketing methods such as approaching a sponsor in a physical event and engaging in an honest conversation with the sponsor should still be utilized when possible. It is recommended for future and current Finnish combat sports athletes seeking sponsorship to develop a strategy and goals for their marketing activities. As athletes' job is to practice their sport and as athletes often have a very busy schedule due to their career it is recommended to seek for professional help with the planning and execution of marketing activities.

Several authors in theoretical framework emphasized the importance of modern-day athletes having a strong athlete brand, the interviewed companies also saw it as a factor that makes athletes more attractive. However according to the interview results none of the interviewed athletes really had built an athlete brand with determination. Current and future Finnish combat sports athletes should seek guidance for building an athlete brand and start building athlete brands intentionally. Furthermore, an athlete brand should be promoted and supported by social media content. The brand should bring out the athlete as a person instead of just another athlete. An athlete's values, characteristics, and core strengths should be visible parts of the brand to make the athlete more approachable and make it easier for companies to see if their values are in line with the athlete's values. Having a strong athlete brand makes an athlete more desirable sponsorship property for

sponsors. A good example of how a Finnish combat sports athlete can utilize his/her athlete brand comes from Makwan Amirkhani, a Finnish MMA athlete. Amirkhani was chosen as a brand ambassador for Huawei Finland and Sokos because of his brand and values.

Honest, genuine, personal, and diverse content should be created on social media in the form of images, videos, and text when looking for sponsors. Creating content about an athlete's represented sport that is either unknown or relatable to followers is recommended. The research found that content related to a combat sports athlete's sport, especially competitions tend to get the most visibility. Created content should give a picture of what an athlete is like as a person and what values does, he/she represent to make sponsors take interest in the athlete not only because of a certain track record in the represented sport but because of who he/she is. It is recommended for Finnish combat sports athletes to not only market themselves through their content but to also market the sport that they represent to make possible sponsors and other people understand what their sport is all about. A high emphasis was put on being active and posting frequently on social media by all participants of this research.

Before approaching sponsors, Finnish combat sports athletes should think about what they can do for the sponsor in return for sponsorship. It is recommended to develop a concrete concept that an athlete can market and sell to sponsors in return for sponsorship. The concept can be based on social media visibility for instance.

It is recommended for Finnish combat sports athletes to be proactive and take the first step to approach companies when seeking sponsorships. When approaching sponsors, it should be remembered that approaching suitable companies that are known to have close ties, positive mindset, and shared values with combat sports is beneficial. Lastly, it is recommended for Finnish combat sports athletes to apply for sponsorship programs offered by some companies such as Valio's "Valio Akatemia" and Lidl's "Lidl All Stars".

5.3 Suggestions for further research

The author suggests that further research on this topic should be carried out with a more limited scope. As combat sports consist of many individual sports future studies should be done for each combat sport to find out if there are concrete differences between the marketing activities of athletes representing each respected sport within combat sports. Furthermore, the author suggests that further research should be done solely from the athlete branding point of view to study how athlete branding as its own can be used from the Finnish combat sports athletes' part to seek sponsorships. Lastly, the author would recommend quantitative research to be done on the topic as it would give a better representation of the studied population.

5.4 Reliability and validity

As explained earlier in chapter 3.5 of this thesis, reliability and validity are used to evaluate the quality of research. Reliability investigates the consistency of research. Reaching the same results by using the same specific research design multiple times means that the research can be considered reliable. Validity as the name suggests determines if the research is valid by looking at the suitability of used research methods, truthfulness of the analysis and if the findings can be generalized.

Reliable and relevant literature, articles, and research were used as sources for the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) of this thesis to ensure high reliability and validity.

The information of the empirical part of this thesis was obtained from sponsored Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes and Finnish companies that sponsored a Finnish combat sports athlete at the time of the study. All interviewees had personal experience within the topics this thesis studies although the foreign participants did not have as strong experience with the topics as Finnish participants. The interview questions were well thought out and shaped based on the theoretical framework and the investigative questions of this thesis which further increases the reliability and validity of this thesis.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method in this research. The used method lacks standardization, and it can cause threat to the reliability of the research in the form of biases. To eliminate possible biases on the interviewees' part the author informed the interviewees about the purpose of the research and the anonymity and confidentiality measures that were taken by the author during and after the interviews. All interviewees were aware that the interviews were being recorded and that the recordings were deleted after the author had transcribed them. Interviewees were also aware that they were appearing anonymously in the research. The interview questions were shared with the interviewees well before the interviews took place to ensure that they were prepared for the interviews. The same questions were asked from each interviewee which makes it possible to repeat the interviews if needed. All factors mentioned above increase the reliability and validity of the research.

Most of the interviews were translated from Finnish to English which can pose some threat to the reliability of the research as they were not translated by a professional translator.

5.5 Personal Learning

The thesis process was very educative for the author. During the development of this thesis, the author learned a tremendous amount about the topics of sponsorship and sports sponsorship from the viewpoints of a sponsor and sponsee. The author also developed better knowledge about the use of social media marketing, and athlete branding. Moreover, new academical writing and research skills were learned by the author in addition to improving previously learned skills during the thesis process. The author had no previous experience in interviewing, the data collection for this thesis allowed the author to learn how to plan and conduct interviews and how to transcribe and analyze interview data.

During the development of this thesis, the biggest issues for the author were time management and prioritization of time between the thesis work and the author's day job. The author started at a new full-time job right before starting the thesis process. The job allowed the author to gain crucial working experience and important skills for the author's career but also acted as a slowdown for the thesis work. Trying to get a grip on and improve at the new job while simultaneously trying to work on the thesis presented to be a big challenge for the author. Oftentimes the author's day job required the author's full attention which resulted the thesis work to be postponed. To make matters worse the Covid-19 pandemic spread through the world during the thesis process. As the pandemic hit Finland the author was forced to work remotely from home. Being constantly stuck in the same space without having the possibility to practice normal life while combining working a full-time remote job and thesis work caused the author to be under constant stress which had negative effects on the author and the thesis work.

As stated in the beginning of this subchapter the author learned a significant amount during the process of this thesis. The author is convinced that the skills, knowledge, and obstacles that were part of the thesis process will be of great use in the author's current and future working career.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Overlay matrix

Investigative questions	Theoretical framework	Research methods	Interview questions
IQ 1 What marketing activities have Finnish combat sports athletes done in the past to receive Sponsors, what goes into the process?	Sponsorship, sports sponsorship, Role of social media in sponsorship search, Social media platforms, Social media content, Athlete branding.	Qualitative interviews of Finnish combat sports athletes.	Question 10-21 for interviewed athletes.
IQ 2 What marketing activities have foreign combat sports athletes done in the past to receive Sponsors, what goes into the process?	See IQ 1 above.	Qualitative interviews of foreign combat sports athletes.	See IQ 1 above.
IQ 3 What are the differences in the sports sponsorship-seeking activities between Finnish and foreign combat sports athletes?	See IQ 1 & 2 above.	Comparative analysis of IQ 1 & IQ 2 results.	See IQ 1 & 2 above.
IQ 4 For what reasons have sports sponsors decided to sponsor a Finnish combat sports athlete?	Sponsorship, sports sponsorship, Objectives of sponsorship, Sports sponsorship from the company point of view, Who do companies sponsor.	Qualitative interviews of sponsoring companies.	Questions 4-19 for interviewed companies.
IQ 5 What recommendations can be given about platforms, content, and implementation of marketing activities?	Sponsorship, sports sponsorship, Role of social media in sponsorship search, Social media platforms, Athlete branding.	Conclusions.	Questions 4-9 for interviewed athletes. Questions 10-21 for interviewed athletes. Questions 15-17 for interviewed companies.

Appendix 2. Interview questions for athletes

General questions:

1. How long have you been practicing combat sports?
2. What is your most memorable achievement in your sport?
3. How many sponsors do you have / Did you have?

Topic questions:

4. How big of an impact has sponsorships had on your sports career?
5. How does your sponsor / How do your sponsors support you?
6. What have you done in return for support from a company that sponsors you?
7. How has a sponsoring company benefited from sponsoring you?
8. Why have companies started to sponsor you specifically?
9. How long does a sponsorship contract last for and what is mentioned in the contract?

Core questions

10. What kind of marketing activities have you done to attract sponsors?
11. What kind of platforms have you used to search for sponsors?
12. Do you use the following social media platforms? Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn
13. Do you have a separate athlete account on social media platforms?
14. How do you use social media platforms?
15. What kind of content do you create and share in social media?
16. Does it help to be active in social media and to have a large following in social media when looking for sponsors?
17. Are social media platforms effective when it comes to creating visibility around oneself and searching for sponsor?
18. Have you built an athlete around yourself?
 - a. If yes, is it beneficial to have an athlete brand when looking for sponsors?
19. What should be remembered when building an athlete brand?
20. What can combat sports athletes do to increase their visibility towards sponsors?
21. What should combat sports athletes not do / avoid when seeking for sponsors?

Complementary questions:

22. Have you approached sponsors, or have they approached you?
23. Have you had any difficulties with sponsorship?

Appendix 3. Interview questions for companies

General questions

1. What does your company do?
2. What is your role in company X?
3. How long have you practiced sponsorships?

Topic questions

4. Why do you practice sponsorship?
5. Why do you sponsor athletes?
6. How many athletes do you sponsor?
7. How do you support the athletes that you sponsor?
8. How long does a sponsorship contract last for and what is mentioned in the contract?
9. What is a sponsored athlete expected to do in return?

Core questions

10. Why do you sponsor a combat sports athlete?
11. What are you trying to achieve by sponsoring a combat sports athlete?
12. How have you benefited from sponsoring a combat sports athlete?
13. How do you choose which athlete to sponsor?
14. Do the following things have an effect on the selection process?
 - a. Athlete's brand/image/values
 - b. Athlete's achievements
 - c. Athletes following, engagement or reach in social media
15. On what kind of platforms should combat sports athletes have visibility to make themselves more visible towards possible sponsors?
16. What should Finnish combat sports athletes do to make themselves more attractive towards sponsors?
17. What should Finnish combat sports athletes not do / avoid when looking for sponsors?

Complementary questions

18. Have you had any issues with sponsoring a combat sports athlete?
19. Should an athlete approach a sponsoring company, or should a company approach an athlete?