The role of athlete’s sponsorship on the marketing strategy of a sports brand.
A qualitative study conducted at HEAD France

Authors: Marlène Lesaule
Matthieu Bouvier

Supervisor: Nils Wählin

Student
Umeå School of Business and Economics
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Abstract

Athletes sponsorship has become an important part of the marketing communication mix for sports brands today. We know that athletes are major celebrities within the mass media in modern society and they can use their image and the power they have directly through their network to interact with customers. Their level of fame and popularity is still increasing, and many star athletes have million dollars’ endorsement contracts with brands who want to be associated with the athlete’s image.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the use of sponsored athletes as a marketing communication tool by the analysis of the traditional tools companies have but also how a brand can use social medias nowadays to maximise their impact on the customers. More specifically, our research focuses on the growth of social media's importance in marketing strategies and how this variable impact the behaviour of athlete’s, brands, and customers. We answer to the research question:

How do sports brands support their corporate marketing strategy through the sponsorship of athletes?

The study was conducted at HEAD France (division of HEAD NV), manufacturer and marketer specialised in sports equipment and apparel for: Winter sports, racquet sports, diving, sportswear, and licensing. They are well-known thanks to the famous and successful athletes they sponsored like Lindsey Vonn and Alexis Pinturault (ski) and Novak Djokovic and Maria Sharapova (tennis).

To conduct our research, we used a qualitative method along with an interpretivist approach. This was in accordance to highlight social, cultural, and managerial facts by analysing consumer, athletes, and brand’s behaviour. We conducted twelve in-depth interviews on French consumers, HEAD’s employees and athletes’ based on the theoretical framework studied in the report.

The findings include good advice and insights that sport-brands could use to improve their marketing strategy using the image of athlete’s and make it a better fit to the consumer’s expectations.

Keywords: athlete, brand, brand awareness, communication, consumer, consumer behaviour, digital, distribution, marketing, marketing strategy, influence marketing, sales, social media, social network, sport, sponsorship.
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1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present to the reader our research topic, to provide an overview of our theoretical framework and to identify a research gap in the current literature. Moreover, we provide a brief explanation of the key terms that could be unfamiliar to our audience, a basis of theories and concepts related to the relations between marketing and athletes. Furthermore, we explain why we decided to use a qualitative approach to our study, by showing how our research methodology can bridge gaps in current literature. Finally, we introduce our research question and the purpose we aim to achieve with this thesis.

1.1. Subject choice

We are two management students from the Burgundy School of Business, carrying out a double degree at Umeå University. Both of us have practised different sports at the various levels since our childhood, and we also did internships in marketing.

Marlène has practised tennis for 14 years, and she also uses to ski, run, and hike regularly. Matthieu competed in rugby for ten years and had the opportunity to be part of the best French selections, playing against other international teams. Now, he is mainly practising skiing in the Alps, running and hiking. Furthermore, Marlène worked one year for HEAD France during her gap year as an assistant of the Racket sports category manager. And Matthieu already worked with influencers during his internship at Xbox France (Microsoft) and Acer Computer France. For example, he got the opportunity to manage the Xbox/Forza Motorsport booth during the 24h of Le Mans in 2016.

Nowadays, sports are highly diffused over the media and involve brands (corporate sponsors), medias (TV, radio, and so on) and a large audience (spectators). Since the start of the century, celebrities are required to attract commercial revenues (sponsorship or media interest), the concept of “sports celebrity” has emerged (L’Etang, 2006) within the mass media in modern society and they are exposed every day on the radio, TV, social networks, and so on. If the athletes are now seen as celebrities and financial products, the concept of athletes appeared in the eighth century BC when the Greeks founded the Olympics. An athlete is defined as “a person who has risen to the top in their respective field in strength, agility and speed” (Edelman, 2017). If the first Olympics hosted only athletes from Greece, times have changed and now athletes from all over the world can compete during localised, national, or global competitions like the Olympic Games.

Therefore, we decided to work on a marketing subject related to sports. We contacted the company HEAD France to know if they would be interested in working with us on a subject related to the power of influencers nowadays. They agreed to collaborate with us, but they suggested to focus on the influence of the athletes on the marketing, the power they have on the different people targeted. HEAD is well known through the athletes they sponsor; they target the best in the world. Regarding the tennis division, they have sponsorship contracts with Andy Murray, Novak Djokovic, or Maria Sharapova for instance. And regarding the winter sports division, they sponsor Alexis Pinturault, Lindsey Vonn and Jon Olsson for example. The actual marketing strategy of HEAD is interesting because they do not have TV advertisements during major sports events such as the Bercy’s Master for tennis, or the HEAD World Cup Rebel for ski. But HEAD HQ focus on sponsoring athletes and events to
get a global media coverage. So, instead of watching a HEAD advertisement during a TV break, you can see HEAD’s brand name on the athletes and around the slopes, tennis courts during events. This strategy is suitable to maximise the visibility without competing with brands who have a bigger budget allowed to the advertisement. In the problematic HEAD gives us, we want to provide a clear analysis of the development of the sponsorship through the years and what could be achieved today with the new technologies available and especially the power of social media.

1.2. Problem background

Sports brands are always in relation with athletes to develop and promote their new products; athletes are used to growing brands since the late 1930s (Bradic, 2015), when Babe Ruth, a baseball athlete endorsed the drink Red Rock Cola. If athletes receive money from the brand to be seen using the brand’s product, the athlete could be involved in the development process. As a professional and recognised user, he or she could provide useful analyses, feedbacks and insights and help the research and development team (Bråtå et al., 2009, p.26). But, if the role of the athlete in the development do not change a lot through the years, it is entirely different for the marketing. The professor D. Steven White (2010), divides the evolution of marketing briefly in seven parts (see figure 1 below). From the “simple trade” in the pre-industrial revolution to the starts of 1990’s to 2010 where he identified the “relationship marketing era” and from 2010, “the social/mobile marketing era” we know today.

![Figure 1: The Evolution of Marketing (White, 2010)](image)

But, if most companies responded this digital era, this new marketing era is always evolving thanks to new products that could reach new targeted customers via alternative solutions. That is why we decided to contact HEAD, to know if they face some problematics regarding the influence marketing. They told us that they are working with several athletes globally and locally and they would like to optimise the investment they make on each athlete regarding marketing. If a company used several methods in the past and continue to use them now, it is possible that it is not optimised and this is where we can help them by providing research based on what could be the content of influence marketing and the relation between athletes and brands in the future.

1.3. News and facts supporting our observations

“Sport is now the only potential discipline where you can engage very high numbers of people” stated Jean-Pierre Diernaz, vice president marketing at Nissan Europe during an interview made by Suzy Bashford (2017). The sports market is growing quickly and is already estimated to be worth $700bn worldwide in 2017. Today’s way of watching sport may vary, and, the media landscape is fragmented. The traditional way of watching TV or
radio are declining in favour of the social media such as Facebook or Twitter via the “Live” solutions (Bashford, 2017). YouTube is also developing this segment and developers are already working on virtual reality solutions like Microsoft presented with the Hololens (Liberatore, 2017).

Moreover, fans want to be engaged, they want to be closer to the athletes, they do not want only to watch, they want to live the game. And brands understood this leverage, and they created this proximity via sponsorship of athletes. Sports marketing is “driven by the fan desire to know more about their sporting heroes; athletes are becoming more like celebrities” (Bashford, 2017). And this is confirmed when we see how many people follow athletes on social networks. Forbes published a study at the end of 2016 showing the most followed on Instagram (Badenhausen, 2016). We can see that Cristiano Ronaldo is the first with 82.9 million followers, this can be compared to Beyoncé or Justin Bieber. The only non-footballer of this top is the NBA player, Lebron James with 26.4 million followers.

The importance of digitalization in marketing and the potential visibility for brands is now so important that official organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had to regulate it. During the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, only official sponsors of the event could use the vocabulary around the Games (Birkner, 2016). For example, a non-official sponsor of the Olympic Games who had a contract with one athlete was not able to mention the performance of the athlete. And the Athlete was also not able to thanks all his sponsors when the competition started. All the brands and athletes had to think out of the box and find an alternative way to congratulate the athletes without “Gold medals” or other mentions and keep the advertising message and maximise the visibility of the brand. One of the biggest winners of this game was the brand Under Armour according to the media Digiday UK (Dua, 2016).

1.4. Theoretical background

The following section provides a theoretical background about key concepts from our chosen research area. For this purpose, we introduce the concept of sponsorship. Moreover, this chapter includes the relations between brands, athletes, and consumers. But also, the four domains of marketing in sport and its impact on commercialization and sales.

1.4.1. Sport sponsorship

Sports sponsorship is not a recent concept; it has its roots in the Greek and Roman history (Desbordes & Tribou, 2007, p.269). Indeed, during this area, Greek athletes received from the state a financial compensation for their participation in the Olympic Games (Koronios et al., 2016, p.239), or Caesar used to sponsor the gladiators’ fights to earn public influence (Desbordes & Tribou, 2007, p.269). Since the 1980s, sponsorship has increasingly grown and is now a powerful and strategic tool used by companies to support their marketing communication plans (Desbordes & Tribou, 2007, p.269). Sponsorship is the fastest growing form of marketing (Dolphin, 2003, p.173), and had these last decades continuously taken larger proportions in the marketing budgets of companies (Verity, 2002, p.161).

Sponsorship is a business relationship between a sponsor and another entity which can be a person but also an event, or an association (Desbordes & Tribou, 2007, pp.269-270). Smith et al. (2008, p.387) consider sports sponsorship as an investment in a sporting entity to capitalise on the commercial potential of this sports property. The International Chamber of Commerce establishes a general definition and states that sponsorship is:
“Every communication action where a sponsor engages contractually to support financially (or other) in order to associate in a positive way its image, identity, brands, products or services to the event, activity, organisation or person it supports” (Arthur, 20007, p.270).

Pope (1998) provides a more explicit definition regarding what can be sponsored and different objectives which can be achieved. He defines sponsorship as “the provision of resources (e.g., money, people, equipment) by an organization (the sponsor) directly to an individual, authority or body (the sponsee), to enable the latter to pursue some activity in return for benefits anticipated in terms of the sponsor’s promotion strategy, and which can be expressed in terms of corporate, marketing or media objectives” (Pope, 1998, p.1). This definition highlights the fact that both sponsor and sponsored benefit from their sponsorship relationships.

Farrelly et al., (2006, p.1019-1022) and Verity (2002, p.162) considers that the main objectives of sponsorship for companies are to increase publicity by using the image of the athlete. But also to foster or position their brand image, to differentiate from the competition, to target a specific audience and to increase the awareness for both the company and the targeted market.

The relationship between the sponsored and the sponsor is a mutually beneficial exchange for both parties (Farrelly et al., 2006, p.1017). Indeed, the sponsor uses the sports entity in its marketing strategy to create a corporate image, a brand positioning and enhance or leverage its sales by influencing the consumer behaviour (Farrelly, Quester & Burton, 2005, p.1017). In return, the sports entity benefits from financial resources (or other material resources) to be used for a commercial purpose and to participate in a promotional activity (Farrelly, Quester & Burton, 2005, p.1017).

1.4.2. Relationships between brand, athletes, and consumers

Professional athletes are working with companies for decades (Louie et al., 2001). Brands endorse athletes to associate the image of the enterprise with the image of the athlete, not only in term of performance, but it could also be about his or her attitude. The brand needs this association to create an easier connection with the consumers, to relate this connection to their passion and furthermore, develop brand awareness, loyalty, and brand image (McGhee, 2012).

Some studies before 2000, already associated the positive effect between the brand image and fan loyalty. 20 to 25% of all ads are using celebrities (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Stephens & Rice, 1998) and in these ads, 60% are using a sports celebrity to endorse (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Brands are more willing to work with athletes to promote a product because the performances are easily accessible and easily understandable for everyone (Elberse and Verleun, 2012). Athletes are seen as great role models to promote a brand image because we see them as someone strong and successful, we associate these athletes to “societal and cultural norms” (Jones & Schumann, 2000, p.65).

The concept of sports affiliation is important in the relation of the three actors, the brand, the athletes, and the consumers, as Carlsson and Donavan (2008, p.155) stated. The athlete is seen as a public person representing his or her sport, for example, N. Djokovic is a professional tennis man playing in the main major tennis tournaments such as the Grand Slams, and the Masters 1000. As a public vehicle, the customers become familiar with the athlete as a celebrity. In their study, Carlson and Donovan showed the relation in the
consumer responses to athlete endorsements as an important determinant for the team (or athlete) and the brand (Carlsson & Donovan, 2008, p.159).

1.4.3. Sponsorship impact on commercialization/sales

In her study, Lily Bradic (2015) clearly established the relationship and the connection between famous names and brand awareness/credibility. When the consumers believe that a celebrity uses the product or service, it boosts the sales massively. The website Marketwatch released a study to show the impact of a new contract with an athlete can increase the stock prices of the company with 4% on average (Sager, 2010).

Even if athletes are not involved in competition anymore, they still can be valuable for the brands. This is the case for HEAD with Jon Olsson or Michael Jordan with Nike that is still betting on the basketball legend (Bradic, 2015), in 2009, Nike owned 75% of the basketball shoe market thanks to Jordan’s brand. Even if the contract cost a lot for the brand, they bet on the athlete, for example in 2003, Coca-Cola signed LeBron James when he was a rookie for $12 million. In 2011, he had reportedly made over $147 million from his endorsements (McCormick, 2013). A study of 2012 (Elberse & Cerulean) concluded after analysed 178 athlete’s endorsements and 95 companies, that endorsements increase on average a brand’s sales by $10 million a year, and it could go higher if the athlete wins a major title when he or she is under contract.

Moreover, previous studies investigated on the extent sponsorship influence fan’ behaviours and buying intentions. Koronios et al., (2016, p.240) have shown that sports fans and team performance impact on the brand image of the sponsor and the purchase intentions. Sponsorship strengthens the corporate image as it conveys a positive image and creates consumer preferences toward the brand (Koronios et al., 2016, p.242). Sponsorship also enhances the sponsor sales; studies revealed that there is a strong correlation between fan, sponsorship, and purchase intentions (Smith et al., 2008, p.395). Indeed, sales tend to be boosted among passionate supporters which are more inclined to use and/or buy services or products of the sponsor’s brand and even more when the sponsor shows integrity and receptiveness (Smith et al., 2008, p.397).

1.4.4. The four domains of sports marketing

Sam Fullerton and G. Russell Merz developed a conceptual framework due to too much ambiguity in the concept of “sports marketing”. So, they decided to clarify what was under this concept using two critical dimensions, the type of product and the level of sports integration. They categorised good, services by differentiating between sponsorship-based strategies and traditional strategies (Fullerton & Merz, 2008, p.90). They identified four sports marketing domains explained in the figure (2) below.
To clarify details of the four categories, “Theme-based” strategies is the way to do marketing through sports via a traditional level of integration. For example, a non-sports brand doing advertisement during the Super Bowl. On the other hand, there are the “Product-based” strategies where a sports company want to advertise via the sport, for example, Adidas’ advertisement in a luxury magazine to target wealthy potential customers. For the last two segments, the “Alignment-based” strategies are how to advertise via the sport but without a product related to the sport. For example, Volvo sponsoring the Ocean Race or L’Oreal with Lewis Hamilton. And of course, it exists “Sports-based” strategies, a sport related brand doing marketing via the sport. It could be HEAD with Novak Djokovic or GoPro with the X-Games 2017 in Norway.

It is important to distinguish the various categories and way of doing marketing around the theme of the sport. Our thesis focuses on the sponsorship based level of integration of sports-related brands, but it is important to know what exists in the marketing of sports.

1.5. Research gap

Studies have been conducted about the relationships between athletes and brands. Studies tried to emphasise the effects of those interactions on the consumer behaviours. How sponsorship help brands to create awareness and interest regarding their service/products. However, marketing strategy is moving rapidly and thanks to new solutions of advertising and communication like Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat; and new trends like Vlogging
(telling your journey via a video posted on social networks, mostly on YouTube), brands always need to be on the lookout for new changes.

Indeed, brands have to adapt to these new types of media to effectively promote and communicate to their targeted market. Therefore, we identified a lack of research, especially in the sports areas regarding digital marketing and influence marketing.

### 1.6. Thesis focus

We decided to focus our study on the sports industry because sports business is massively growing and analysts expect the sport to reach $73.5 billion by 2019 only for the North American market. It is a growth of more than $10 billion in only five years (Jones, 2016, p.3), and because of that, it is an industry where innovation and marketing strategies are crucial (Madec and Tribou, 2005). We were also both highly interested in this area and as aforementioned both regular practitioners of sports activities.

We base our thesis on the study of HEAD France, as previously introduced. Our research points out the importance of sponsorship in the marketing strategy of sports brands companies. We choose to take an example from a global scale. However, our study is mainly applicable for the French market. Our aim is to investigate how sports brands use sponsorship techniques to reach their consumers, to build their corporate image and to create brand awareness. Moreover, our research thesis naturally emphasises the fundamental role of social media in marketing strategies nowadays.

As stated in the research gap, it is interesting for us to analyse the new marketing techniques of marketing solutions brands are using, can use or what analysts predict to be the future of marketing for sports.

### 1.7. Research purpose

The study aims to provide a better understanding of the use of sponsorship techniques in the marketing strategy of sports brands. The purpose of this study is to examine how sports brand companies determine their sponsorship strategy. Moreover, the aim is to analyse the interactions between the brand, the athletes, and the customers. We think that the growth of the sport-business the last decade is a consequence of a closer relationship between athletes and consumers stimulated by the expansion of social media. Brands do not only communicate via normal way of marketing; they always have to innovate and think out of the box to find new customers and develop customer’s loyalty using the image of their athletes for their benefits. We will have a special focus on the digital marketing because it is something lacking in other studies and something new that touch especially the new generations.

Through the study of HEAD, we intend to investigate the outcomes of different marketing strategies using athletes, depending on two approaches. It will be interesting to see and understand how the brands used to communicate with the athletes and how the uses of an athlete for marketing purposes has changed over the years.

Our study is useful for companies which aspire to have a deeper understanding of the sponsorship process and how they could use athletes in their marketing strategies with the help of the new marketing solutions and consumer’s expectations.
1.8. Research question

In order to reach our purpose, we formulated the following research questions:

How do sports brands support their corporate marketing strategy through the sponsorship of athletes?
2. Theoretical review

In this chapter, we review the previous literature on the topics related to the relations between brands and athletes, and the endorsement power they could have on the final consumers. We provide an analysis of the changes occurred in the marketing with the development of new technologies, how the brands can be effective by using these new technologies for their marketing strategies. But we also analyse the importance of the sponsorship in the marketing strategy of sports brands, from the development of the sponsorship strategy on both B2B and B2C approaches to the impact on the final customer.

2.1. A drift in the way of advertising

The appearance of the internet in the 1990’s marked the beginning of significant changes in the Marketing management practice but also in the consumer behaviour. Those new technologies are changing the marketing approach we have, “marketers are increasingly forced to operate in a complex and evolving world where they do not have anymore the full control of the media and the message” (Constantinides & De Vries, 2017, p.2). Otherwise, customers are now losing trust in brands and how they used to communicate (TV advertisement using biased data for example), and those customers now have the power to find the information they want with reliability using the internet.

2.1.1. Interaction, the new business model of advertising

Today’s new digital technologies give access to more information and choices than ever before to the customers. Marketers strategies have changed, and they cannot rely on pushing a message as they did before, “the marketing-to-consumer relationship must shift from interruption to interaction” (Nathues, 2017, p.38). It means that brands must switch from linearity to reciprocity to build a relationship with the customer. The digital revolution we lived at the start of the 21’s century imposed this switch. The amount of information available everywhere and at every time placed the customers “from passive receivers to active participants”, and all the marketplace are becoming increasingly transparent, fragmented, and interactive (Harrison et al., 2006). Even if the computer has been available

![Figure 3: Model of consumer needs (Nathues, 2017, p.40)]
for a while, this society of interaction is born with the combination of the internet and the mobile phone that gave the possibility to customers to easily communicate with others (Kucuk, 2009).

This new client is now modern and sophisticated, and he or she got the power against the marketers, “he is more demanding and challenging to influence” (Nathues, 2017, p.39). This new customer is looking for new needs (figure 3). He wants to live an experience with the product, live emotions with it, express what he thinks about it and be engaged.

With this new business model, the customer is now at the centre of the marketing universe. The client has the final decision to buy or not the product, and with all the information he can find on the different media. But through all the different medias, brands have the possibility to influence him using different marketing options (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p.77). And a simple advertisement on TV is not enough. In the chapter “Situation influence: a new model for a new era”, Danny Brown and Sam Fiorella (2013) developed theories about the role of the influencers in the marketing of today. The marketing strategy of a brand is now to target a particular community of people and catch their attention by sponsoring the different type of influencer that could have power on this community.

This new business model developed with the rise of the social media redefine the rules for brands on how to do marketing, especially for young targets such as the generation Y and Z.

2.1.2. Marketing with Generation Y and Z

A social generation has been defined as “cohort of people who were born in the same date range and share similar cultural experiences” (Mannheim, 1952). The Generation Y, -also called “Millennials”, are people born between 1977 and 1994 (Glass, 2007) and the Generation Z, also called “iGen” is represented by children born after 1994 to now. The Generation Y is materialistic, and they want to possess things. For them, everything is possible to achieve by themselves; they are very individualistic (Riegler, 2017, p.84). Researchers have made studies over the US to estimate the spending power the Gen Y has. And if it is now 80 million Millennials, they already spend $600 billion a year; researchers expect them to spend $1,4 trillion by 2020, that will be 30% of total retail sales (Riegler, 2017, p.84). The significant difference between the Gen Y and the Gen Z is the internet. Gen Z is born with the web and all the social networks such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook and so on, and they always use them with their smartphones or tablets, they did not learn the information via computer as the millennials did, it is all about mobility (Dorsey, 2015). Even if the parents are still paying for the Gen Z belongings, they are becoming the fastest growing generation in the market and workplace (Williams et al., 2011). Moreover, they are the first generation not to ask their parents to teach them and rely on their knowledge; they directly search for the information they need. As we can read in The Gen Z Effect, it is the first time in the history of mankind that a generation can connect every human on the planet to each other and in the process to provide the opportunity for each person to be fully educated, socially and economically engaged (Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014).

Something importantly valuable for the companies is the way the next generations will buy, how and where the Gen Y and Z will shop, and the differences of behaviour. According to a study conducted by Accenture (2015), Millennials have approximately the same shopping behaviour as the previous generations and look the “cheapest return option”. But even if the Gen Y is familiar with the internet and looking through the different websites to find the lowest price for a product, they still like to see and try the product in real life as the previous generations did. By the way, if the Gen Y order on the internet quickly, they now expect to
have the same price in stores compared to the web, but with a better service to make sure they purchase the best quality at the best price (Riegler, 2017, p.86). As we said, the generation Z still need their parents to buy, but it seems they influence them a lot in the purchasing decision, and this “kidfluence” would represent around $600 billion of family spending’s in the United States alone (Abramovic, 2015).

Creating customer loyalty is one of the primary KPI (key performance indicators) a company want to reach via the marketing strategy. The customer loyalty is defined by the relationship between an individual’s relative attitude and repeat patronage (Dick & Basu, 1994). It was easier to build customer loyalty before the internet era; the marketing was “less transparent”. But now, providing a good product is not enough if a brand wants to keep his customers loyal. Companies are struggling, and the number one challenge for 40% of those companies is how to create loyalty with the Millennials’ because the new clients want to be treated as a valued customer (Riegler, 2017, p.86). When before, a customer was valuated in store by the person who helped you, companies should find how to do the same online. And according to a study provided by EY (2015), it exists differences regarding loyalty between the Gen Y and Z. The Generation Y is looking for personalised advantages from loyalty programs as the previous generations would like to; but generation Z is more pragmatic and require free shipping, additional price discounts and flexible return options, things that companies like Amazon did well for several years now.

These two generations are using social media's a lot, but even if one of them is following the brand over the social networks, they are loyal to them. They can “quite well differentiate between manipulation and honest brand communication” (Riegler, 2017, p.87). By the way, they are more attentive if the advertising is honest, humorous, or ironic, and this, depending on all the different types of media and impact.

2.1.3. Social media, the new element to drive brand awareness

It is a necessity for brands to stay in customer’s minds, even with the rise of digital communication channels, brands have multiple tools available to advertise potential consumers. The brand awareness is the way a brand stays into the memory of consumer’s minds (Aaker, 1996), products can be copied but not brands (Christiansen et al., 2009). Advertising on TV was the most useful marketing tool to create and drive brand awareness even if it is costly. But gradually with the rise of the internet, the expenses are switching to digital advertisements. In the US, digital contents are already over TV ad spending’s (eMarketer, 2016). But it does not only exist TV and the internet (via social media), a brand can communicate via the radio, catalogues, physical stores and so on, and most of them have a multichannel strategy to engage and interact with consumers (Kumar, 2012).

Social media is the new media companies should work with and add to their multi-channel strategy. Statistics show that the Gen Z is spending more than 10 hours a day on social media for several reasons such as socialising, watching videos, and so on (Addeco, 2015). And a difficulty for the brand is to adapt their strategies depending on the generation targeted. For example, the generation Y is using Facebook when the generation Z is using other social medias like Snapchat (Abramovic, 2015). The social media marketing consists of persuading consumers via the use of social media (communities, social networks, and so on). But it also represents several advantages for the companies; for example, it helps to increase the traffic, generates leads, sells more, reduces the overall marketing expenses, and so on (Neti, 2011, p.6). The role of social media is easy, instead of showing your advertisement to “everyone” like on the TV or radio (even if it is targeted depending several criteria’s), brands can target
precisely the potential customers they want to reach (even if they do not know the brand yet).

Today, with social media, a brand does not represent only a product, a service, or a company; but also, the vision and the interests that unite the different stakeholders in the aim to achieve a similar goal such as the CSR policy, eco-friendly production… (Kersten, 2017, p.94). But even if social media seem easy to use for brands, implementing a successful social media strategy is not.

2.1.4. Keys to being successful on social media

With more than 1.5 billion accounts on Facebook, 500 million on Instagram worldwide, brands cannot target everyone (Coëffé, 2016). Companies want to influence consumer preferences and purchase attention through the different networks and create word of mouth (WOM). The article of the MIT Sloan Management Review (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012), through a project of three years mandated by the brand Hokey Pokey, they identified a seven-step framework for social marketing. For them, the first step is to monitor the conversations (1), it means the brand should do a pre-analyse of what is happening on its social networks before the campaign to know if they already have a potential axis to start with. Then, the brand should identify influential individuals who can spread the messages (2), the influencers. The brand should determine the factors shared by influencers (3), to determine which ones that could create the most engagement; and locate those potential influencers who have interests relevant to the campaign (4) and recruit those interested in talking about the product or service (5). Then the company must incentivize the influencers to spread a positive WOM about the product/service (6), and the last step is to reap the rewards (7). By those seven steps, the brand “Hokey Pokey” used during the test increased its sales revenue per 40%, social media ROI by 83% and brand awareness by 49% (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012, p.60).

To build an efficient Social Media Marketing strategy, a company should respect a few things. First, it is not because other companies are creating social media content that it is necessary for you. A company should analyse the market to understand if they can benefit. Also, results take the time to appear, even if the potential of the campaign is enormous, it does not mean they will follow the brand instantly. And, as we said earlier, it is preferable to have a social media campaign running with more conventional marketing strategies (Neti, 2011, p.13). But all the goal of those social media campaigns is now to position the customers at the centre (vs. the “Fisherman’s influence model” where the influencer is at the core of the figures, surrounded by all the followers he is affecting by his or her posts) of the discussion. And by identifying the decision makers and the different influence they could receive, the brand can develop a strategy to be fully efficient (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p.78). In the figure (4) below, the customer is not only influenced by one actor but by many such as one or many influencers (could be celebrities, athletes) but also by the media (TV, radio, and so on), and many micro-influencers (family, friends, co-workers). A campaign conducted like this uses different channels and approaches to catch the final customer but remains mainly focused on the influencer because the brand identified him or her as the one who fit with the product or service in term of image and audience.
So, if companies want to improve their return on investment with the help of social media campaigns, they should identify the users on social media that would be interested in the company’s product or service category. Then incentivize the diverse types of influencers, for example, athletes for sport, to talk about the product/service. And to know if a campaign is successful or not, it is important to use metrics to calculate the value of the different individual’s influence (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012, p.55).

2.2. Sponsorship as the biggest marketing leverage for sports brands.

Sports sponsorship is an important market, which has continuously grown since the last decades, a growth rate comprised between 4,1% and 4,6% during the last years (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.2). From 2009 to 2016, the volume of sponsorship spending worldwide has increased by 26,79%; from 44 billion U.S. dollars to 60,1 billion U.S. dollars in 2016 (Statistics, n.d.). In 2016, a total of 16 billion U.S. dollars was spent on sponsorship in Europe, which is the second region in the volume of sponsorship spending, right after the North America, which spent 22,3 billion U.S. dollars the same year (Statistics, n.d.). For 2017, the global volume of sponsorship spending is forecasted to reach 62,8 billion U.S. dollars, i.e. a growth rate of 4,5% compared to 2016 (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.2).

2.2.1. The importance of sponsorship

*Sponsorship as a strategic tool of the marketing mix*

Sponsorship is an integral part of the marketing communication strategies of companies. According to Arthur (2007, p.411), the primary purpose of a marketing communication strategy is to combine all the different features of the promotion mix to design a structured, coherent, and integrated marketing communication plan to achieve the marketing goals of the organisation. The various elements of the promotional mix are the advertising, the sales promotions, the personal selling, the sponsorship, the public relations, the direct marketing, and the Internet (Arthur, 2007, pp.411-412). Figure (5) below shows the different interactions of the components of a promotional mix to achieve an integrated marketing communication mix:
Sponsorship is one of the most visible parts of the promotional mix that is mostly used to reach specific communication objectives such as raise awareness, build corporate image (Hoek et al., 1997, p.22). Figure 6 illustrates the role of sponsorship regarding the other elements in the promotion mix:

Cornewell & Maignan (1998, p.12) highlight the distinction between advertising and sponsorship by explaining that the audience is different for each one. Indeed, in one hand advertising aim to reach viewers whereas on the contrary sponsorship targets active participants, spectators, and media followers. This differentiation emphasises the fact that sponsorship tends to appeal directly to the target audience’s emotions and experience while on the contrary advertising send a more visual and/or vocal contextual message (Cornewell & Maignan, 1998, p.12). Hoek et al., (1997, p.30) state that with sponsorship non-users are
more likely to have a broader range of stimuli than they could have through advertising. However, these two marketing tools are complementary, and their combination is valid for instance to communicate on events (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998, p.12). In the report of IEG and ESP PROPERTIES (2017, p.4) sponsorship’s global spending has grown at a rather similar rate than advertising, 4.3% for the annual growth of advertising, as with 4.6% for the annual growth of sponsorship, which is exceedingly higher than the 4.0% of annual growth rate of traditional forms of marketing, consisting of public relations, direct marketing, and sales promotions (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.4).

The benefits of sponsorship

Many companies have been attracted by sponsorship because this marketing tool is a way to achieve specific marketing objectives and offers significant opportunities to differentiate its marketing strategy. The report conducted by IEG and ESP PROPERTIES (2017, p.7) emphasises the five main important objectives ranked with a 9 or 10 by sponsors on a rating scale of one to ten when evaluating properties of sponsorship. These five objectives are the following: create awareness/visibility, increase brand loyalty, showcase community/social responsibility, change/reinforce the image, and entertain clients/prospects (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.7). The other objectives most of the time mentioned are linked to the collection of data use to promote the brand or to reach new market (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.7). These objectives are following named: the access platform for experiential branding, to obtain/develop content to use in digital, social and other media, the capture database/lead generation, the access property’s audience/fan data, and stimulate sales/trial/usage (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.7).

According to Hoek et al. (1997, p.22), the main benefits of sponsorship are awareness and promotion of the brand image. Cornewell & Maignan (1998, p.11) provide a more detailed explanation of sponsorship goals and classify the sponsorship objectives into three categories: first the broad corporate objectives (which consist in improving the corporate image), second the marketing objectives (which is essentially brand promotion and sales increase), and third the media objectives (which involve cost effectiveness by reducing advertising expenses, reaching targeted markets, increase brand awareness). The authors also identify in their research the following motivations for investing in sponsorship: “improving goodwill, enhancing the image, increasing awareness, improving profitability, management interest, and staff recruitment” (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998, p.13). Tripodi (2001, p.85) divides the objectives into two categories according to if they are corporation-related objectives or product/brand related objectives, which gives the following classification:

Table 1: A classification of sponsorship objectives (Adapted from Tripodi, 2001, p.85)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Corporation-related Objectives</th>
<th>B. Product/Brand-related Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. increase public awareness of the company and its services;</td>
<td>1. increase target market awareness;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. enhance company image;</td>
<td>2. identify/build image within target market (positioning);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. alter public perception;</td>
<td>3. increase sales and market share; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. increase community involvement;</td>
<td>4. block/pre-empt competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. build business/trade relations and goodwill; and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. enhance staff/employees’ relations and motivation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Therefore, sponsorship is considered as an investment in the marketing strategy and as a significant resource that helps a brand to differentiate from its competitors by acquiring or sustaining a competitive advantage (Amis et al., 1999, p.251). Indeed, sponsorship is considered as a sustainable advantage in the way that a sponsorship contract provides an additional resource that competitors do not have, and which is unique and distinctive, meaning not easily replicable (Amis et al., 1999, pp.255-256). Cornwell et al., (2001, p.48) highlight in their study that sponsorship offers for a brand the opportunity to differentiate their products/services from other competing companies and provides a financial value to the brand.

Assessing the impacts and successes of sponsorship might be difficult (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998, p.14). However, Ukman (1999, p.66) state that sponsorship results can be evaluated through three ways:

1. “Measuring awareness or attitude changes
2. Quantifying the effects regarding sales results; and
3. Comparing the value of sponsorship-generated media coverage to the cost of equivalent advertising space or time.”

2.2.2. The role of athletes

An athlete is defined as “a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina” (Merriam-Webster, n.d) and “especially one who competes in organised events” (Cambridge, n.d)

How to choose the right athlete

Sports athletes are significantly useful to endorse a sports brand because they benefit from a significant media coverage and most of the time a worldwide public image recognition (Conway, 2011, p.1). Therefore, sports brand uses sponsorship to promote their product/service through sponsorship contracts. However, it is important that company choose the right athlete to represent well the brand and reach the marketing objectives set.

Sponsorship is subjected to a selection process, in which specific criteria need to be meet (Tripodi, 2001, p.85). Walliser (2003, p.11) listed ten criteria that the sponsor has to look for when selecting an entity: “perceived affinity between sponsor product and sponsored activity, affinity between targets of sponsor and sponsored, the popularity and image of the potential sponsored party and its willingness to cooperate (on a long-term basis), geographical reach, contact frequency, contact quality, expected sponsorship costs/benefits, the type of rights received, possibility to integrate the sponsorship into the communication/marketing strategy”.

When selecting a sport entity, other criteria should be taken into consideration. Indeed during the decision process, the sponsor should ensure that the athletes can both increase sales and enhance corporate image as well as increase brand awareness (Mäki & Sjöstrand, 2007, p.9). Moreover, a sponsor should make sure that the athlete is able to generate enough favourable media interests, and has a good community goodwill (Mäki & Sjöstrand, 2007, p.9). Further, it is also important for a sponsor to consider the employee/sales force goodwill, the sampling opportunity and the guaranty of exclusivity for the brand (Mäki & Sjöstrand, 2007, p.9).
Brassington & Pettit (2000, p.828) draw up a theoretical framework (Figure 8) regarding five main factors involved in the choice of sponsorship.

![Figure 7: Factors Influencing Sponsorship Choice (Brassington & Pettitt, 2000, p.828)](image)

The relevance of sponsorship is crucial; indeed, the brand should make sure the entity sponsored match and can influence the targeted audience (Brassington & Pettit, 2000, pp.827-829). The second factor, the length of impact concerns the ability of sponsorship to have effects in the more or less long term (Brassington & Pettit, 2000, pp.827-829). Moreover, the brand has to check that sponsorship is in line with the marketing objectives, and cost effective, which is the factor compatibility, meaning that the benefits of sponsoring athletes should overcome the expenses of getting this sponsorship contract (Brassington & Pettit, 2000, pp.827-829). The potential of uniqueness is another important factor to consider. Indeed, uniqueness provides a competitive advantage and can incrementally increase brand awareness (Brassington & Pettit, 2000, pp.827-829). Finally, spin-off promotion is also a determining factor; this is the ability to have additional spending on advertising to boost the sponsorship impacts (Brassington & Pettit, 2000, pp.827-829).

To complete this analysis, Ukman (1999, pp.19-22) defines different practical sponsorship categories that sponsors should question themselves before taking their decision for sponsorship selection. This includes image compatibility, audience composition, ability to motivate retailers, the ability to leverage, media coverage, exclusivity, product showcase, ability to impact consumer sales, efficiency, measurability, continuity/ability to extend and ease of administration (Ukman, 1999, pp.19-22).

Furthermore, an athlete must fill specific attributes in order to be a sponsor, and these attributes are indispensable for the brand to reach its sponsorship objectives (Conway, 2001, p.1). Conway (2001, p.1) classifies these attributes into two categories: on the one hand, the on-field attributes which are the performance quality, the winning records, the skill, the style, and the potential. And on the other hand, the off-field attributes, which are the personality, the attractiveness, the uniqueness or unique personal background, the role model, and the relationship with fans (Conway, 2001, p.2). Brands should seek and select athletes that own most of these attributes to ensure a successful sponsorship strategy and reach the marketing objectives (Conway, 2001, p.2).

Athletes as marketing influencers

Nowadays, social medias have over the years increased in importance, and as previously explained, they have altered the marketing strategies of companies. Indeed, social media is the most popular channel to leverage sponsorships; in 2016 98% of sponsors questioned for
the IEG report, use social media as the first channel to activate their sponsorship (IEG and ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.7). The communication also goes through different social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are the four main channels use by the sponsors for sponsorship activation, with 92% of the sponsors questioned using Facebook, 90% for Twitter, 64% for Instagram and 55% for YouTube in 2016.

Furthermore, on the other hand, professional athletes have also increased their use of social media channel to get closer to their fans and directly communicate with them (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.454). “The results suggest that this new medium provides a more personalised, unfiltered method of communication not often found in mainstream media. In the past, athletes transmitted their messages via public relations personnel, or through media outlets such as television broadcasts or newspaper and magazine articles now athletes can reach their fans in a more direct manner” (Hambrick, et al., 2010, p.463). Thanks to social media’s athletes have increased their visibility, although they benefit from a worldwide scale audience (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.454).

This is very valuable for brands sponsoring those athletes because they can meet easier their main objective which is increasing brand awareness. Indeed, on the one hand, sports organisations use the social media channel to “connect with their fans worldwide”, “to provide game information, sell tickets, and increase brand awareness and product sales”, and “to reach their consumer” (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.455). On the other hand, athletes use this social media “to discuss their playing performance and interact with teammates and fans”. Therefore, brands use the athletes to deliver messages and promote their product, as the athletes use themselves the brand products, it offers more credibility to the brand (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.456). And as fans tend to have loyal behaviours towards the team or the athletes, it creates more intentions to purchase and the opportunity to reach new consumers (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.456).

Social media also provides benefits for the users that are regularly connected on social media. Indeed, Hambrick et al., (2010, p.457) emphasise these benefits with the uses and gratifications theory. This theory explains what are the key motives involved to engage users in different activities (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.457). The main benefits identified of using social medias are interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity: “The Internet facilitates interactivity, giving users the opportunity to correspond with other users, share information, and form personal relationships. With demassification, users can pick and choose activities of interest to them. They can also select with whom they interact, custom fitting the Internet to their specific needs. Finally, the Internet’s asynchronicity provides users with more flexible communications. They can post messages for other users and read and respond to messages when it is most convenient for them” (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.457). Therefore, fans desire to get closer to their favourite athletes or teams (Hambrick & al., 2010, p.458). So, companies have to take these customers wants into consideration in their marketing strategy to promote their brand and enhance awareness of their products/services.

Consequently, influence marketing is an approach that companies have been developed with the development of social media. Influence is the capacity or the power of a person, group, or thing to impact or have certain kind of authority on the actions, behaviours, decisions of other people or group of individuals (Brown & Hayes, 2008, p.49). The influence can take different forms “from direct purchase advice to subtle shifts in perception of a vendor’s credibility” (Brown & Hayes, 2008, p.49).
Today athletes have a new role of influencers which the overall dimension goes beyond the simple bilateral sponsorship relationships. An influencer is defined as “a third-party who significantly shapes the customer’s purchasing decision” (Brown & Hayes, 2008, p.50). Brassington & Pettitt (2000, p.161) state that influencers can change the result of a decision-making process thanks to their power to influence the others. Hambrick et al., highlight why athletes use social media such as Twitter (Hambrick et al., 2010, p.463). They classified their results into six categories which are interactivity, diversion, information sharing content, fanship, and promotional (Hambrick et al., 2010, p.463). Influencers have now a strong power that is why brands are interested in them. Indeed, a study conducted by Twitter and Annalect have revealed that brands benefit from influencers that offer them a real adding-value (Kunalic, 2016). The results show that approximately 40% of Twitter users questioned affirm to have already purchased something as a direct consequence of a tweet, the purchase intents have been multiply by 5,2 when users are exposed to both influencer and brand tweets (Kunalic, 2016). Further, the study shows that followers trust influencers on Twitter, indeed, 49% of users rely on advice and what influencers recommend; in comparison, 56% rely on recommendations made by friends (Kunalic, 2016). Finally, 20% of users state they are willing to share a product recommendation from an influencer tweet (Kunalic, 2016).

2.3. Athletes sponsorship in the marketing strategy for the brand

Results of the IEG & ESP PROPERTIES annual report about sponsorship decision-makers survey (2017, p.2) forecast that total global sponsorship spending will grow by 4,5% in 2017, from 60,1 billion U.S. dollars in 2016 to 62,8 billion U.S. dollars projected in 2017. Results also show that 75% of the sponsors questioned are considering new sponsorships in 2017 (IEG & ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.9). Moreover, the study emphasises that companies interrogated spent 19% as a proportion of their marketing budget on sponsorship right fees (IEG & ESP PROPERTIES, 2017, p.10). Therefore, it is important to clearly understand what are the challenges of sponsorship in the marketing strategy for brands.

2.3.1. Boost and drive sales

Many companies employ societal marketing tool such as sponsoring professional athletes to enhance or generate brand awareness and establish their corporate image to achieve and secure a sustainable competitive advantage to deal with competition (Koronios, 2016, p.238). Tanvir & Shahid (2012, p.659) notice that “Sponsorship has a share of 67% in making marketing strategies”. Thomson & al. (2005, p.78) explain how these policies can create a positive and strong emotional relationship between a brand and its customers. This attachment tends to develop positive customers’ attitudes and beliefs towards the brand product or service (Thomson & al., 2005, p. 78-79).

Sports sponsorship is a societal marketing which consists of associating the brand name with sports team or professional athletes to attest a particular affinity to the fans (Koronios et al., 2016, p.239). Tanvir & Shahid (2012, p.659) state that “Sports sponsorship is very effective tool to associate brand with the sports in creating the strong feelings about the brand in the heart of consumers. Sponsorship shows the passion, excitement, spirit, emotions, feelings and excellence when the brand values associate with the values of sport.” Therefore, Barros & Silvestre (2006) advocate that organisations use sports sponsorship as a strategic marketing tool as it offers them the opportunity to reach, to communicate with a broad audience and to target consumers’ preferences and in the end to heighten sales. Koronios et
al. (2016, pp.239-240) has developed a model to present the main factors influencing the corporate image of a sponsor, as follows the sport involvement, the team achievement and the team attachment, and justify that these factors have a significant impact on the sponsorship behavioural outcomes which the main impact influence is on purchase intentions. Figure 9 illustrate the model:

![Figure 8: Sport sponsorship effectiveness model (Koronios et al., 2016, p.240)](image)

The study conduct by Koronios et al., (2016, p.246) reveal that sponsor image has a strong influence on intention to purchase, meaning to buy the brand’s products. Tanvir & Shahid (2012, p.661) define purchase intention as “composed of consumer’s feelings, thoughts, experience and external factors that he considered before making any purchase. Purchase intention of the consumers depicts and expresses their behaviour and the way they are making decisions about their buying process”. Consumers that are extremely involved tend to a high level of purchase and tend to be more sensitive to the sponsor message (Tanvir & Shahid, 2012, p.661). Indeed, “Fans have the intention to purchase the products of their team’s sponsors even when they are not specifically interested in the product category they belong.” (Koronios et al., 2016, p.246). Although sponsoring activities enhance purchases of companies’ products in a more efficiently way as any of the others promotional techniques, marketers of sponsors brands have to carefully develop their strategies because purchase intentions differ according to the age group targeted (Tanvir & Shahid, 2012, p.666).

2.3.2. Increase brand awareness

In the US, sponsorship is the fastest growing form of marketing (Friedman, 2016). Though all the way brands can do sponsorship, they want to achieve several goals at once, especially improving the image of the brand, shaping consumer attitudes via positive reaction to drive sales. But it is also a very effective way to drive brand awareness by creating positive publicity and enhance the visibility. For example, in the UK, Huawei signed a contract with Arsenal to double the brand awareness of the brand in the country. The agreement includes special visibility during the matches, but also the access to several athletes such as Mesut Ozil and Jack Wilshire (O'Reilly, 2014). With this investment, Huawei expects to double its brand awareness who were at 36% before the signature in 2014 in few years. In a first stage, the expected goal is not double the sales in the UK; the phone brand wants to be known by the British before focusing on the sales. Edwin Schravesande explained in the blog of the Cruyff Institute that “a message on Twitter is not just an advertising channel with which you
can win an audience. Its power lies in the message being relevant and credible” (Cruyff, 2015)

Sponsorship is a way to be different from the competitors, especially via exclusive sponsorship (Friedman, 2016), this could be useful in the sports domain. For example, when a brand has an exclusive deal with an athlete, and this athlete wins a major competition, the positive image and the interviews the athlete is giving generate brand awareness like athletes sponsored by Red Bull, wearing the brand’s cap on the podiums, during interviews, and so on. If we keep the example of Huawei, it is a way to be different from HTC, Apple and Samsung, direct competitors who bet on big-spending brand campaigns to increase their brand awareness (O'Reilly, 2014). Increasingly brands are using the sponsorship and in every sport, “athletes are so influential on social media that a mere mention of a product can significantly increase product sales almost immediately” (O'Malley, 2013). If brands have good reasons to sponsor athletes, it is a winning situation for both parts of the deal; athletes can boost their extra income by accepting sponsorship. In the article of the Cruyff Institute (2015), we learned that a brand could pay up to $260,490 for one tweet of Cristiano Ronaldo. And the brand still win thanks to his large community and because the brand does not have to pay to set up a production day in studios to register a commercial for example.

Athletes are now as social media marketing products, with the rise of the internet and the social medias, not only sports brands are betting on them to increase their brand awareness on targeted customers. So, this market is gradually increasing, and people are trying to make business by creating the contact between athletes and brands looking for sponsorship; with the platform Opendorse, created by Blake Lawrence for example (Cruyff, 2015).

To summarise, we highlight how companies have upgraded their strategy in an advertisement with the increasingly use of social medias and influencers, especially to attract people from the Generation Y and Z. In the meantime, sponsorship is still the biggest marketing leverage that sports brands use to promote their products. Indeed, the role of the athletes is predominant to establish a market strategy for a new product or service. Athletes sponsorship heighten sales and revenues by targeting the final customers and by offering a substantial and persuasive base for sale argumentation to value the brand’s products in retail stores. With the literature review, we design a traditional model of marketing strategy of sports brand using athletes (see figure 9 below) and we will design how a sports brand could use athletes for their marketing strategy from now on in the analysis (figure 10).

![Figure 9: Traditional sport-brand marketing triangle](image-url)
In the figure 9, we highlight that in the traditional model, sports brand acted as an intermediary between the athletes and the customers. Brands used to be in contact with the athletes, to sign contracts with them and use the image and the performances of the athletes to reach the final customers via intermediaries. At this period, sports brand and customers used to not be in direct contact, the relation between the brand and the customer occurs mainly via advertisement on TV, in magazines, or point of sales advertising content.
3. Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce to the reader our philosophical point of view. We describe our research approach and then state our ontological and epistemological position. Further we explicit our research design and our sampling approach to explain how we conducted our research.

3.1. Research approach

Two main approaches can be used when it comes to the research approach: the inductive or the deductive approach. The inductive research concerns the development of a theory after analysing empirical data; it goes from individual observations to general patterns (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.7). The deductive approach involves the development of a conceptual and theoretical structure, that is then developed by empirical observations (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.7). Regarding our methodological assumption, we have chosen the inductive approach. Our starting point was the theory about athletes as marketing influencers.

As stated before, athletes have always been used in the marketing strategy of sports brands to influence customer purchasing behaviour. Sports brands and non-sports brands sponsor athletes to promote their products or services. Indeed, the athlete sponsored have to use the product during training, competitions, advertisement and so on. Furthermore, sports brands, assign some of their products to a specific athlete. For instance, HEAD promote their five-top range of racquets to their five main players, such as the HEAD Speed Pro racquet is the racquet played by Novak Djokovic. So, we decided to conduct qualitative research interviews to get a better understanding of athletes influence from a marketing point of view regarding three different type of respondents, employees of a sports brand, HEAD France, athletes, and consumers. Those interviews enabled us to collect data as well as interpret them, to get a better understanding their position (Appendix 1, 2 & 3).

Most of the literature and sources used to construct this thesis were gathered through Umeå University Library or Burgundy School of Business online library. Google and Google Scholar database were used to collect articles not obtainable on the University’s database.

3.2. Ontological assumption

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality, what kinds of things exist (Saunders et al., 2009, p.110) and it is divided in two positions: the constructivism and the objectivism. Bryman (2008, p.35) provides a more precise definition, where the ontology groups the social entities, art and nature, whether social entities should be regarded as objective entities or constructive based on the perceptions and action of different actors. For the two different approaches, constructivism suggests that social phenomena are constantly being revised, and not only occurs because of social interaction (Bryman et al., 2011, p.37). Objectivism, on the other hand, suggests that social entities are independent of social actors, meaning that social phenomenon existence and influence are beyond the influence of social actors (Saunders et al. 2009, p.110).

We embrace constructivism as our ontological position. We believe that the different perceptions regarding the influence of the athletes have an impact on the marketing strategy of sports brand. As stated by Saunders et al. (2009, p.111), subjectivism is the understanding
of meaning that individuals attach to social phenomena. The subjectivism is often related with social constructionism, which states that reality is socially constructed. The different social actors such as athletes, customers, or the employees of a sports brand in our case have probably a different vision of the situation in which they find themselves thanks to their position and experiences. Depending on their view of the world, they will perceive the situations differently (Saunders et al., 2009, p.111). That is why when choosing and interviewing our different respondents; it is crucial to understand the subjective reality of each one. The difference between objectivism and subjectivism has been developed by Smircich (1983), who explained that objectivists would tend to see an organisation’s culture as something acquired, whereas subjectivists would view culture as a complex and changing concept that an organisation develops. Our research will focus on the second perception of culture.

3.3. Epistemological assumption

Epistemology refers to what is regarded as appropriate and acceptable knowledge in a particular field of study (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.15; Saunders et al., 2009, pp.112-113). According to Bryman & Bell (2011, p.15), the issue to consider is regarding if one can or should study the social reality based on similarly principles and approaches as the ones employed in the natural sciences. Moreover, Collis & Hussey (2014, p.43) emphasise the importance to look at the philosophical framework, also named as research paradigm and defined as “a framework that guides how research should be conducted, based on people’s philosophies and their assumptions about the world and the nature of knowledge”. Therefore, one can identify two main research paradigms within the epistemological assumption, respectively named positivism and interpretivism (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.44; Saunders et al., 2009, p.113).

Positivism is a philosophical approach based on the use of the procedures of natural sciences to investigate the social reality (Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.15). Positivism assumes that the social reality is unique, objective, and independent of the researcher, who will consider as trustworthy only if the knowledge arises from observable and measurable phenomena (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.46; Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.15). However, many criticisms have emerged from the positivism approach, arguing that it is too restrictive to consider the social world from only law-like generalisations based on scientific methods (Saunders et al., 2009, pp.115-116) and has led to the development of interpretivism (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.44). Therefore, interpretivism is an epistemological position that considers the differences between humans as social actors (Saunders et al., 2009, pp.115-116) and the need to study people within the boundaries of their social environment (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.16). Interpretivism advocates that the social reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.45). Unlike positivism, interpretivism considers as acceptable knowledge, the knowledge arisen from subjective meanings and understanding of social phenomena relying upon the perceptions of the participants (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.45).

Our research aims to study how sports brand supports their marketing strategy through the sponsorship of professional athletes. We argue that using methods based on laws of positivistic scientific methods would be too narrow to gather and understand the knowledge needed. Indeed, our research question intends to grasp the perceptions of both marketing managers, and professional athletes, and the opinions of customers to conduct a more
comprehensive study. Therefore, our study is framed by an interpretivism paradigm. Indeed, analysing attitudes comes under subjectivism because we are interacting with the phenomena under study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.45). As previously mentioned interpretivism is consequently the most relevant approach to adopt when studying subjective phenomena, and when understanding and interpreting the interactions between different actors from their perspectives (Saunders et al., 2009, p.116).

3.4. Interview question design

An interview is a method of collecting primary data in which a sample of interviewees are asked a question to find out what they think, do, or feel (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.133). The interview questions have been designed according to the theoretical framework presented earlier. Former studies have focused on the influence of athletes’ sponsorship for brands without including the aspect of social medias. And most of the time the studies were related to non-sports brands using the image of athletes. To ensure that respondents have a complete understanding of the interview questions, our interview includes a brief introduction. In this introduction, we introduce ourselves and present the project we are conducting with HEAD France, explain the purpose of the research and the privacy issues. Even if we ask the name, the age, the gender during the interview, we only use these data to help us for an analytic purpose. Indeed, we never mention their names in the thesis, and all the data are used anonymously with the exception of the company name. Only the age is mentioned to explain the group targeted and placed the person depending on its generation. Presenting ourselves, asking for the names, ages and occupations of the respondents help to create a pleasant atmosphere between the respondents and us, so they could feel comfortable and free to answer the questions and discuss. Depending on the respondents, we created three different interviews. We follow a semi-structured interview approach, and we prepared questions to drive the conversation with the respondent about our main topics of interests, but the conversation can also lead to talking about interesting points and experiences the interviewee want to talk about (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp.133-134). This helps us to understand the personal experience of the interviewee, and we reduce the influence of our questions, in an open-ended way, this limit the risk of a respondent answer yes to a question he does not agree on for example. One for HEAD France employees, another for the athletes and the last one for the customers. All the interviews are divided into four main parts (Appendix 1, 2 & 3).

The first part is all about the person interviewed. We want to have a first understanding of the person before asking the questions. We ask broad questions such as the name or age, but also the principal professional activity of this person. For HEAD employees, we know where they work, but we want to know their exact job position, and for how long do they work in the sport industry, this will help us to analyse their answers later. For the customers, we want to know if they are working or if they are still students, by the way, the age helps us to classify them in terms of generations (as explained in the theoretical review (see 2.1.2.). For the athletes, it is slightly different because we want to know the principal activity of the athlete and from where does he or she get his or her revenues. It is interesting to see if they can survive on the revenues they get from the practice of their sport and how their incomes are split (part-time job, rewards, sponsorship contracts, and so on). Also in this part, we ask if the respondents if they have accounts on social medias and if yes, which social medias and how often do they use them. We end this part by asking if the respondent practices sport and if yes, what sports and at which level.
Then, we ask questions related to the advertisement. This part is to know if the respondent is aware of the different changes appeared in advertising since the creation of the internet and more recently, influencers promoting products or services directly on their respective social networks. For all the respondents, we ask if they paid attention to how companies advertise nowadays with the help of social medias and what do they think of it. Then we ask them if there are too many advertisements and if this number of ads has a negative impact on the consumption. For customers, we ask a last broad question about what the person think about brands using influencers to promote a product directly. We want to stay broad on this question and narrow in the next part on the athletes. Regarding HEAD employees, we ask questions more about their job and if this change in the way of advertising affected their work and if yes, how. We also ask them if they are in direct relations with influencers in their job and if they think using influencers to promote the brand HEAD is an effective solution. For the athletes, we ask them if they believe they are an influencer and what they think of this new type of promotion. We also ask how this new kind of marketing for a non-sports brand can help the athlete (if he has a contract) and if he or she thinks it is an effective solution to promote a brand.

After that, we start talking about the relation between sponsorship and marketing. For HEAD employees, we interview people working in sales, marketing, and communication areas, in that case, they know the subject, and consequently, we could ask precise questions. First, we start by asking if they are in relations directly with athletes. We mean professional athletes, people known for their achievements in sports competitions, different from influencers that could be known for sports but without achievements. Then, we want to know the impact of athlete’s sponsorship in their job, if it could help them to sell, to promote, and so on. And we also aim to know what are their objectives in sponsoring athletes, the answer may differ depending on the job and if the performance is still the number one criteria to select an athlete or if there are others important criteria to analyse. Thanks to their knowledge in marketing, we also ask a question not related to HEAD, mainly to know if the interviewee has an example of a particularly successful marketing campaign for him or her, and why this one especially. Regarding the athletes, we ask general questions about his experience with sponsorship. We start by asking if he has sponsorship contracts and if yes, for how long and with which brand (he/she is allowed to not give the name of the brands). Then, we ask almost the same questions as for HEAD employees, to know the main dimension a brand is looking for by sponsoring an athlete and if performance is still the first aspect to value. Then we want to know what are the benefits to be sponsored. For customers, we want to know if they are sensitive to marketing using the image of an athlete and if they can mention athletes and their respective sponsors. This helps us to know if a customer can rely on one name with one brand and maybe we will see if athletes are still linked to old sponsors. Then, we ask if they think the sponsorship is an effective way to promote a product, a service, or a brand and if they think about a better solution to promote a sports product/service/brand. We finish the questions of this part by asking if they buy a product because an athlete is using it because they like the brand or a combination of both.

For the last part, we focus on the influence of the social medias. We ask to HEAD employees if they regularly follow the performance of the athletes sponsored by HEAD and if they follow other athletes and why. Then, we want to know how they measure and monitor the influence of the athlete sponsored by their brand. Also, it is interesting for us to know if they try to control the publications made by their athletes on social medias, to be sure there is no negative impact on HEAD. And we finish by asking if it is possible for a brand to be absent from social medias now. For the questions, we ask the athletes about their involvement in
the different social networks, how do they use them (maybe they have different strategies depending on the media). We also ask how many people follows them, and if he or she thinks having an influence on his or her audience, and if yes, on which dimension (purchasing behaviour, a way of life, and so on). Also, it is interesting for us to know if the athlete has a business approach to his or her social networks and follow the different statistics the network can provide (regarding the age, location, and so on). Regarding the customers, we want to know if they follow brands and/or athletes on social medias, if yes, we would like to know the name of the brands/athletes and the reason they follow. Then, we end by two questions to know if they are influenced by “traditional advertising” on the web like a Google Ads banner or a posts by an influencer/athlete (picture on Instagram promoting a new product for example), to know if they can identify what is a product placement and if they feel influenced in their purchasing behavior.

It is important for us to have the same template for all the diverse types of respondents, we will analyse their answers (in chapter 5, analysis and discussion) all together to see the different points of view regarding the respondents.

3.5.  Pre-test

The interview questions should be checked by specialists to ensure the quality of the language and the reliability of questions before interviewing people (Saunders et al., 2009, p.394). The three types of interviews were written in English, but we conducted all the interviews (except one) in French. We reviewed the questions with one of our native English speaker friend, our supervisor and one of HEAD’s category manager. We also ran a pre-test with friends around us to approximately estimate the length of each interview.

After the feedbacks and the pre-test, we deleted some questions in each interview and kept them apart in case we have time at the end of an interview. We erase few questions because most of our respondents only have a limited time to answer (employees and athletes) so we had to keep it clear, concise, and accurate. We also changed the way we asked some questions and developed them to be sure the respondents will easily get the meaning. After those few changes, the interview questions were ready to be conducted.

3.6.  Sampling in qualitative research

For our study and to answer our research question, how sports brand supports their marketing strategy through the sponsorship of professional athletes, we need to collect data, and we need to select a sample because it is infeasible to collect data from the entire population (Saunders et al., 2009, p.212). Therefore, a sample can be defined as a “subset of a population” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.131). Saunders et al. (2009, p.213) separate the sampling methods into two categories, namely the probability or representative sampling and the non-probability or judgemental sampling. A probability sample is a sample selected from a random selection process, which means that all the person chosen for the sample have an equal chance of being picked, and the results can be generalised as they tend to accurately reflect the entire population (Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.176). Unlike the probability sample, a non-probability sample is a sample selected without using a random selection method, meaning that some subsets of the population are more inclined to be selected than others (Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.176).
Considering we adopt the interpretive approach, we are not aiming to analyse with statistics data, neither test hypothesis or generalise our results from the random sample (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 131). Therefore, we do not need to use a probability sample, and the most suitable sampling method, in this case, is the non-probability sampling method (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.131; Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.190). Saunders et al., (2009, p.233) state that a non-probability sampling technique can be appropriate to raise ideas and collect feedbacks on the research question. In our research study, a random sample of random managers, athletes and customers would not have been relevant as we are concerned to get insights from subjects involved with the company HEAD France. Regarding our data collection chosen, we decide to use a convenience sampling also called natural sampling for the data collection regarding our employee's group and our athlete's group, which is considered as a non-random sampling method (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.132). According to Collis & Hussey (2014, p.132) a natural sample only involves some subjects available, indeed “only particular employees are engaged in the phenomenon being investigated or only certain employees are available at the time of the study”. And the researchers are little involved in the sample composition, indeed “natural sampling occurs when the researcher has little influence on the composition of the sample” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.132). One the other hand for our customer's group we decide to use a judgmental sampling method which occurs when “the participants are selected by the researcher on the strength of their experience of the phenomenon under study” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.132). Indeed, in order to select potential customers, we published a message on Facebook and Twitter to request for volunteering participants in our study. Moreover, a judgmental sampling method involves that “the researcher makes the decision before the commencement of the survey and does not pursue other contacts that may arise during the course of the study” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.132). In doing so, we first waited to receive answers of potential customers willing to participate, and when we chose to stop at six participants and we didn’t pursue with the other contacts that had arisen.

Thanks to our contacts at HEAD France, we found 12 persons to interview. The sample is structured and split into three distinctive parts: employees at HEAD, athletes, and potential customers. The employee's sample is entirely masculine and structured as follow, two category managers at HEAD France, one person responsible of the racquet sports promotion at HEAD France, communication and marketing manager at HEAD’s headquarters in Austria. For the athletes, we interviewed two professional skier athletes and one professional tennis player, the three/four athletes interrogated are men. Finally, the customer's sample includes six respondents, two women and four men. The respondents’ age range is comprised between 23 and 25 years old (Appendix 4). The time of the interviews is between 18’14 and 65’55 long (Appendix 4).

3.7. General analytical procedure

To analyse qualitative data, several steps to manage and control the massive volume of data should be followed (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.9). The general analytical procedure is composed of three steps: data reduction, data display and conclusions. It is also necessary to test the validity of these findings. These activities should take place at the same time. It is also important to record the interviews and transcript the responses exactly, so, when needed, data are easily accessible. Moreover, when collecting the data, thoughts and reflections are important to add to the interviews, also called “memos”.
Therefore, a summary and interoperation of the answers of each respondent were made, including quotes. Their responses were gathered in specific themes, the same also present in the interview (1) overview of the respondents, (2) the evolution of advertisement, (3) the sponsorship of athletes related to the marketing and (4) the concept of influence on social medias. Our previous analytical work allowed us an overview and an understanding of the answers for each theme, which help later in the discussion and the conclusion.

Another point that needs to be discussed is the inter-reliability of the study. This is about the agreements among consistency and appraisers, the appraisers referring to the researcher conducting the interviews. Being two researchers could have biased the interpretation of the findings, but before designing and conducting the interviews, we both agreed on the participants and how we shared the speeches. However, inter-reliability should be considered carefully since interpretation and subjectivism are always present when doing qualitative research.

3.8. Ethical considerations

Many ethical issues arise from the different situation when conducting a business research and it is important to carefully take them into consideration in order to act ethically (Saunders et al., 2009, p.183). These ethical considerations are based on the code of conduct standards, including moral values, principles, and procedures (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.30). Saunders et al. (2009, p.184) define research ethics as “questions about how we formulate and clarify our research topic, design our research and gain access, collect data, process and store our data, analyse data and write up our research findings in a moral and responsible way.”. To complete their definition Saunders et al., (2009, p.187) state that ethical issues tend to occur during the interactions of the different actors involved in the study, which are the research provider, the research user, and the respondents. These ethical dilemmas might happen at all different stages of the research, when formulating and clarifying the research topic, when designing the research and gaining access, when collecting the data, when processing and storing the data and when analysing the data and reporting the findings (Saunders et al., 2009, p.188). We argue that it is essential for us to be aware of these ethical issues to provide a high-quality work and not hinder the integrity of our research thesis.

Bryman & Bell (2014, p.128) highlight four main ethical principles areas to consider when conducting a business research, which is the following “whether there is harm to participants; whether there is a lack of informed consent; whether there is an invasion of privacy; whether deception is involved.”. First, the participants shouldn’t be harmed, which imply to assure the well-being of the actors involved in the research on both physical and psychological aspects (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.31). We, therefore, ensure that no harm has been made to any of our research participants. In designing our study, we use semi-structured interviews meaning that our questions could evolve and adapt throughout the interview, which helped to respect the ethical issue. We respected also the dignity of the subjects involved, which is a principle emphasised by Collis & Hussey (2014, p.34), who advocate that participants should not be mentally upset or be either ridiculed or humiliated. In this purpose, we intended to be the more courteous as possible with them and comprehensive over the course of the interviews to ensure the respondents would not feel embarrassed and upset. We have been polite and we avoid drawing up value judgements about the participants and their answers. The principle of no lack of informed consent is also crucial to consider and refers to the importance to guarantee the completely informed consent of the actors.
involved in the research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.31). For this purpose, participants must receive enough information to decide to engage themselves in the research study or not and be able to give their approval in participating (Bryman & Bell, 2014, p.133). Hence, before starting an interview we provided to all the participants the same short interview, which introduces our topic, the purpose, and explains the procedure of our study. We also ensured to get their agreement in participating and using the information shared for our analysis. In addition, we request respondent’s permission to record the interviews. Another important principle is the respect for privacy, referring to the requirement to preserve the privacy of the research participants and prevent any potential intrusions into their privacy (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.31). In our study, we ensure to not infringe the privacy of participants by explaining them that they would remain anonymous and nobody could identify them from their answers as we use a confidential procedure. Indeed, research procedures should ensure anonymity and confidentiality during the interview foster freedom of expression and more clear solutions (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp.32-33). In this regard, we assert that the names and personal information of the participants would not be divulged and only asked to have more trustworthy interviews. The last area of ethical issue concerns the deception, which refers to lies or misleading way of acting, i.e. participants shouldn’t be lied or cheated (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.32). In our research study, we do not use such practices, meaning we do not manipulate participants and we ensure, to be honest, and transparent. This principle also involves to not have unethical behaviours in the publication of the thesis such as invent data, falsify results, plagiarise, overstate, or intentionally exclude some results to get the results desired (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p.34). That is why we recorded and transcribed all the interviews to guarantee compliance and authenticity when presenting and discussing the respondent’s answers.

Apart from these four main ethical principles areas, Bryman & Bell (2014, pp.139-142) add several other ethical and legal considerations which are data management, copyright, reciprocity and trust, and affiliation and conflicts of interest. These additional factors have also been ensured during the whole research process to be as ethical as possible.
4. Results and findings

This part concerns the empirical findings from our qualitative study; we present the information we received from the different interviews. We organised the findings in four main parts regarding each type of respondents we interviewed: (1) overview of the different respondents, then, (2) HEAD’s employees, (3) athletes and (4) potential customers. Inside each part, we summarised the findings according to the main question topics of each interview.

4.1. Overview of the respondents

The overview of respondents (Appendix 4) aims to introduce our respondent sample with the answers to general questions such as job information, age, sport practiced, social medias’ affinity and so on. We decided to ask those questions first in order to know a bit our interviewee and can ask more specific questions later in the interview regarding their behaviour or experience related to the topic.

The first category is HEAD’s employees; we got the opportunity to interview three employees at HEAD. The first we interviewed (employee 1) works as a category manager rackets at HEAD France for two and half years (and for 12 years old in the industry). At HEAD France, we also interviewed the promotion director (employee 2) working on rackets at HEAD France for three years and in the tennis industry for six years. Thanks to the employee 4, we got the opportunity to interview the ski marketing and communication manager at HEAD HQ (employee 3). All the employees are on social networks, they all have an account on Facebook, and employee 2 has even two accounts on Facebook, one for personal purposes and the other for HEAD where he can post and follow the athletes he is working with. It is interesting to notice that employee 1 is also thinking about creating a second account on Facebook to split the professional and the personal. They are all also available on other social networks for personal purposes mainly because they follow the news around their industry with those accounts (Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn…)

We got the opportunity to interview three athletes, two skiers and one tennis player. Our athlete number one (athlete 1) is a former skier, now a consultant for a famous sports channel in France and he resumed his study in marketing and commerce last year. Still under contract with HEAD but now more as an ambassador, he is earning his revenues via consulting contracts and sponsorship contracts. When he competed, he received wages from the government as a customs officer, but most of the money was from his partners (like HEAD, Bollé, Reusch, and so on) with a fixed revenue and bonuses depending on the results. Our athlete 1 competed in Giant Slalom and Super G in World Cup and Olympic Games; he won a Gold Medal with the French team and a Silver medal in Super G individually during the World Cup. He is not very active on social medias; he closed his professional Facebook account when he ended his career because he felt like he didn’t need to keep it. Our athlete 2 is a French professional skier still competing; he finished an Alpine ski season in the 3rd worldwide place. He gets his revenues from sponsorship contracts (from 60 to 70%) and one part from the government like the athlete 1. Our second athlete is active on social medias; he has professional accounts on Facebook and Instagram. Our last athlete interviewed (athlete 3) is a French professional tennis player; he is among the top 150 players worldwide but for confidentiality reason, he asked to not talk about his performances in competition. All his revenues arise from sponsorship contracts and competition rewards. It is important
to notice that revenues from all the athletes we interviewed, could fluctuate according the results. Our third athlete is active on Facebook, but someone else manages the account for him.

To finish, we conducted interviews with six potential customers. They all have different activities and backgrounds. We got two students (customer 1 and 3), one digital consultant (customer 2), one sales manager export (customer 4), and an entrepreneur (customer 6). We also have a McLaren and LMP3 professional driver (customer 5) that we decided to interview as a customer because he has no sponsorship contract with any sports brand, but we also asked questions about his influence and how he managed his social networks. It was interesting to receive their point of views since they practice different sports. Customer 1 is interested in tennis; he plays tennis (competed at a regional level), basket and badminton. Customer 2 practices running and used to play basketball at a regional level. Our customer 5 is also running to keep himself in good form between the different races. Customer 3 goes to the gym and used to dance a lot when she was young. Customer 4 and 6 are into the ski, they practice a lot, and customer 4 used to compete in slalom and downhill ski. They are all connected on Facebook, and all of them are also active or passive on others social networks like Instagram (Customer 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 are active, and customer 6 is passive), Snapchat (all active), they all use LinkedIn for professional purposes. Only customer 2 and customer 5 are active on Twitter when the customer 4 has an account but never tweets.

4.2. HEAD’s employees

In this part, we present according to the main topics ask during the interviews with employees (Appendix 1), we first start with the results related to questions about the marketing strategy and the changes with digital communication, then about sponsorship and finally about their social media strategy.

To understand the growing significance of social medias in the marketing strategy of sports brand, we asked a series of questions related to the theme defined “advertisement and marketing strategy”. All the respondents are aware of the change in promoting and especially advertising in the marketing strategy. They are all aware that companies have changed their advertising communication strategy. Employee 1 and Employee 2 answer that the biggest change is concerned by a progressive rebalancing between the traditional printed press and the digital communication. Indeed, HEAD has taken a big digital switch as the brand aims to stop completely the printed campaign such as catalogue, flyers and so on. Consequently, HEAD’s strategy is to significantly reduce the part of the budget allocated to press, printed catalogues, magazines, brochures, flyers, and now dedicate a biggest part of this budget to digital medias. Employee 1 reveals that “the only printed press he is still investing in is a specialized magazine because it is freely distributed in more than 1000 tennis clubs in France, which is a good way to directly reach consumers”. Also, the specialized press is henceforth more oriented toward digital formats such as videos. Employee 1 further illustrate: “for instance, to promote and communicate, before, we had to organize physical events, invite selected customers, find a place and so on and it was quite expensive and hard to reach a wide range of consumers. Now we can create events on socials networks where we are going to introduce the new racquets for instance, with teasing phases whereas before we would have presented the products through the traditional written press. Now we have more freedom, social medias allow us to create effective communication campaigns with a strong impact and with more videos and teasing”. Therefore, our findings reveal that
according to all the employees, digital communication is a way to reach a wider range of consumers by using nicer techniques (like videos, teasing and so on) and this allow a company to embed its brand message far more, which wouldn’t be possible or too costly with using printed press. However, it is important to notice that these changes have been made because social medias are becoming the number one communication tool for brands to target consumers, which has been highlighted by Employee 2. Further, our employee’ respondents haven’t considered the changes neither positive or negative as they all underline that is just a different way of operating in which brands need to adapt and communicate increasingly through social medias”. Employee 3 specifies that “it is good because it helps to tell a story to the customers. Social medias are a way to let customers experience the brand, products/services”. However, Employee 1 was more critical and his thought emphasize that brands cannot limit themselves to digital campaigns. Indeed, sports brands need to keep maintaining the contact with their customers, because it is still essential that consumers try the product before buying it, because sport products like a tennis racquet include performance requirements. According to Employee 1 the marketing strategy should “use digital to drive a communication campaign and reach consumers, to bring them back to something more real, and make them try products on physical places. The brands make a promise to the consumers via digital communication but there is still a need to try”. Therefore, to summarize our finding about this question, one can see that digital communication and printed press are still linked, and it is a global strategy on which brands must find the right balance. The answers to the first question has overlapped with the second when the respondents’ answers to the first one. But they have similar thoughts when it comes to explain how the increase of digital medias has impacted the way of establishing a marketing strategy.

When asking their point of view regarding brands’ collaboration with influencers, the distinction is made between influencers as athletes and influencers like bloggers, vloggers, YouTuber and so on. All the respondents agree to say that athletes are essential and consider that is an appropriate and effective solution to promote the brand. Indeed, according to them, athletes are important for a brand to sponsor because they bring credibility to the brand as consumers tend to highly identify with them. Even more with the increase of social medias, athletes are essential because brands now aim to show the daily-life of athlete to make the consumers feels that they are close to the sports player and that they are living the same experience. Both employee 1 and 3 highlights that it is a recent shift taken by many sports brands to make customers experience from the within. Employee 1 explains that “people don’t use social networks for the same purpose. Therefore, Facebook is more a way to diffuse contextual information such as “Discover our new racquet”, it is more information that would remain. Whereas social media like Snapchat or Instagram is more about instantaneous information, to see what is going on behind the scenes. Instagram creates more intimacy with the brand and its customers”. To illustrate this idea, Employee 1 gives the example of a communication campaign around Novak Djokovic that HEAD is currently conducting on Instagram. The campaign consists of a series of videos showing to the consumers Novak Djokovic as they have never seen him before. Employee 1 explains that “with this campaign, the consumers can feel closer to the professional player, as he/she sees Novak Djokovic in his intimacy inside the changing room where only players are allowed. Also, the videos convey a positive image of the athlete and have the purpose to show the tennis player has funny, attractive, accessible, likeable; they wanted to emphasise more his charismatic personality”.
However, their opinions slightly differ regarding the other kind of influencers like bloggers, vloggers, and so on. Employee 1 and 3 believe this new communication technique is good, even if the last one is more sceptical on the length of this trend. On his side, Employee 2 doesn’t feel that the practice is very employed in the sports industry but recognises the positive impact that external influencers can have on a brand communication. Therefore, our findings reflect that investing in external influencers is less expensive as they have a lower cost of producing videos than brands which have higher costs as they have to pay athletes, and have shot, filming, and producing costs. The answers also emphasise that these external influencers are very valuable because they have a huge outreach and influence over the consumers as most of them are followed by a high number of people. Another benefit of using external influencer pointed out by two of our respondents (Employee 1 and Employee 2) is that they are a way to reach a wider range of consumers, and even consumers not highly concerned with tennis or skis matters in order to generate more engagement with the brand. Besides, these influencers are used even more to create and provide consumers with a great experience.

Employee 1 explains that “HEAD aims now to use these influencers to convey a positive image of the brand and to retrieve influencers in other than tennis for instance”. He also says that “It is interesting to see that former athlete like Jon Olsson, have now a new role as brand ambassadors (more between athletes and influencers). Still, he has an athlete contract but is used by HEAD more as an ambassador for the brand since he stopped the competition and he’s now vlogging”. Further, we learned via our interviews that there are less and fewer tennis players in France. In addition, as aforementioned, now brands like HEAD invests less in direct communication and more in soft-communication. That is why Employee 1 points out that “the purpose of using external influencers is to inspire consumers, and create a need. Now, the brand must provide the willingness to play tennis, make tennis sounds like sexy via these influencers, to give further the need to play with a HEAD tennis racquet.” For instance, Employee 2 illustrates that the brand organised a fashion show during one tournament and they collaborated with the first runner-up Miss France who paraded with HEAD textile. Moreover, we discuss with the Employee 3 who drives an innovative marketing strategy with the new Kore series of freeride skis. HEAD is releasing the Kore skis in fall of 2017, but they already start to tease about them by sending special packages to their athletes (Jon Olsson for example) composed of the new skis, fixations, a cap, a sweat and a t-shirt at the start of the year 2017. In exchange, athletes had to publish contents on their social networks about the new skis. However, Employee 3 is balanced and as he believes that “it is good but not for long because I don’t get how people can trust influencers that much, people doesn’t understand it is fake”.

In a second part, we asked questions related to sponsorship and marketing, to get a better understanding, identify, and apprehend the role of sponsorship in a marketing strategy. We required the respondents to enumerate and classify the objectives of a brand to sponsor an athlete. While conducting the interviews we learned that HEAD sponsored international players who are managed by the group and other players who are managed by the subsidiaries. There are national scouting’s to find young players from 10 years old to professional players. For instance, HEAD France sponsors players aged between 10 to 18 years old, and adults ranked until the 150th worldwide place. After this ranking, the players get international sponsorship contracts handled by the headquarter (Employee 2). According to all the employees interviewed, even if there are several levels of objectives, the main goal is to create brand awareness and increase the brand image according to the strategy established because the athletes have a significant visibility during competitions, with a lot
of spectators watching them. Employee 1 emphasises that “the objective is to convey an image of performance and quality with the best athletes in the world.”.

Further, our findings reveal that all respondents agree to say that the ultimate goal of sponsorship is to indirectly generate sales because athletes bring credibility to the products. Moreover, Employee 1 and 2 explained that the consumers identify themselves to these players, and they induce consumers to play with the same equipment. Indeed, Employee 3 illustrates this statement by saying that “For instance when a HEAD player won a tournament like grand slam (like Roland Garros, Wimbledon) on Sunday, the next day shops notice an increase of sales concerning the model of the racquet the player use (i.e., Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray)”.

Regarding the local players, Employee 1 also adds that “this sponsorship is also important because the brand also needs a local influence”. He develops his statement by saying that “sponsoring a local athlete with good performances can be a way to retain a tennis club because the player is an influential member inside his/her club”. To summarise what are the main objectives for a brand to sponsors professional athletes, Employee 1 stresses that “sponsorship has for purpose to create a high-quality image of the brand, and a marketing image to, therefore, sell the products like for instance the racquets used by the best tennis players”.

We then asked the employee to understand how they select an athlete to sponsor. Our findings demonstrate that the employees all agree to say that performance is still important criteria. However, it is not the only one anymore. The performance and results in competition are the first things that HEAD looks at because the brand aims to get the best athletes in the world. The performance will also determine the basis and the different requirements of the sponsorship contract. However, the respondents all underline that is not anymore, the only criteria. Results reveal that HEAD ambitions to have a global vision of the athlete. Employee 3 says that “It is an overall package.”. The brand also takes account of the environment of the player. Indeed, Employee 2 states that “When selecting an athlete, we look at if the player has the potential for growing and performing on the strategic and physical level. It is important also to discuss with the player, to see his/her ambition, and to see if the player has his/her feet on the ground and his/her head on the shoulders”. Employee 3 also points out something really important for sponsoring an athlete: “It is also important that an athlete has the same values and convey same values as the brand”. To summarise our finding, we notice that the commercial aspect, which represents everything surrounding the athlete’s image that the brand can use and value to sell its brand image and promote its products/services is important when selecting an athlete to sponsor. Employee 1 argues that are important “the charisma aspect, his/her humour, his/her behaviours, his/her sexy personality”. Employee 1 illustrates his point of view by saying that “we have chosen to sponsor local athletes or influencers to promote HEAD textile and generate demand because it is too expensive and impossible to have textile contracts with top worldwide players. That is why for instance, we offered a textile contract to a young tennis woman player who wears perfectly the outfits of HEAD and who has influence and good visibility in her region. Thus, the strategy is to create need through the local influencers who are going to fit well in the clothing and post online images or videos to highlight the brand and at the end influence people on their clothing choice”.

Regarding an example of a marketing campaign using an athlete that inspired him, Employee 3 says the campaign between Nike and Michael Jordan that manages to make Jordan as a brand name, same for Usain Bolt, or Adidas and the football players during the world cup. Employee 2 chooses the campaign of Tennis Magazine in 1996 that introduced Richard
Gasquet, who was nine years old at that time on the front page. Employee 2 says that “this campaign was highly striking for him as he was the same age than Richard Gasquet”.

Our last part of the interview interrogates the employee regarding the relation between influence and social medias. Employee 3 follows the performance of athletes but not necessarily HEAD athletes because is not a big fan of HEAD players for tennis, but he follows Federer (Wilson player). Employee 1 follows HEAD athletes and the main results as it is part of his job, but he mainly follows other athletes for personal interests. Employee 2, however, follow more the athletes as it is directly linked to his job. When asking how he follows them, he says that “via Facebook, as young players are all very active on Facebook during their tournaments, their training sessions and they are also expressive about their project, coach and so on. Therefore, it is a way to get information about them”. Otherwise, Employee 2 also says that he moves a lot on the different tournament to observe the players and talk with them. Moreover, he highlights that “an increasing number of players have blogs, personal internet page, professional accounts on social networks and so on, so it is also a way to follow the players sponsored but also the players sponsored by the concurrent brands”.

Our findings reveal that HEAD barely measures and follow the influence of their athletes, they mostly try to have a global overview. The arguments put forward by the respondents are that it is time-consuming and difficult to really measure and calculate the return on investments of sponsorship (Employee 1 and Employee2). However, Employee 3 explains that “HEAD use a specific tool called Socialbakers to measure the influence of top players on social medias, but also an old-school technique which consists in daily look at publications and looks at the likes/followers” however he also limits the potential of this when saying that “social medias are not the first key performance indicator for athletes, the first is competition performances, and then the image on their social medias”. We noticed when interviewing employee 1 and 2, that for subsidiaries like HEAD France they have no tool to really measure the influence of the players sponsored even if they try to follow them on social medias.

We got comparable results regarding their willingness to follow and control the publication of the athletes sponsored. All the respondents underline that it is hard or even impossible to directly control what the athletes published on social networks as the information spreads really fast, this would be too much work to do. Employee 3 says “athletes are free to post, HEAD only analysed the comments on the publications in order to check if the feedbacks are positive or negative”. However, employee 1 and 3 emphasise that HEAD is very reactive if something negative which could harm the brand image is published. They declare that athletes can’t disparage or denigrate the brand. Employee 3 illustrates this by saying that “When Lindsey Vonn published last year a video of her breaking her skis after she lost a race, the brand tried to solve the problem as soon as possible by talking with the athlete to get explanations and ask for apologies”. Furthermore, employee 2 stresses that athletes have specific requirements and obligations toward the brand. He declares that “players are asked to post a picture when they receive their equipment at the beginning of the season. And emails are regularly sent to ask them to post publications and pictures showing the brand products to give a good visibility to the brand”.

Finally, our last question asked to the respondents if they think that is still possible for a brand to be absent from social medias now. As already felt throughout the interviews answers all the employees believe that is impossible now to overlook the importance of social medias in the communication strategy of brands. Employee 1 argues that “there is a
need to have a wide range of people talking about the brand, and its products. Before communication was mainly through the athletes because they had the best and bigger exposure in term of visibility, but now digital allows brands to enlarge the diffusion of their communication and reach more people. For instance, the athletes are required to add the hashtag #headtennis at the end of each of their publications, to increase the impact and the number of people affected by the message”. Employees 2 and 3 also agree on that question and state that is indispensable to be absent from social medias now. Employee 2 says that “now there is not even a brand that is not on social medias, but it is only some brands that have a less focus on social networks strategy”. We learned by interviewing employee 1 that sports distribution is currently moving because of the increase of online shops, and the creation of big franchises or retail chains, at the expense of independent shops which number is significantly decreasing. Consequently, brands have to adapt and change their communication and sponsoring approaches. In doing so, employee 1 explains that HEAD is changing is communication investments strategy. Indeed, before 90% of the communication budget was for intermediaries such as tennis clubs, monitors, medias and only 10% to some website. But now with the changes noticed in sports distribution and with an increasingly volatile customers brand has to directly target and reach the final consumers. Employee 1 adds that “the ultimate goal of sponsoring communication is to sell products and helps retailers to sell the equipment. However, HEAD need to make the consumers buy a HEAD racquet, and needs to gain customer loyalty. So now it is important to convince in direct to avoid any customers’ losses. So right now, HEAD tend to rebalance its investments and directly reach its final customers”.

4.3. Athletes

In this part, we introduce the athletes’ answers according to the main topics identified during the interviews (Appendix 2), we first present the results related to their perception of the brands marketing strategy and the changes with digital communication, then about their sponsorships and finally about their social media influence.

The athletes don’t feel threatened by external influencers such as bloggers or Instagramers indeed, athlete 1 and athlete 2 underline that even if brands are asking for daily-life communication, it is sometimes hard for the athletes to always have his/her phone during practices, races because they need to focus on their performances. Some athletes have another person to manage their accounts for them. The opinions of the athletes interviewed about external influencers is relatively positive, as they consider that this new type of influencers are important because they are able to quickly create the buzz around their post as they have many followers. However, athlete 2 is more critical and believes that it is not enough. Indeed according to him “consumers prefer to see that a ski-equipment is well working on an athlete rather than a blogger”. Athlete 2 adds that “influencers such as athletes, on the one hand, are useful to emphasise the performance and the quality of a product and on the other hand, influencers such as blogger are more useful to introduce a product, and to show give, collect and share a point of view on product”. Indeed, our findings emphasize that athletes’ opinions slightly differ on the impact of external influencers. Even if they don’t see as a bad thing, they agree to say that influencers such as bloggers, vloggers and so on, don’t have such a significant impact as athletes. Indeed, the explanation is that for a sports brand, consumers identify themselves more to an athlete because of its performance and because he brings more credibility regarding the equipment. Athlete 1 stresses that “Sponsors increasingly ask athletes to share their everyday life, so they have to
adapt to this way of communicating”, also “to answer to this new demand, that did not exist 3 years ago, influencers are complementary” however athlete 3 explains that “sometimes communication with external influencers can be controversial as they may not know the sport they are communicating with”.

For the question related to the new way of marketing via the increase use of social medias, athletes 1 and athlete 2 agree to say that it is helpful for athletes as it is a way to generate more revenues for them, and a way to make athletes more attractive and to convey a good image of the athletes. Our results also highlight that the increased of social media allow the athlete to easily and better promote the brand image of a sponsor, or the products such as the equipment provided. Athlete 1 argues that “from now on, the visibility of athletes has been enlarged by the increased use of social medias because through these networks the information has an exponential growing as every video, every Facebook live is instantly compounded. And with this new trend, people want to follow the athletes daily-life, to be as close as possible to their idol and for instance, this is possible with the Facebook live”. Athletes 1 concludes on the question by saying that “It is an intrusive trend, but it is exciting. Indeed, in doing so, consumers are going to turn on the television, they are willing to consume to have the same ski than Alexis Pinturault for instance”.

When formulating and classifying the objectives of a brand to sponsor athletes, all athletes agree that the main objectives are commercial (increase sales) and marketing (increase the image). Athlete 1 says that “there are various reasons, the first one is the brand image through the image of its athletes sponsored and his/her performances. Then the objective is to sell and sell HEAD equipment because a lot of people are going to identify themselves to what equipment the athletes are using”. Moreover, athlete 2 states that “the first objective the brand explained to him when he got his contract, was to better and on a long-lasting basis establish the brand in France, and through athletes’ image and performances attest that HEAD are the best. There are huge benefits of sponsoring from the ski monitor to the tourist”.

Our findings reveal that all the athletes interviewed consider that performance and the results during competition are still nowadays the first aspect that a brand value. However, they also all admit that brands are now looking to additional qualities. Athlete 3 answers that “the brand is also looking if the athlete correctly reasons, how he/she behaves, and what he/she can contribute to the brand”. Athlete 2 responds that “now brands tend to select according to charisma, and between two athletes with similar results the brand will choose the most charismatic”. So, results show that now communication skills are also very important if an athlete wants to be sponsored. Athlete 1 confirms that “the sponsor considers if the athlete is a good communicator. Brands look at the global image of the athletes, but communication is important and can sometimes be even more essential than performance.” Therefore, our findings emphasise that athletes should be endowed with the skill of articulation to carry well the sponsor message and value the brand. So now, according to our athletes’ answers, brands are significantly paying attention to notoriety, charisma. To summarise, there are a lot of criteria to consider for an athlete to be attractive for a sponsor, and not only the performance anymore.

Furthermore, regarding their affinity with social medias, athlete 1 stopped his professional page on Facebook because he thinks that he has less impact, he also states that “it is important for an athlete to be careful with social medias because there are codes of conduct to respect”. He also says that “social medias can be dangerous and now the younger generation has to master well all these networks, and it is important they are well advised
because the information goes fast and they have no right to be mistaken now”. Athlete 3 is not connected, he has a player page which is managed by an external person because he explains that “it is important to stay focused on our game and our performances. Always searching for visibility is complicated and is time-consuming”, he isn’t willing to use too much social media and says that “maybe it is related to the personality of the player”. On this side, athlete 2 tells us that “he mainly uses social medias when there is something to tell, and he always tries to be active on these networks for the sponsors”, indeed, according to him “it is his job to be on social medias to promote the brand, it is now part of his contract”.

Finally, none of them follows their statistics on their social medias. However, they notice they have a bite of influence on their audience. Indeed, athlete 1 who is a retired athlete, considers that he still has an influence on people, since he is also a sports consultant for a well-known sports TV channel. He says the following “I think I tend to have an influence on purchasing behaviour when people see that I am wearing a coat from one of my sponsors, or when I am using equipment from another sponsor. I think people listen and identify themselves, my past career and performance give me credibility”. Athlete 3 notices that “people are paying close attention. For instance, when I meet people, they notice the brand of the racquet I am using. Also, for instance, I have just signed for a textile sponsoring contract with HEAD, and since I am wearing the clothing I got remarks like “oh it looks nice, I didn’t know about HEAD outfits”, so yes I think I can have a little of influence”. However, athlete 2 believes he has little influence only on a local level, but it is hard to measure.

4.4. Customers

In this part, we introduce the customers’ answers regarding to the main topics of the interviews (Appendix 3). We start by the results related to their vision of advertisement, then about their perception with athletes and sport brands and finally about their behaviour regarding social medias.

Firstly, it is important to notice that all our respondents notice the changes in advertisement with the growth of social medias, they are all sensitive to the commercials they can face every day when they are connected on Facebook, Instagram and so on. Our customer 2 highlight the fact she feels closer to the brand and the promotion on social networks for the new generation (Y and Z) than traditional commercials we can have on TV. Most of the respondents are okay with this new kind of advertising and they think is it good because they can have diversified advertisements that TV does not offer (most of the time, always the same commercials). In all our respondent, only the customer 5 answers there is a bit too much advertisement around us and it “should be more selective”. During all the other interviews, they do not mention that there are too many advertisements, but they say advertising should be more and more targeted on social networks. For our customer 2, an advertising on social networks who do not target the right person could have a negative influence; when the customer 4 thinks, it is easy today to select the advertisement we want to receive by using a plugin like AdBlock or similar solutions that remove promotion content from the web pages. Talking about the influencers, they could be an alternative to the traditional advertisement we can find on social medias; all our respondents give positive feedback about it for diverse reasons like the influencer show the product or the service in the situation, how he or she uses it every day. This new kind of marketing also helps a brand when they share the same values with the influencer; and our customer 2 working with
influencers every day told us the feedbacks could be negative if she did not target the suitable influencer for the brand. The customer 3 highlights the negative strategies a brand could have by writing the posts of the influencers for them. So, influencers post almost the same picture but with an entirely identical message, and without this proximity, the message on social networks is less efficient. Only our customer 4, even if he understands why brand are using influencers and the positive effect behind it, he does not understand how so many people could follow those influencers. The customer 1 gives the example of GoPro on social networks like Instagram; the brand promotes its products by sharing influencers pictures or videos every day. Customer 2 provides us with how she chooses influencers for the varied brands she works with, more than the community the influencer, she prefers to work with quality, taking the time to select the influencers fitting with the product to highlight; and she looks at the engagement the influencer generates more than the likes made.

Then, all our respondents know what the sponsorship and athletes are. They are also sensitive to the concept of an athlete used for the promotion, even if our customer 3 is sensitive if the promotion shows the values and the image of the brand via the new product and the athlete, rather than a weak message only showing a product. They were also all able to mention at least one athlete with one of his sponsor, most of the time sponsorship contract you can spot on TV with commercials like Antoine Griezmann, the French football player with Gillette (customer 2, 3 and 5) or sportswear equipment (“this is the first thing with see” – Customer 1) like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal with Nike (customer 1 and 3) or Quicksilver with Candide Thovex (customer 4 and 6). Moreover, they all think sponsorship is a good marketing strategy for sports brands because the “consumer can identify themselves with the athlete” (customer 1), and “athletes are for the sport what models are for fashion” (customer 1). Our customer 2 thinks sports brands are a bite late for using influencers in their marketing strategies because they focus all on the athletes for the communication. However, some customers give us their insights about how a sports brand can communicate effectively without using athletes. For example, customer 3 tells us a company can use other leverage to catch a potential customer like talking about the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) of the brand if the brand takes care of the planet as much as possible for example. And the customer 6 has almost the same reasoning, giving the example of the French brand Picture Organic Clothing who built its image without using athletes but only communication about the mention “ecological products”. For our customer 4 who see the sponsorship of the athlete as an “advertising poster”, he regrets that ski brands are now less present in ski-resorts to give the opportunity to try their products and bet too much on digital communication to present a product. It is interesting to notice that the customers 4 divides sponsors into three categories, first, the outfits because this is the first thing we see (Uniqlo on Novak Djokovic), then, the equipment to perform (Faction skis for Candide Thovex) and the others (Gillette for Antoine Griezmann). When we ask the question if they feel influenced by an athlete, a brand or both, the audience is divided. Half answers no (customer 1, 3 and 5) and half answers yes (customer 2, 4 and 6). Customer 1 answers no because he wants to try the product before buying it and seeing an athlete with a special product will not influence his purchasing behaviour. Instead of the customer 3 who is totally influenced by the athlete. Customers 4 and 6 would be influenced by both the brand and the athlete when they will see a video of the skis, used by a professional athlete for example.

About the behaviour of our respondents concerning the social medias, they all follow brands on social networks (GoPro, RedBull, Nike, and so on) except the customer 5. It is interesting to notice that the customer 2 follow brands for professional purposes or because she like “the universe the brand created or because the marketing strategy is interesting”. However, two
of our respondents do not follow athletes on social networks (customer 2 and 4) because they prefer to follow the brand who will share directly the highlights of the athletes, so they can follow the athletes’ performances when a page like GoPro often share the best moves of their athletes. Concerning the others, they follow the for different reasons, most of the time it is the best from the sport they practice like Roger Federer (customer 1) or Lewis Hamilton (customer 5). But also because the athlete is one of the best in the customer’s country (customer 1 follow Richard Gasquet, customer 3 with Martin Fourcade) or because the athlete comes from the area of the customer (customer 1 with Julien Bénétou or customer 6 with Candide Thovex). Customer 3 likes to follow athletes that are really covered by the traditional medias like the TV, for example, she was able to follow the competition of Marie Martinod on Facebook direct. However, our respondents answer no (except customer 4 who says, “a little”) to the question if they feel influenced by the “traditional advertising” we can find on websites (banners), Google (first results) with a little targeting system. And when we want to know if they feel influenced by athletes and influencers who post something on his or her social networks to promote a product, a service or a brand, half of them feel the influence (customer 2, 4 and 6) because they follow these persons for reasons, so they trust them and will look more the details on each post. Customer 2 mentions she does not feel influenced directly, but more on the long term when the influencer/athlete has made few posts for the same thing because she can see the product in different situation and she can imagine herself with the product thanks to the proximity she can feel on social media by following someone and not a brand. Moreover, the customer 4 gives us her feedback about the Generation Z (by analysing her cousins), she feels they more influenced by people on social networks because they like every post and they do not have the same behaviour as previous generations (doing Live streaming, using emoji’s everywhere, and so on).

Thanks to all the different answers we got from the interviews, all around the four same main topics, we can analyse in details the role of the athletes and the influence they could have on customers in the marketing strategy of a sports brand.
5. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, we analyse the empirical findings of the previous part and put through the theoretical framework. The empirical material guides the chapter, and the analysis will be provided with running discussion.

The discussion in a qualitative analysis is rather free and, unlike a quantitative analysis, it does not include many rules (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.200). All the content will be interpreted by following the frame of the empirical findings. The role of sponsored athletes in the marketing strategy of a sports brand, the keystone of our thesis, will be analysed by bringing together different topics: (1) the importance of social medias in the marketing strategy, (2) the sponsorship at the center of the strategy, and (3) the use of athletes in the social media strategy. The aim is to analyse the data while considering the theories described in the theoretical part.

5.1. The importance of social medias in the marketing strategy

5.1.1. Social media as predominant media to receive target advertising

The Internet and especially social medias are now necessary for a marketing strategy. As all HEAD’s employees interviewed told us, they do not conceive a sports brand absent from social medias today. Which is understandable when the figures show that 75% of male internet users are on Facebook, and 83% of female internet users and; Facebook is used by almost a quarter of the overall population and the number of active users is still growing (Lister, 2017), none brand would say no to the opportunity to reach around 3 persons out on 4 on the internet. Each of our respondents is at least connected to one social network, and people are used to deal with brands now through social media. And not only young, even if the young generations have the higher score with 49,5% of the 18-24 who have dealt with a brand through social media before, but it is also more than one person of +55 years old out of four. So, companies can target people from different generations through the social medias, even if the gen Y and Z remain the most active. Moreover, a brand should think mobile when they are developing a marketing strategy nowadays. Smartphones are used increasingly to check content on social networks. This is the case with YouTube where more than half of the videos are watched from a mobile device (Lister, 2017).

HEAD’s strategy is moving increasingly to the digital medias. It is the actual trend, 70% of marketing professional expect to increase their investment on social media in the next 12 months, and more than any other marketing activity such as TV, catalogue, and so on (DBS Interactive). And we got the same point of view from the interviews we conducted with HEAD’s employees; they are decreasing their investment in magazine and other traditional advertisement. The tennis branch is keeping a small budget in France, dedicated to Tennis Magazine because it is a very targeted segment and they know they touch the tennis man and woman directly in their clubs because they are all subscribed to the magazine. But as we see with the ski strategy, they are completely switching to the digital and stop the papers; it is a worldwide decision. They get a bigger return on investment, and it seems to be more appropriate as we saw with the customers, a lot of them are following ski brands and other brands related to the snow segment on social networks regularly, and they feel influenced by it. From the experience they have with social networks at HEAD; they are changing the way they post by having different posts depending on the network. Employee 1 tells for
example that Facebook is a media to inform people, where you can introduce new products and information on a long term when Instagram is more to entertain people, a network where you share the moment and followers want to live an experience with the athletes via the posts.

85% of businesses are currently using social medias only to drive traffic and increase awareness (DBS Interactive, 2017), but they can do more by using a new kind of celebrities we called, influencers.

5.1.2. The growth of influencers

Social networks are the new high schools, people who have the popularity are regrouping with individuals who are looking for it and those individuals follow the popular persons. Brands are now willing to pay a lot to be on popular posts shared on influencers accounts (Agrawal, 2016). And the figures are high for millennials. For one-third of them, they consider Instagram as the most important social networks, and most Instagram users are between 18 and 29 years old, that is about six-in-ten online adults (Lister, 2017), and Instagram is the most used networks for influencers. This is something the digital specialist (customer 2) we interviewed is aware of. When brands are using social media to drive traffic and increase awareness mostly, 71% of the brands also think community engagement is the key behind their presence on social networks (DBS Interactive, 2017).

And to create community engagement, brands are hiring influencers. As we talked with the customer 2, the digital consultant, engagement is one of the KPI she is looking at while working with influencers. A company is not only looking for likes and brand awareness anymore, but the goal is also now to convert the like into a purchase decision. HEAD is one of the pioneers in the social medias; they started using influencers years ago at an international level as we see with the employees. But even if influencers who have an international community are dealing with HEAD HQ, in Austria, HEAD France has the power to deal contract with a smaller influencer on a national or even local level. The employee 2 gave us the example of a young woman now under contract with HEAD Tennis to promote the brand via her Instagram account. It is a cheap investment for HEAD, and the girl has constraints to follow. Those constraints are sometimes the biggest issue with the influencers because they are not professional and they do not realise the importance of their posts. For instance, employee 2 gave the example of an influencer who did not match his outfit; he posted a picture with a T-Shirt from the 2016 season with 2017 short. This may appear not significant but it is significant for the brand. Indeed, they want to promote their actual products and maximise the return on investment.

By the way, even if they have small problems with influencers sometimes, it remains a valuable investment and even more when one of the influencers can create the buzz.

5.1.3. The word-of-mouth power as a reward

The word-of-mouth (WOM) is part of viral marketing. The concept of WOM is a communication about a brand, product or a service between people who are perceived to have no attachment to a commercial entity (Carl, 2006, pp.604-605). Brands can mostly thank influencers or early adopters when they create the word-of-mouth (a publication going viral) because they have the community to whom they share their discovery. Social media marketing strategy is a main component of WOM marketing, and to create this spread, companies should always think about innovation, not traditional innovation on a product, but something we can call “social media innovation”. If a company is able to innovate in the
way they communicate on the social platforms, they are more able to generate this word-of-mouth (also called “buzz” sometimes) because people on social networks like to experience new things.

This is what HEAD started to do with the #TOTHEKORE campaign. It is the first time an extreme sports product uses that kind of “teasing strategy” to promote a product. They mix the innovation in their segment with the best of social networks. They started from the fact that the freestyle segment was competitive and they should bring unique qualities. So, they developed the KORE line; a new freestyle skis line using material never used before such as graphene (O’Neill, 2017). We discussed with the Employee 3 about this strategy, because, building a good product is not enough, the go-to-market strategy needs to be perfect as well. So, HEAD decided to change the rule of the market, and instead of starting the promotion when the ski was almost released, they began the campaign nearly a year before. And they bet on social medias, they created the hashtag #TOTHEKORE and sent special packages to ski influencers and athletes with one rule: spread the word. They should all post to social media one to two times a month something with the hashtag. So, they were skiing with skis that no one would have before one year in exchange for a post, for example, Jon Olsson did an unboxing video to talk about the KORE skis. And it works, the strategy generates as today, over 1 000 posts using the hashtag #TOTHEKORE, and people are asking where to get those skis (O’Neill, 2017).

So, a well-organized marketing strategy using social media is essential to get good results. But it could be not enough, as we seen with HEAD, companies should think out of the box if they want to maximise the return on investment and generate buzz.

5.2. Sponsorship at the centre of the strategy

5.2.1. Athletes and sponsors doing one

As aforementioned the relationship between an athlete and a sponsor is a win-win situation, meaning that in on hand an athlete gets revenues from his/her sponsorship contracts as well as equipment. But on the other hand, the sponsor enjoys and take benefits the image of the athlete sponsored to enlarge its visibility, to promote its brand and its products/services and to create a unique relationship with the consumers. Therefore, they both rely on each other.

When analysing our results, we noticed that main elements are cementing the relationship between an athlete and a sponsor based on confidence and loyalty. Those factors include the image of the athletes, his/her outreach on the targeted audience, the overall personality and behaviour of the athletes and the overall environment (Arokallio & Tuominen, 2006) Our findings reveal that the athletes considered that they act as a guarantee of expertise and trustworthiness for the brand toward the consumers. Therefore, athletes are essential for a brand to bring credibility and to guarantee the quality and performance of its products. When sponsoring a professional athlete, a brand becomes inevitably associated with this athlete (Arokallio & Tuominen, 2006). Indeed, when questioning our customer's sample, we notice that top international athletes are very well associated to at least one of their sponsors by the customers.

Nowadays, the recently move of sports brands toward digital medias have strengthened this relationship. Indeed, brands aim to ensure a unique and fulfilling experience to the consumers by bringing him the closest as possible to the athletes. This new trend has arisen from the increasing use of social networks to answer to the customer need and curiosity to
know more about the daily life of his/her icons. Therefore, brands have taken the opportunity of the first wave of digital innovation to change their communication strategies. The goal is now to make live a full experience to the consumer. Now brands are more concerned about reaching directly the consumer and even more reaching the consumer that doesn’t know already that he/she needs the brand product. Brands are searching to create emotions for the consumers. So, sponsors and athletes are now closer than before, and one can now consider they are acting in a single dynamic. That is why for instance HEAD has launched the campaign showing the daily life of Novak Djokovic on Instagram. To make the consumers feel closer to the professional player.

However, risks cannot be excluded. Indeed, sponsorship involves some risks that must be taken into consideration and even more now with the increase of social networks. Sponsors and athletes are doing one, meaning that the image of the sponsor brand is automatically linked to the athlete operating on his/her own outside the company boundaries. Therefore, as soon as this last one misbehaves, acts unethically, defames the brand, or is involved in scandals the brand image of the sponsors can be damaged, and which can indirectly impact the product sales (Arokallio & Tuominen, 2006). Indeed, this issue was underlined in our findings, but the brand is reactive if its image is harmed by negative posts or comments. Also, the athlete can at any time lose his/her contract with a brand if the prerequisites are not respected. It is important to consider that with the increasing use of social medias; a message is spread worldwide fast and can have quickly repercussions on the athlete and the brand.

Taking into consideration this first part of analysis, it is important to examine the sponsor's requirements toward the athletes sponsored to build a relationship of mutual trust.

5.2.2. Performance is still the first criteria, but not the only one anymore

In sponsorship contracts, sports results are essential to the profitability of the operation. Indeed, it seems perfectly normal that a company which invests in athletes’ sponsorship requires good results in exchange. Whether we interrogated HEAD employees or athletes, they all agree that performance is the first criteria that a brand looks for when selecting an athlete for a contract. Pope et al. (2009, pp. 6-7) demonstrate in their study that identifies that spill over effects to sponsorship regarding the winning or losing of a sponsored team or athlete. Indeed, performance results can impact the brand’s products evaluation from the customers, if the sponsor products are used by an athlete during a performance, meaning that the perception of the brand’s quality tend to be more favourable when the sponsored is winning than when it is losing (Pope et al., 2009 pp.14-16).

Moreover, sponsoring or also called endorsement marketing rely upon psychological mindsets. One of the main reasons for the effective use of athletes in business communication is emotions and memorization. Our brain works in such a way that the intense emotions we can feel, encourage the memorization. Thus anger, joy or sadness open the door of our memory to the information we receive. Therefore, the athletes provoke emotions in us, which favour the withholding of information around: a message, the name of a brand, or product (Brand and celebrities, p.7)

For instance, the victory of Novak Djokovic (HEAD player) in Roland Garros in 2016 was striking for many tennis fans because he won the only major Grand Slam title missing from his sparkling resume and he wrote a new page in the history of tennis (BBC). Indeed, he achieved a very rare feat in the history of tennis: winning four consecutive Grand Slam tournaments, which took him a step further in becoming one of the best players. Through his victory, Djokovic also conveyed strong values such as performance, excellence,
determination to succeed, hope, tenacity, combativeness, and motivation and so on. And this was a great opportunity for HEAD in that way.

However, to enjoy all the benefits of sponsorship, the performance is not enough anymore, many criteria are to be taken into consideration for a brand when selecting an athlete. And this applies even more now with the increase of social medias which enlarged the athlete’s visibility.

By associating a mark with an athlete, a transfer of meanings occurs. The brand then also carries these values and properties (Brand and celebrities, p.7) Indeed because of the transfer mechanism, the association of an athlete with a brand also allows the development of a positive association that influences our perception of the brand. Therefore, our positive attitude towards the athlete is transposed to his/her sponsors. Over time, the brand will be associated with positive values that will extend beyond the initial communication campaign. Furthermore, McCormick (2013, p.22) explains that “according to the transfer meaning model, the athletes’ effectiveness as endorsers stems from the cultural meanings they possess”. This process is structured into three steps: the first one is concerned with building the athlete image, the second one involves the transfer of the features of the image from the athlete to the product, and the third step includes by the transfer of the message meaning from the product to the consumer (McCormick, 2013, p.22). Therefore, aside to the results and the athlete’s performance, a brand will search for a wide range of other criteria. Brands look for athletes who will share the same values as the brand, and they look at the athletes at a whole. Our research highlights that brands are interested in the global image of an athlete, meaning the charisma, the attractiveness, the notoriety the humour of an athletes but also the way he/she can communicate and behave to well represent the brand.

Further, McCormick (2013, pp.24-33) enumerates different aspects to select the right and most effective athlete to sponsor in order to reach the brand objectives, which are the following: a likeable personality, a character style, a source attractiveness, a source credibility. A likeable personality represents the way consumers will see the athlete if he/she is good person, friendly or likeable (McCormick, 2013, p.24). Then the character style is also very important, it involves the social image of the athletes, how the athlete raise its profile and boost visibility especially through the social networks, and how he/she is perceived by the consumers, the athlete should have a positive image, and avoid being illicit, unethical or being into scandals (McCormick, 2013, p.24). A negative image may result in a damaged image and reputation (McCormick, 2013, p.25). The attractiveness of the athlete also enables to convey a message and persuade consumers (McCormick, 2013, p.29). For instance, Employee 1 explains that the brand recently sponsors a young women tennis player to represent and promote the textile of HEAD because she is well wearing the clothes and she is influent in her region. Finally, the credibility of the athlete is important as it is the prerequisite to ensure trustworthiness and expertise of the message on which the sponsor wants to communicate (McCormick, 2013, p.32).

To conclude selecting the right athlete to promote a brand or product is essential and doesn’t rely anymore on the performance of this one. Indeed, the more positive, likeable, and credible he/she is acting during his/her public appearance or on social medias, the more beneficial it would be for the brand.

5.2.3. Sponsorship to drive the sales

When questioning about the objectives of sponsorships the results highlights that the two main objectives for companies to sponsor professional athletes are to build brand image and
create awareness. Indeed, our research emphasize that all employees acknowledged that the final goal is to generate sales, but the first objectives are to create brand awareness and to increase the image of the brand according to the strategy established. In addition, athletes’ answers, confirm this statement, they reveal that the first objective is to strengthen the brand image through the image of the athletes sponsored and his/her performances. Further, customers by identifying themselves to the equipment used by athletes, the objective is to sell HEAD equipment.

Indeed, by associating a mark with an athlete, we already mentioned that a transfer of meanings occurs. The brand then also carries these values and properties via the athlete’s image. Therefore, the consumer will then buy the brand and its products to appropriate these distinctive and rewarding attributes. This mechanism of the transfer of meaning makes it possible to make a product desirable and to influence the attitude of the consumer as well as his intention to purchase (Brand and celebrities, p.7). Employee 1 summarises well this, explaining that “sponsorship has for purpose to create a high-quality image of the brand, and a marketing image to, therefore, sell the products like for instance the racquets as used by the best tennis players”. Indeed, when sponsoring a top worldwide player, a brand aim to build brand image and increase brand awareness because the players are highly present on tournaments with a lot of spectators watching them. Consumers identify themselves to these players, and they induce consumers to play with the same equipment.

McCormick (2013, p.23) argues that “companies attempt to transfer the positive associations with the athletic star to the product; in turn, consumers will buy the product because they like the athlete endorsing the product”. Indeed, if an athlete obtains good results, it can have impacts on product sales. For instance, HEAD can notice a bit the phenomenon when a player sponsored by the brand won a major tournament, which would slightly increase the sales of products related to the athlete (Employee 3). Therefore, driving sales are more an indirectly objective of athletes’ sponsorship because sponsorship brings credibility to the product. Employee 1 confirms this when emphasising that “the objective is to convey an image of performance and quality with the best athletes in the world”. But this will at the end influence whether the consumer will consume the product or not.

On the customer’s side, our findings illustrate that consumers are relatively sensitive to the influence of the athletes. Results highlight that if their favourite athlete conveys a message or brand values, they would be attentive. However, results are not conclusive regarding the influence of athletes over the purchasing behaviour. The customers answering that they can be influenced are those expressing that they can identify themselves to an athlete and then they will feel the need to buy the same equipment. On the other side, the customers that showed they don’t feel influenced are those that have a need to try the products, especially sports products that demand special and technical requirements.

However, Employee 1 explained to us that the sports distribution is currently moving and evolving. The consequence of this is that brand should adapt and have to target the consumers directly. In that purpose and linked to the increase of social networks, sponsorship has evolved also, and the brand, as HEAD did, should manage a shift in the way of communicating.

While sports sponsorship aims ultimately at the same objectives as advertising, meaning to promote the brand, its effectiveness is sometimes superior. The values raised from the sport add value to the brand image. Traditional advertising aims to raise awareness of the brand and promote the products, but sports sponsorship contributes to making consumer love the
brand and retain them. At the same time, sports sponsorship is often less expensive and more effective than traditional advertising, while also being profitable. Indeed, when sponsoring local athletes for instance HEAD only need to provide equipment for the season, in exchange the players use the equipment during training and competitions. They also have an obligation toward the brand to post images, video, or digital content to promote the brand. This promotion has a wider impact and is less expensive than promoting via traditional printed press. Indeed, players enjoy a huge visibility and thanks to the increasingly use of social medias the impact of their post on social networks is enlarged, so it is possible to reach more people in short time, which wouldn’t be possible with classic advertising.

Taking into consideration the new situation of the sport's distribution and the increase of digital communication, HEAD, for instance, has already taken a big shift in the digital. They change their approach regarding how they use the athlete in their digital communication strategy and are now considering the use of a new kind of influencers. This is developed further in our last part.

5.3. The use of the athletes in social medias strategy

5.3.1. Social medias and targeting

Social feeds are crowded, a brand should target to perform on social networks. Relevance is one of the keys for a brand to promote its content. It is important that a post reaches the right segments of an intended audience (Cuttica, 2016). Today, big companies such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and so on provide free service to the final customer, it is because, in exchange, they have much more to earn. By offering a free service, those companies are creating databases with the personal data of everyone. And they analyse the data in order to sell them indirectly to other companies via some advertisement offers (McFarlane, 2014).

The advertisement sold by these companies is targeted, any business can choose to target depending on the age, gender, location, and so on. And when we conducted the interviews with customers, we did not expect to hear the word “targeting” that often. We were surprised that all our respondents were aware of the targeting and completely fine with being targeted. Even more, they do not like the non-targeted advertising, as the customer 2 told us if she sees on the social networks an advertisement for a brand she does not know, and she does not like the post, she will get a negative feedback of the brand, without knowing it.

And brands are now targeting directly with their social media accounts. Due to the growth of social medias and the change in sports distribution, customers are more volatile and less loyal to a brand. As the employee 1 told us, brands have to create the most engagement possible to develop a new connection between the customer and the brand to maintain its loyalty. This is something we felt during the interviews with the customers; they like brands on social networks when they feel close to and when they can interact with them. One example is the ski brand, Fusalp, on their Instagram, they regularly like the pictures of their customers just to remind them that they see the post and they like it. Moreover, once a month, they post the best pictures of their community just to highlight customers who trust the brand.

If pages like Red Bull stay wide and post videos of different sports, other brands like Adidas (example given by customer 3), split the communication by managing different pages like Adidas, Adidas Originals, Adidas Football, Adidas Running, and so on. With those different pages, brands are targeting directly the final customer who want to see only posts related to the Football for example. HEAD’s strategy is to split HEAD SKI and HEAD Tennis, it is
two completely different markets, sport, and customers, so they are managing those two pages on different networks. They also don’t have the same popularity; the Tennis page has three times more likes on Facebook compared to the Ski page (≈1,5 million likes vs. ≈0,5 million likes).

So, to be effective, brands are now posting their own content, and they can have an added-value on each post by boosting them (investment depending on the amount of people the brand want to reach and the precision of the targeting) and also directly share the posts originally diffused on their athletes or influencers personal pages.

5.3.2. From athlete to influencer, how to stay valuable

Not all athletes are able to make a lot of money to live on it during their whole life. Even if they were popular when they were active and won the competition, the retirement could be something difficult to live for athletes, switching from the light to the dark. A recent study conducted by Steve McKenna and Julia Richardson (2017) on 27 retired male athletes and 24 current athletes, coaches and administrators highlighted the need for them to think about their retirement when they are active. Athletes are stress and struggle of retirement; this is due to a loss of sporting identity mostly. But some athletes succeeded and made good reconversion in the sport areas, as the athlete we interviewed, now working as a consultant for a famous TV channel.

The reconversion of the athlete is difficult to make, but with social networks, former athletes can maybe find new opportunities. Even if former athletes are still under contracts as athletes with brands, the growth of influencer could be a good opportunity. We got the point that HEAD’s strategy is to focus more on digital medias and deal with influencers and athletes, but they can combine both sometimes by helping their athletes during the active life of athletes to develop their social networks if the athlete agrees, and later, the brand can still capitalize on the athlete’s image and his reputation on social network. This is the case we had with Athlete 1, he is still under contract with a few brands that pay him not for the results but for the influence he has, and the athlete is aware of his influence. And customers stay attached to the athletes they used to follow, even if they retired, the customers we interviewed do not unlike or unfollow them. This could be a sustainable strategy for brands to promote new products and for former athletes to stay in the sport they like and live with it.

![Marketing strategy](image)

Figure 10: Actual digital sports brand marketing triangle
To summarise, by interviewing different persons from the employees at HEAD, or athletes and customers, we clearly get an impression that social medias are in the centre of the strategy for sport-brands and it also takes an important part in the life of athletes and customers. Brands have the power to influence customers directly on those new networks and customers are aware of that. The sponsorship is still one of the main things sport-brands are investing on, but they do not only look on performance right now. Thanks to the social medias growth, they can also be seduced by an athlete who knows how to generate engagement on his or her social networks and drives the sales of the brand in the long term. But, now that social medias are in the life of everyone, the effect for sports brands is athletes who can be in direct contact with customers and engage them (figure 10 above).
6. Conclusion and contributions

This chapter provides answers to the research question and discusses the theoretical, practical, societal, and managerial contributions of our study. Moreover, we evaluate the research process and suggest ideas for future research.

6.1. Conclusion

The main purpose of this degree project is to acquire a deeper knowledge and an improved understanding of how sports brands support their marketing strategy through the sponsorship of professional athletes. We define our research question as following: How do sports brands support their corporate marketing strategy through the sponsorship of athletes? Furthermore, our study adds an extra dimension by analysing the phenomenon studied within the overall context of the increasing use of social medias.

The findings of our qualitative study give insights regarding the current shift in advertising and the digital revolution, the importance of sponsorship in the marketing strategy of sports brand, and finally the role of the athlete sponsored into this new communication strategy.

From this qualitative study, we found that nowadays a sports brand cannot exclude to be absent from social medias, and has to build its communication strategy around, in order to reach the targeted audience. The results help us to analyse that sponsorship is still an essential tool for the marketing strategy of sports brands. Indeed, brands like HEAD dedicate a huge part of their promotion budget to sponsorship contracts. Furthermore, the results emphasize the fact that even if performances are still the main criteria of sponsorship, brands do not focus only on the sport results. Indeed, it appears that brands are increasingly searching for athletes with a full package, and attached a lot of importance to the image and visibility they convey even more with the use of social medias.

However, changes show that brands tend to progressively communicate without intermediaries to target consumers instead directly thanks to a redefinition of their digital strategy. Our results obviously highlight that the communication strategies of sports brands are henceforth deeply embedded in social medias. To go further in our analysis, we have been able to draw the conclusion that it is even more indispensable for the brand to be present on social media. However, sports brands need to balance well the share they allocate to digital marketing. Indeed, while it is important to seduce the consumers with these new attractive techniques, brands have to ensure not to break their special relationships with consumers, who are still requiring high proof of performance when it comes to technical material such as skis or tennis racquets. For this purpose, the role of the athletes as influencer has been strengthened and sports brands starts considering the services of external influencers to enlarge their audience. From now, brands are using athletes, ambassadors that are mainly former professional athletes and external influencers to endorse their corporate image and promote their products/services. Furthermore, the core strategy is to seduce the potential customers and even beyond create a need for customers that are not yet aware of this by enlarging their outreach thanks to the use of digital communication strategies.
6.2. Contribution

This study has contributed with several insights that can be of value for several stakeholders. These insights are now presented and discussed.

6.2.1. Theoretical contribution

This thesis examined the role of the sponsorship of athletes in the marketing strategy of sports brands. The study contributed to explore this aspect from a new point of view, social media technologies. Interviewing the three actors (employees, athletes, and customers) was a choice justified by the fact that they all can provide a different point of view that were relevant for us to analyse the actual role of the athlete now versus the role they could have before the growth of social media.

Moreover, our study underlined the difficulty to deal with the different generation when a company is using the image of an athlete and the different impact they could have on each generation. Indeed, measuring the impact is something difficult to do because tools to measure influence on social medias are not really developed yet, and for a brand, they can only partially measure the influence since they do not have access to athlete’s accounts.

Our study allowed a better understanding of historical circumstances and behaviour that shape the consumer’s purchase decisions, the reasons why sport-brands use athletes in their marketing strategy. More specifically, our study enabled to highlight the impact athletes has on the purchasing behaviour of customers, on the image construction of brands and source of income for athletes. Moreover, the theoretical framework and interviews underlined the difference of behaviour depending on various generations.

6.2.2. Practical contribution

From a practical point of view, we would recommend sport-brands to reconsider the way they use and choose athletes for their marketing strategies. As we stated (in figure 9 vs. figure 10), customers can follow and interact directly with athletes on social networks, if brands do not focus only on performance and on the athlete’s behaviour in his or her social networks. By changing the way of selection, the brand could have a bigger impact on customers and influence more people for a limited investment and could help athletes to raise their incomes.

However, sports brands should keep in mind that athletes are not the only persons they can bet on. The growth of social networks helps to rise people called influencers. Even if those people are not professional, they have a large community who follow them for different reasons and brands can invest on those influencers for a limited amount of money but with most of the time a big return on investment. It is also a possibility for sports brands and former athletes to enable a way to work after their career like Jon Olsson now, switching from freestyler to vlogger, still in contract with HEAD and Red Bull for example. However, sports brands keep those former athletes under “sponsored athlete’s contracts”, new types of contracts should appear in the following years.

6.2.3. Societal contribution

On a broader view, all brands could benefit from our study, since it examines the rise of new types of medias and marketing strategies they could use. However, our study is fully oriented to a sports brand. They can use our conclusions to elaborate their marketing strategy without losing the fact that they do not target all the generations via a full social media’s strategy and
trends are moving fast on social networks, they should always follow the trends to maximise the impact.

Moreover, our study could also be used by athletes who want to know how they can manage their community and maximise the impact they could have on it, to be aware of how they could be evaluated for a brand. This study can help consumers who are interested in marketing, digital media, or sports and how brands are targeting them to influence their behaviour.

6.2.4. Managerial contribution

As mentioned before, our study is relevant for any company willing to understand the role of athletes in relation to their marketing strategy, especially for organisations specialised in sports. Moreover, our research show that even if sports brands used to invest only in professional athletes who perform. They should now change the way they manage their athletes if they want to maximise their return on investment and should open the way they want to reach customers. Indeed, they can target potential consumers not only during the career’s athletes but on the long term if the retired athletes are still visible on social networks, TV, and so on, thanks to people that are still following them.

However, even if our study deals with the specific case of a French structure (managed by an international group, HEAD HQ in Austria) based on data from French customers, our research could hopefully be used at a global level, with minor adaptations regarding the market.

6.3. Truth criteria

When conducting a study, the researcher must evaluate the quality of their work. In this section, we will draw a parallel between the standards for quality and our research. Therefore, we will outline the characteristics of quality in qualitative research to evaluate the truth criteria of our study.

6.3.1. Reliability and validity in qualitative research

There are two main criteria used for the evaluation of business research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp.52-53). These two criteria are reliability and validity which are both essential for qualitative research as for quantitative research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp.52-53). Reliability is defined by Collis & Hussey (2014, p.52) as “the accuracy and precision of the measurement and absence of differences in the results if the research were repeated”. Reliability is divided into two types: internal and external reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395). On the one hand, internal reliability is the internal consistency of the study, i.e. “by which they mean whether or not, when there is more than one observer, members of the research team agree about what they see and hear” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395). On the other hand, external reliability is the replication condition, how easily a study can be copied, i.e. “by which they mean the degree to which a study can be replicated” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395). Furthermore, validity is defined by Collis & Hussey (2014, p.53) as “the extent to which a test measures what the researcher wants it to measure and the results reflect the phenomena under study”. There are also two types of validity: internal and external validity (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395). Internal validity is the good fit between data and theory, i.e. “by which they mean whether or not there is a good match between researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas they develop” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395) while external validity
is concerned with generalization, i.e. “the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395).

While conducting qualitative research, it is also important to consider alternative criteria which are trustworthiness and authenticity (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395).

6.3.2. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness includes to ensure the four following criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.395).

Credibility is referred by Bryman & Bell (2011, p.396) as “the respondent validation or member validation” meaning that to ensure the credibility of the results, researchers have to conduct their study following good methods and they have to submit their results to the respondents in order to guarantee that the researchers correctly understood the answers. In our study, we conducted semi-structured interviews, therefore, in doing, so it enabled us to ask for precisions if an answer was unclear or too fuzzy, and we could also discuss further with the interviewees or adapt questions regarding the respondent’s understanding and answers, which helped us to reach the credibility of our study.

Transferability is defined by Bryman & Bell (2011, p.398) as “a thick description” which “provides others with what they refer to as a data base for making judgements about the possible transferability of findings to others milieu”, which means doing a transfer of the results into a different context, transferability relies upon the degree of salience or matching conditions (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.398). In our study, the results cannot be generalised to other companies, as they have different strategies, and the conclusions might be different. However, the results can be transferable to other subsidiaries of the group, as we only focus on HEAD France, and enlarge our research.

Bryman & Bell (2001, p.398) explain that confirmability “is concerned with ensuring that, while recognising that complete objectivity is impossible in business research, the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith”. These criteria ensures that the data collection and interpretation don’t arise from the researcher’s imagination, and in other words that “it should be apparent that he or she has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of the research and findings deriving from it” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.398). Regarding our research, while conducting interviews, we avoided that our personal points of views interfere in the answers we got, and we remain as objective as possible.

Finally, dependability involves “ensuring that complete records are kept of all phases of the research process – problem formulation, selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions, and so on – in an accessible manner” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.398). In our study, we ensure the dependability through these following research process enunciated by Bryman & Bell (2011, p.398) “problem formulation, selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions”. Indeed, we kept all traces of our different actions such as message exchanges with the respondents, interview guidelines, vocal records, interviews transcripts and results of our analysis.
6.3.3. Authenticity

Authenticity is concerned with ensuring that the criteria of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity are respected (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.398).

Bryman & Bell (2011, pp.398-399) explain that research should guarantee fairness towards different standpoints, a better understanding of the social situation which is the ontological authenticity, a better appreciation of other perspectives which is educative authenticity, an impetus for change which is the catalytic authenticity and the empowerment of participants which is the tactical authenticity. For our research, we tried to ensure to take into consideration all these criteria of authenticity.

6.4. Future research

This study was very interesting to cover, both theoretically and practically. We believe that during this process, we learnt a lot about marketing, the evolution of advertising and the increase of social medias. Moreover, we gained a thorough knowledge of the difference of behaviour between the different generations, how professional athletes are used to help the strategy of sports brands and finally how their strategic role is evolving. Being two researchers to conduct the interviews and during the whole research, allowed us to discuss about the different topics and share our visions, which guarantee the quality of our study. We also took the time to discuss with our respondents, to ask more precise questions when we thought it was interesting to investigate. This research area is full of interesting aspects that are evolving while the society is moving. By consequences, many investigations could be performed in the future.

Further research could be recommended to investigate and measure the impact of athletes on customers. It would be interesting to do a quantitative research on a large scale focusing on customers from different ages and how they react to the different posts using athletes, influencers, and brand’s social networks. This would help to highlight the differences between the generations, the engagement rate and help companies to conduct precise strategies regarding the people they focus on and the athletes they are using.

Moreover, conducting a study on the same topic, a mixed method could be used, to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. This could have given better insights on technical aspects of a “suitable marketing strategy”, using quantitative data to complete our insights.

6.5. Limitations

Regarding our study, we identified several limitations. First, this study was limited to France, with only the French subsidiary of the group taken as a study reference. Indeed, except on employees from the headquarters, all the other respondents are in France. Further research needs to be conducted in other regions and other countries. Then, the second limitation concerns our geographical situation: we are in Sweden, and we investigate a French company and French consumers. Furthermore, we had to conduct all the interviews via phone. The drawback of using this method of communication is that it is harder to feel the emotion of the respondents compared with face-to-face interviews. In addition, as we conducted semi-structured interviews, which can be seen as controversial, as it is difficult to
guarantee honesty of the participants. Also, one can fear that the researchers influence or guide the answers of the respondents through the questions. Our study was to the best of our knowledge the first one to test the role of athletes in the marketing strategy of a sports brand using the social media variable. Also, we were limited in time, this study should be conducted on a larger scale and a novel, and interesting perspective could use a mix-method approach.

Moreover, another limitation we identified is that we did not interview random respondents at HEAD as well as when it came to the athletes, they were selected by HEAD thanks to their experience and skills of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, one can see a potential bias in our study. Besides, due also to the time limitation, it was impossible to contact employees and athletes from competitors’ sport-brand. Furthermore, we decided to select our customers’ respondents via posts on social networks, this helped us to get people who have a little knowledge of the topic, but the issue was about the age. Indeed, we only got people of the Y Generation; we believe that it would be relevant and interesting to implement this study on a larger scale including both older and younger generations.
References


Appendix

Appendix 1: Interviews with HEAD employees

Introduction

Hello, we are Marlène and Matthieu and we are conducting a study for our Master Thesis at Umeå School of Business and Economics. First, we would like to thank you for taking the time to answer few questions and support us in our degree project. The study has ethical approval from the Umeå University. The participation in the study is entirely voluntary; you can withdraw from the interview at any point of time without giving a reason and without implications for yourself. The topic of our research is the role of athlete’s sponsorship on the marketing strategy of a sports brand. We are doing this study at Head and we will interview, HEAD’s employees like you, athletes and potential customers. We will ensure that your name and data are kept anonymously and your information will be held confidentially. Please consider that there is no wrong or right answer and feel free to act as in a daily life conversation manner. If you want to know more about the subject, please ask questions after the entire interview. Also, would you agree if we record the interview? It is for practical and ethical reasons, to ensure the accuracy of your answers.

I. The preliminary questions about the person interviewed
   A. What is your name? Age? Gender? We will use these information’s only for an analytic purpose, we will not mention your name in the thesis.
   B. What is your job position? For how long do your work in this industry?
   C. Are you on social medias? If yes, which?
   D. What sport do you practice and at which level?

II. The advertisement
   A. Have you paid attention to the changes in the way companies advertise nowadays? How does brands use social medias to catch potential consumers? What do you think of it?
   B. Do you feel the increase of digital has impacted the way you establish your marketing strategies? If yes, how?
   C. Brands are now collaborating with people, called influencers thanks to the community who follow them on social networks. The brand pays the influencer and the influencer post a picture or a message to promote a special product/service. What do you think of this new kind of marketing?
   D. Are you in relation with influencers in your work at HEAD? Do you think HEAD using influencers to promote the brand is an appropriate solution?

III. Sponsorship and marketing
   A. We know HEAD sponsors athletes all over the world, which are the one you are in relations with HEAD France?
   B. Which are your objectives with sports sponsorship? (generate awareness, reaching target markets, image building, avoid competition threats, relationship marketing, increased sales, public relation objectives)
C. Is the performance still the primary criteria in the selection? What are the others criteria’s? On which other aspects do you exploit the athletes? (charisma, humour, and so on)
D. Do you have an example of a marketing campaign using an athlete that inspire you? If yes, why this one?

IV. Influence and social medias
A. Do you often follow the performance of athletes sponsored by HEAD? Other athletes? If yes, give example and why?
B. How do you measure and follow the influence of your athletes?
C. Do you try to control the publication of your athletes? (To be sure there is no negative impact on the image of HEAD.)
D. Do you think it is possible for a brand to be absent from social medias now?
Appendix 2: Interviews with athletes

Introduction

Hello, we are Marlène and Matthieu and we are conducting a study for our Master Thesis at Umeå School of Business and Economics. First, we would like to thank you for taking the time to answer few questions and support us in our degree project. The study has ethical approval from the Umeå University. The participation in the study is entirely voluntary; you can withdraw from the interview at any point of time without giving a reason and without implications for yourself. The topic of our research is the role of athlete’s sponsorship on the marketing strategy of a sports brand. We are doing this study at HEAD and we will interview, HEAD’s employees, athletes like you and potential customers. We will ensure that your name and data are kept anonymously and your information will be held confidentially. However, if you agree, we only use your performance and status to mention you. Please consider that there is no wrong or right answers and feel free to act as in a daily life conversation manner. If you want to know more about the subject, please ask questions after the entire interview. Also, do you agree if the interview is recorded? It is for practical and ethical reasons, to ensure the accuracy of your answers.

I. The preliminary questions about the person interviewed
A. What is your name? Age? Gender? We will use these information’s only for an analytic purpose, we will not mention your name in the thesis.
B. What is your main activity?
C. From where do you get you revenues?
D. What sport do you practice and at which level? What are the major’s competitions you won?

II. The advertisement
A. Brands are now collaborating with people like you, called influencers thanks to the community who follow them on social networks. What do you think of this new kind of marketing?
B. How does this new kind of marketing strategy helps athletes like you? Talking about non-sports brands having contract with athlete such as L’Oréal with Lewis Hamilton.
C. Do you think companies using influencers to promote the brand is an appropriate solution?

III. Sponsorship and marketing
A. Do you have any sponsorship contracts, if yes since how long, and with which brand?
B. According to you, what are the main dimensions that a brand value when sponsoring an athlete? Can you classify them from the most important to the less important? (generate awareness, reaching target markets, image building, avoid competition threats, relationship marketing, increased sales, public relation objectives)
C. Do you think performance nowadays is still the first aspect to value to be sponsored? What are the other natural assets (charisma, humour, and so on) important to value according to you?

IV. Influence and social medias
   A. Are you on social networks? If yes on which one? (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram…)
   B. Do you have dedicated social medias accounts for your sports activity? Or do you use your personal one to communicate on your performance?
   C. Do you use all the different medias in the same way? For example, same post on all the networks. If not, why?
   D. Do you consider yourself having any influence on your audience? If yes, at which level (local, national, international)? And aspects (example: purchasing behaviour, a way of life…)?
   E. Do you follow the different statistics on your social medias? To know the people who follow you and have a better understanding of you as an influencer.
Appendix 3: Interviews with customers

Introduction

Hello, we are Marlène and Matthieu and we are conducting a study for our Master Thesis at Umeå School of Business and Economics. First, we would like to thank you for taking the time to answer few questions and support us in our degree project. The study has ethical approval from the Umeå University. The participation in the study is entirely voluntary; you can withdraw from the interview at any point of time without giving a reason and without implications for yourself. The topic of our research is the role of athlete’s sponsorship on the marketing strategy of a sports brand. For this study, we interview employees from a sport-brand, athletes and potential customers like you. We will ensure that your name and data are kept anonymously and your information will be held confidentially. Please consider that there is no wrong or right answer and feel free to act as in a daily life conversation manner. If you want to know more about the subject, please ask questions after the entire interview. Also, do you agree if the interview is recorded? It is for practical and ethical reasons, to ensure the accuracy of your answers.

I. The preliminary questions about the person interviewed
   A. What is your name? Age? Gender? We will use these information’s only for an analytic purpose, we will not mention your name in the thesis.
   B. What is your activity? Job position or studies followed
   C. Are you on social medias? If yes, which?
   D. What sport do you practice and at which level?

II. The advertisement
   A. Have you paid attention to the changes in the way companies advertise nowadays? Using social medias more and more to catch potential consumers. What do you think of it?
   B. Do you think there are too many advertisements? Do you think the massive amount of advertisement has a negative effect on your consumption?
   C. Brands are now collaborating with people, called influencers thanks to the community who follow them on social networks. The brand pays the influencer and the influencer post a picture or a message to promote a special product/service. What do you think of this new kind of marketing?

III. Sponsorship and marketing
   A. Sponsorship is how a brand uses an athlete to promote its product or service. Are you sensitive to that kind of marketing strategy?
   B. Could you mention some athletes and their respective sponsors?
   C. Do you think sponsorship is effective to promote a product for a sports brand? Do you think there is a more effective way to promote a product? Like using an actor, a random people, …
   D. Do you buy a product because the athlete is using it? It is because you like the brand? Or a combination of the two?
IV. Influence and social medias
   A. Do you follow brands on social medias? Athletes? If yes, give example and why, please. (You want to follow the performance, you find the person attractive, you want to discover where the person travel…)
   B. Does your purchasing behaviour is influenced by traditional advertising on social medias? By traditional advertising on social medias, we mean advertising that appear on a website and you can clearly identify the brand like a Google Ads banner for example.
   C. When an athlete or influencer post an image to promote a product on his or her social networks, do you feel influenced by it? If yes, why? (want to be part of the community, a guarantee of quality…)
### Appendix 4: Interview information

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<th>Age</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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