



**Aalto University**  
School of Business

# **Providing value to sports sponsor**

An exploratory study of Finnish athletes and sports clubs in cross-country skiing and golf

Bachelor's Thesis  
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13.9.2019  
ISM Program



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**Title of thesis** Providing value to sports sponsor – An exploratory study of Finnish athletes and sports clubs in cross-country skiing and golf

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**Degree** Bachelor's degree

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**Degree programme** Information and Service Management

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**Thesis advisor(s)** Markku Tinnilä

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**Year of approval** 2019

**Number of pages** 32

**Language** English

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**Abstract**

Sponsorship is an important part of sports as it is typically one of the main sources of finance for athletes and sports clubs. Thus, athletes and sports clubs seeking for sponsors should know what they can offer in return. Through interviews with Finnish athletes and sports clubs in cross-country skiing and golf, this thesis examines different ways for providing value to a sponsor, identifies the best ones according to the interviewees, and gives opinions of the ways that do not include visibility of a sponsor in the perspective of a sponsored entity.

This thesis identified numerous methods for athletes and sports clubs from using a logo of a sponsor to utilizing networking and B2B opportunities between sponsors and making straight commercial agreements. In addition, suggestions for the best ways were given although it was discovered that the best ways varied between the interviewees. Furthermore, this thesis found that the ways not including the visibility of a sponsor were more important for athletes than sports clubs.

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**Keywords** sponsorship, sports sponsorship, sponsor, athlete, sports club, sponsor objectives, sponsor benefits

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# 1 Introduction

Sponsorship is the fastest growing form of marketing globally and sport is the most popular object of sponsoring (IEG, 2018). Between 2009 and 2018 sports sponsorship in Finland has grown from 95 to 155 million euros (Sponsor Insight, 2018a). In addition, 77% of sponsoring companies were going to increase their sponsoring investments or keep them the same (Sponsor Insight, 2018a). However, 55% of Finnish individual athletes who are competing internationally got less than 2000 euros from their sponsors in a year (Färdig, 2015). In other words, more than half of the athletes cannot make one's own living through sponsorships even though the largest share of their income actually comes from sponsors (Kärmeniemi et al., 2013).

One of the reasons for poor income from sponsorships might be that companies cannot utilize all the athlete's potential. Many athletes know only a few ways to provide value to the sponsor. These are usually logo in clothes and advertising in social media because they are the ones that show outside from sponsorships. Thus, biathlete Kaisa Mäkäräinen, who is the most followed athlete in Finland (Sponsor Insight, 2018b), feels that even nowadays the focus of sponsorship is to get the company's logo in athlete's clothes even though it is not enough anymore (Suopuro, 2016). In addition, the logo in clothes is just one of many ways to provide value to the sponsor. Moreover, the benefits of the logo highly depend on the media coverage of the sport and athlete. Especially in the case of an unknown athlete, something else has to be offered to the sponsor as well.

Cross-country skiing is the third most followed sport in Finland (Sponsor Insight, 2019) but globally it is a minor sport compared to e.g. golf, which had worldwide spending of 1.73 billion dollars on 2015 (IEG, 2016). Yet, it is possible to earn from cross-country skiing as well. For example, Norwegian Therese Johaug has made over 1 million euros from sponsorships annually in one part of her career (Nilsen, 2015). Remi Goulignac, who has been involved in some of Johaug's largest sponsorships, underlines that athletes play a large role themselves in sponsorships and putting a logo in clothes is not the only way (Nilsen, 2015).

In addition to athletes, sports clubs need sponsors to be able to function properly and provide different services to their members. Most of the cross-country skiing clubs in Finland operate through numerous volunteers because there is not enough money to hire employees. In its entirety, approximately a fifth of the Finnish population do volunteer

work among sports and overall exercise (Mäkinen, 2019). Therefore, sponsors are a necessary part of sports and in order to get them, the athlete and club have to know what they can offer.

## **1.1 Research objectives and research questions**

The objective of this research is to recognize the ways that already exists on how athletes and sports clubs can provide value to sponsors in cross-country skiing and to try to find new ways from another sport, golf. In addition, the objective is to find the best ways for athletes and sports clubs. Especially the focus is on the methods that do not include the visibility of the sponsor and their value in sponsorships.

The specific research questions are:

1. In what ways can athletes and sports clubs provide value to the sponsors?
2. What are the best ways to provide value in sponsorship for athletes and sports clubs?
3. How valuable are the ways that do not include the visibility of the sponsor?

Thus, the objective of the first research question is to find different ways athletes and sports clubs have used overall. The second question tries to classify the best ways to provide value to a sponsor in general based on the opinions of the interviewed athletes and sports clubs. The aim of the third question is to get insight into how valuable the ways without visibility are for sponsors from the perspective of athletes and sports clubs.

## **1.2 Scope of the research**

This research addresses ways that are used to provide value to sponsors in cross-country skiing and golf. In addition, this research examines both individual athletes and sports clubs on both sports. Two very different individual sports were selected to achieve more and potentially different methods between sports. Both sports are in a major position in Finland, cross-country skiing being the third most followed sport (Sponsor Insight, 2019) and golf being the most popular sport based on licensed participants (Lämsä, 2018), hence there are also numerous sponsors involved. However, it must be noted that every golfer is a licensed participant which affects the popularity results.

The focus is only on the athletes and sports clubs locating in Southern Finland. Athletes that are recently retired can also be interviewed because the area of sponsorship has not notably changed in the past years and thus, it has no effect on the objectives of this research. Furthermore, athletes are required to be professionals and have a successful career because they typically have more experience with different sponsors. Moreover, professional athletes with experience with sponsorships are more likely to be able to identify the best ways for athletes to provide value in sponsorships.

In addition, this research examines only non-profit sports clubs in cross-country skiing since most of the skiing clubs in Finland are non-profits. However, ideas could come also from professional sports as they are typically useful in non-profit sports as well. Furthermore, in golf, there are both non-profit associations and limited companies which are working closely together. In this research, the focus in golf is on limited companies because they have more sponsors and therefore can provide a wider range of methods. One of the aims of this research is also to find the best ways for sports clubs to provide value in sponsorships based on the interviews.

This research is conducted from the perspective of a sponsored athlete or sports club. In addition to finding different ways and identifying the best ones, the objective is to examine how valuable and meaningful are the ways that do not include visibility in sponsorships. The results are analyzed through Terence Zinger and O'Reilly's (2010) model of sponsorship benefits.

### **1.3 Structure of the research**

This thesis has five chapters in total. Chapter two reviews the theoretical background of sports sponsorship and specifies athlete and sports club sponsoring. Lastly, it addresses the literature on sponsor objectives and provides a framework which is used in analyzing the results.

Chapter three presents the methodology and structure of the study, selection of the candidates, and how the interviews were conducted and the results of the interviews analyzed. The fourth chapter provides the results of the research with the framework. The final chapter contains a discussion of the results and conclusions. In addition, implications to practice, limitations of this research, and potential future research objectives are provided.

## **2 Theoretical background**

This chapter provides a literature review on the subject. First, it covers literature on sponsorship and sports sponsorship in general. Second, it addresses athlete and sports club sponsoring separately. Lastly, sponsor objectives and the framework of this research are presented.

### **2.1 Sports sponsorship**

Sponsorship has no generally accepted definition (Walliser, 2003) even though there has been numerous research about sponsorship in general, different forms of sponsorship, sponsorship objectives, etc. However, there are several different definitions from various researchers. For example, Walliser (2003, pp. 8–9) suggests that “sponsorship is based on an exchange between sponsor and sponsored, and pursues marketing (communication) objectives by exploiting the association between the two.” Keshkar et al. (2019, p. 66) provide another suggestion:

The basis of sponsorship is that a sponsor (i.e., an individual or group willing to pay or trade resources, goods, services or opportunities) desires to connect with a sponsee (i.e., an individual, group or event willing to receive or trade resources, goods, services or opportunities) in order to undertake an exchange and mutually enhance both of their organizations.

One of the reasons for different definitions might be the change of perception of sponsorship over time. Sponsorship was originally perceived as a cheap, philanthropic addition to the marketing mix but nowadays it is considered as an exchange process for corporations (Séguin et al., 2005). Thus, sponsorship thinking has changed from considering sponsorship as a gift or investment to perceiving it as interaction and source of competitive advantage (Ryan and Fahy, 2012).

Sponsorship is deeply linked to marketing as isolating sponsorship from other marketing efforts is difficult (Terence Zinger and O’Reilly, 2010). Advertising and sponsorship have partially the same objectives such as awareness and image but in advertising, the messages are often more explicit and easier to control (Walliser, 2003). Furthermore, it is challenging to distinctively separate sponsorship and other communication tools as sponsorship is perceived as a communications instrument and consequently as a commercial investment (Walliser, 2003).

Sponsorship research, defined as “the investigation of the delivery of value to companies arising from the strategic implementation of their sponsorship marketing objectives” (Johnston and Spais, 2015, p. 302), have moved towards a relational approach in the 2010s (Johnston and Spais, 2015). For example, in Nufer and Bühler’s (2011) research, sponsorship has been linked to relationship marketing. On the other hand, in recent studies, such as Habitzreuter and Koenigstorfer’s (2018) research, sponsorship has been examined from a perspective of corporate social responsibility. However, more research should be directed to sponsored entities as they have been under-researched (Ryan and Fahy, 2012). In addition, sponsorship research has focused too much on increasing awareness and image as sports sponsorship objectives and neglected other sponsorship objectives which are seen in actual companies and their sponsorship budgeting processes as well (Walliser, 2003).

In general, sponsorship has an impact on the public opinion of the sponsor and on consumers’ will to buy sponsor’s products (Walliser, 2003). Thus, philanthropy is not a reason for sponsorship anymore (Copeland et al., 1996). Different symbols, such as names and logos, are very popular and distinctive rights that are exchanged and used in sponsorships (Keshkar et al., 2019). Furthermore, sponsors expect that sponsored entities have created awareness in the sponsor’s target audience and are willing to work on a coordinated marketing effort (Terence Zinger and O’Reilly, 2010). However, the priorities of sponsorship have moved from brand awareness, sales focus, and image transfer to a broad range of objectives and multiple audiences (Ryan and Fahy, 2012). Sponsorship can e.g. provide different marketing platforms and valuable networking and hospitality opportunities (Keshkar et al., 2019). In addition, Cornwell and Kwon (2019) argue that employees role as an audience for sponsorship is underrated. Nonetheless, there is no sponsorship without risk because the outcome cannot be predicted (Walliser, 2003). Thus, both parties of sponsorship face uncertainties when trying to reach their objectives (Copeland et al., 1996). Sponsorship risks could be financial or promotional (O’Reilly, 2008). For example, if sponsorship has perceptions of commercialization, it may lead to negative outcomes (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019).

Sponsorship is typically a result of negotiations and bound with a contract which may hold e.g. the duration of the partnership, payments, and exposure values (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). However, some sponsorship systems are complex as properties might be also part of “beneficiary sponsee” or charity such as children’s sport (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019) which might have an effect on the contract. In addition, generally, companies get to choose their sponsored entities as they receive a large number of requests regarding



sponsorship funding (Copeland et al., 1996) because sponsorship is an important source of financing for most properties and securing financial support is their main goal in sponsorship (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). Therefore, organizations and other entities need to be able to differentiate themselves in order to stand out (Copeland et al., 1996). That said, it is important to remember that local brands tend to have local partnerships (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019).

Sports is the most important area of sponsorship (Walliser, 2003) as 70% of all sponsorship goes to sports (IEG 2018). It is also a diverse object of sponsoring as excitement and emotional attachment are often involved in sports and its consumers (Copeland et al., 1996). In addition, sponsors that are sponsoring sports are more easily accepted in the eyes of the public than sponsors that are sponsoring arts or social causes (Walliser, 2003). Especially employee-oriented companies tend to conform to the trend of increased socially responsible practices by sponsoring sport which has both socially responsible and commercially-driven aspects (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Sports sponsorship is both an essential source of income for professional sports organizations and an effective marketing tool for companies (Nufer and Bühler, 2010). Yet, as in sponsorship in general, corporates funding different sports entities have been labeled as a form of fundraising in the past (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). Nevertheless, nowadays sponsorships can be mutually beneficial between corporations and sports organizations, especially in professional sports (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010) although e.g. in Canadian research, only one-third of the sponsors felt that the sponsorship was equally beneficial for both parties (Copeland et al., 1996). However, the reasons were not related to sports sponsorship per se but rather to uncertainty in the sponsorship process (Copeland et al., 1996).

In conclusion, sports sponsorship and its related subjects are fairly researched. There are studies from sponsorship as a marketing effort, development of sponsorship thinking, impacts of sponsorship, etc. However, the definition of sponsorship has varied with different researchers. In this study, the definition is that sports sponsorship is a relationship between a sponsor and a sponsored entity related to sports where both parties provide value to each other.

## **2.2 Sponsoring an athlete**

Sponsoring an athlete is different than sponsoring e.g. a sports club. Athletes are always individual humans which means that athletes have a great responsibility in their

sponsorships. This might be one reason why financially-driven companies are more likely to sponsor individual athletes whereas employee-oriented companies tend to focus on sponsoring team sports (Cunningham et al., 2009). In addition, athletes are nowadays often celebrities or role models (Kelly et al., 2018). Therefore, every action of an athlete can affect the perceptions of both the athlete and stakeholders linked to him or her (Kelly et al., 2018). Thus, sponsoring an individual athlete seems to raise the level of risks of sponsorship because the sponsored entity is only one person (O'Reilly, 2008). Risks considering an individual could be related to e.g. doping, poor results, or misbehaving (O'Reilly, 2008). Moreover, sport scandals, even off-field, can damage the sponsor's brand (Kelly et al., 2018).

Success for an athlete is important in sponsorships as success prior and during an event affects the exposure of the athlete and his or her sponsor which is a significant factor in a sponsorship (Jensen, 2012). Therefore, many sponsors reward the athlete for wins or other great performances (Jensen, 2012). In addition, successful athletes attract success-oriented companies due to the image link between them (Cunningham et al., 2009). If a sponsor's brand and an athlete are a good match, brand equity could be increased, brand awareness enhanced, and brand image improved (Jensen, 2012). Even though the exposure is important, Jensen's (2012) study shows that only very few sponsors of an athlete receive visibility or exposure during live broadcasts. Therefore, televised exposure during an event should not be the only method to generate brand awareness (Jensen, 2012). Jensen (2012) suggests that e.g. consumer promotions and the utilization of social media and public relations activities should be considered as well.

### **2.3 Sponsoring a sports club**

Sports clubs are a unique target of sponsorship with their geographic orientation, audiences and marketing-related potential (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). They can offer different levels of sponsorship or packages depending on their objectives in the partnership (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). However, the reasons for national sports organizations sponsorship varies (Séguin et al., 2005). Sports organization can offer e.g. an opportunity for image enhancement and increase of public awareness (Doherty and Murray, 2007). Furthermore, media exposure and participation rates are the key factors that affect the sponsorships of non-profit sports organizations (Berrett and Slack, 2001). Specifically, television exposure affects the most on sponsorship revenues (Berrett and Slack, 2001). However, the internet and e.g. social media are becoming more and more important platforms for acquiring income (Keshkar et al., 2019).

In addition, sports organizations may attract sponsors through B2B networking opportunities (Wagner et al., 2017). Also, environmental factors such as the media exposure of the sport, public profile of the sport domestically, the international popularity of the sport, country's international success, and participation levels might affect national sports organizations' attractiveness (Berrett and Slack, 2001). However, in the short term, it is very difficult for sports organizations to control media exposure levels and to affect participation levels (Berrett and Slack, 2001). Limiting factors for participation levels might be the availability of facilities, cost of participation, and availability of coaches and other officials (Berrett and Slack, 2001). On the other hand, Berrett and Slack (2001) argue that it is possible for sports organizations to change their environment by creating and engaging in a long-term plan.

Current research has shown that even smaller amateur sports organizations can be part of successful and mutually beneficial sponsorship (Séguin et al., 2005). However, in order to succeed in sponsorships, both sponsorship partners have to work collaboratively (Nufer and Bühler, 2010) and organizations need to understand the corporate sponsors on why they became involved (Berrett and Slack, 2001) and seek for most suitable companies for them (Doherty and Murray, 2007) with matching brand (Séguin et al., 2005). Furthermore, sports organizations that can present how sponsors can reach their objectives are the most desirable partners (Copeland et al., 1996). Séguin et al. (2005) claim that smaller amateur sports organizations should also learn from the example of professional sports and utilize more hospitality events. In addition, sports organizations should use time and staff with the necessary marketing and personal skills to be able to discuss with the sponsors' decision-makers (Nufer and Bühler, 2010). However, non-profit sports organizations have to be able to fulfill the needs of the sponsor but at the same time, they have to keep in mind the wishes of members, client groups, and government (Berrett and Slack, 2001) which might be difficult for some organizations. Sponsoring a sports club involves also the same risks as in sponsoring an individual athlete because athletes represent clubs (O'Reilly, 2008). In addition, risks can be related to support personal, such as coaches, and their misbehavior (O'Reilly, 2008). All in all, sports organization should know how to distinguish itself from other events and organizations seeking for sponsorships (Doherty and Murray, 2007) as companies receive plenty of sponsorship requests (Copeland et al., 1996). However, it is important to note that there is no single strategy that works for all organizations (Berrett and Slack, 2001).

## 2.4 Sponsor objectives

There is a considerable number of theoretical and empirical literature on corporations' motives in sponsorship (Doherty and Murray, 2007). Although there are numerous sponsorship objectives identified, awareness and image transfer are the most studied perspectives (Walliser, 2003; Cunningham et al., 2009). In addition, increasing awareness and improving the image for brands and companies have typically been considered as the most important sponsorship objectives (Walliser, 2003). However, the list of sponsor objectives is both wide and diverse and depended on e.g. the company's size and industry (Copeland et al., 1996). In addition, the company's culture and employee's attitude towards sports have an impact on how the sponsorship is seen and what is expected from it (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010).

Sponsors can have multiple different objectives at the same time when selecting potential partners. Exclusivity, public awareness, and positive image were the most important selection criteria for sponsorship in the research of Copeland et al. (1996). In the same way, Cornwell and Kwon (2019) emphasize the importance of exclusivity, especially in an initial sponsorship relationship. In addition, Cunningham et al. (2009) argue that sponsorship can be used to express organizational identity and to make the company distinctive. However, it is common that the business owner's own affection for particular sport matters when selecting subjects to sponsor (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). In event selection and post-event evaluation awareness, exposure, media coverage, and increased sales are popular criteria (Copeland et al., 1996). Furthermore, sponsors might be interested in the demographics of certain sports audience and sponsoring sports entities might be an ideal way to reach the target market (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). For example, sponsors might seek events that allow them to target specific market segments and thus, increase sales (Copeland et al., 1996). Hence, Copeland et al. (1996) suggest that sponsorship can be described as a "seller's marketplace." In addition, sponsorship can help sponsors to improve the strength of a brand and increase customer loyalty (O'Reilly, 2008) as sponsorship can be an emotionally powerful way to project different images (Cunningham et al., 2009). However, if sponsorship of e.g. an event is perceived as exploitation, it might reduce the enhancement of image and achieved goodwill (Walliser, 2003). Moreover, sponsors need to be careful of what and who they

choose to sponsor because sports scandals can affect negatively the sponsor's brand (Kelly et al., 2018).

In addition to external marketing, sponsorship can help in motivating the employees and boosting morale (Cunningham et al., 2009). Furthermore, the commitment of employees is important in true partnerships (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). Therefore, sponsorship is useful also in internal marketing when targeting implicitly or explicitly employees (Cunningham et al., 2009). Thus, Cornwell and Kwon (2019) argue that employees role as an audience for sponsorship is underrated. It is also useful to take sponsors' other associates into account (Copeland et al., 1996). When both parties work hand in hand with each other, it increases both the immediate and long-term benefits of a sponsorship (Keshkar et al., 2019).

Sponsors might simultaneously have financial and non-financial objectives for the sponsorship but it is important that they define the objectives clearly and evaluate the outcomes frequently (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). However, many sponsors do not measure the effects of sponsorship (Séguin et al., 2005) which might result that companies consider their sponsoring as philanthropy even though they seek business impacts (Terence Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). Yet there are ways for measurement, e.g. one approach for measuring awareness is to consider to what extent public notice sponsors (Walliser, 2003).

To sum up, sponsor objectives has been a popular subject in sponsorship research. Throughout history, increasing awareness and improving brand image have been considered as the most important sponsorship objectives even though there are numerous other arguably as important objects. Especially, utilizing sponsorship in motivating employees and boosting morale is considered more and more beneficial nowadays. Terence Zinger and O'Reilly (2010) made a model for sponsorship benefits (Figure 1) which is used also in this research as a framework. Their model has no clear boundaries as it is presented as a continuum. The continuum's scale is set in patronage activities such as community goodwill. The middle of the scale is called semi-strong sponsorship with activities such as cultivating a new brand image. The scale ends to a fully functioning sponsorship where new sales are generated. In addition to different sponsor benefits, the model includes the traditional AIDA product adoption sequence presented at the bottom of the figure. In their model, the patronage level does not affect the customers. Furthermore, semi-strong sponsorships generate awareness and interest

among customers and fully-functioning sponsorship leads to customers making decisions and actions. However, it is important to note that the model is a continuum because it is impossible to explicitly categorize sponsor benefits and their outcomes. In addition, they may vary depending on sponsorship.

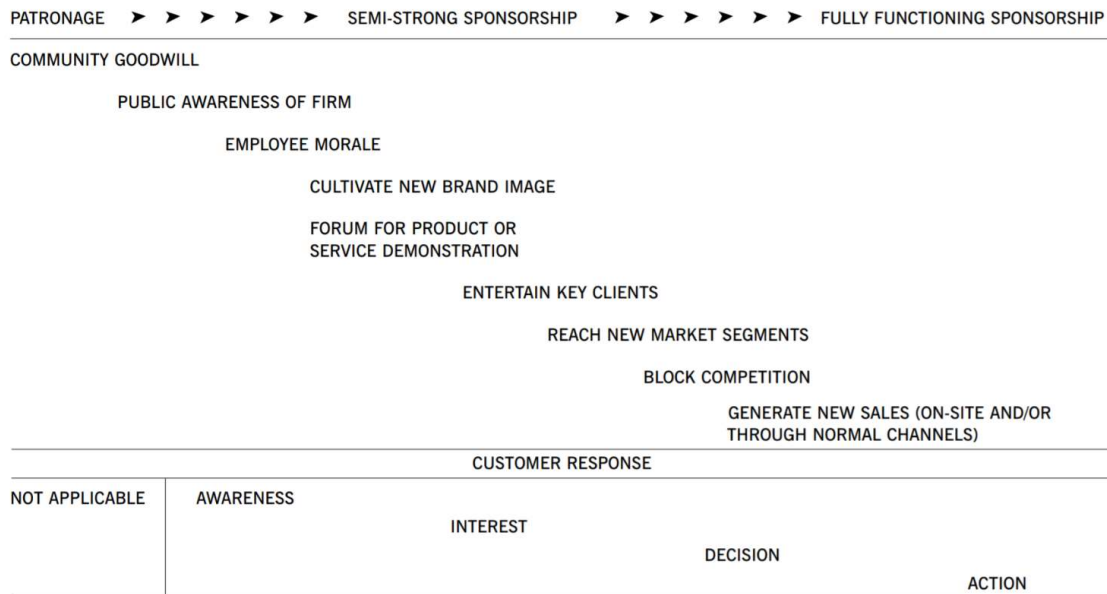


Figure 1. Terence Zinger and O'Reilly's (2010) continuum of sponsorship benefits

### **3 Methodology**

The following chapter presents the methodology and structure of this study. Furthermore, it explains the selection of candidates and collection and analysis of the data.

#### **3.1 Qualitative research with semi-structured interviews**

The purpose of this research is to find different ways on how athletes or sports clubs could provide value to a sponsor in sponsorships. In addition, the aim is to discover the best practices and examine the value of methods that do not include the visibility of the sponsor in the perspective of a sponsored entity. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), qualitative research is for interpretation and understanding an issue. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is selected. In addition, this research is an exploratory study.

The data of this research is collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews consisted of several key questions (Appendix 1) with an open discussion in the end. In addition, in semi-structured interviews, the researcher has the possibility to change the order of questions and ask clarifying questions (Saunders et al., 2015). The benefits of semi-structured interviews are that even though the interview is conversational and perhaps informal, the outcome is still rather systematic and comprehensive (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In addition, semi-structured interviews can offer valuable background and contextual information (Saunders et al., 2015).

Due to semi-structured interviews, the discussions were relaxed and conversational. In addition, a broad understanding of the subject was obtained. Even though the researcher did not know all the interviewees in advance, reliable and trustworthy atmosphere were achieved.

#### **3.2 Selecting the candidates**

Cross-country skiing for the sport was selected due to the major position in Finland and interest of the researcher. Golf for another sport was selected because of its popularity. In addition, both are individual sports, but cross-country skiing is an endurance sport whereas golf is a skill-based sport.

The athletes had to be professionals who have a successful career and experiences with different sponsors. Cross-country skiers who had participated in World Championships or Winter Olympics and golfers who had been multiple years as a pro fulfilled the criterion of “successful career”. Recently retired athletes fulfilling the criteria were also approved because the area of sponsorship has not significantly changed in the past years. In addition, they had to live in Southern Finland and preferably in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Moreover, at least one athlete had to be female from both sports in order to get more extensive results. The sports clubs had to operate in Southern Finland as well. Non-profit cross-country skiing clubs were selected for this research due to their major position in Finland but in golf, limited companies were chosen because of their wider networks of sponsors. The interviewee representing a sports club had to be at least partially in charge of sponsorships.

Eventually, two male athletes and one female athlete were chosen for interviews from both sports. Every candidate is or was a professional and has or had a successful career as some of them had retired from sports in the last years. In addition, every athlete lives in the Helsinki metropolitan area except one who, nonetheless, lives in Southern Finland. Furthermore, every interviewee had numerous different sponsors. From sports clubs, two were chosen from cross-country skiing and one from golf. Every selected sports club works in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In addition, the representatives of the sports clubs were either fully or partially in charge of the sponsorships of the sports club. Generic information of the interviewees with some of the high points of the athletes’ careers and positions of the representatives of the sports clubs are presented in Appendix 2. However, more specific information about the interviewees is not published in order to keep the anonymousness of the participants.

### **3.3 Collection and analysis of the data**

The interviews of this research were executed between the beginning of June and the middle of July 2019. All interviews took place face to face except one over the telephone. The interviews were mainly without distractions. As the place of the interview should be pleasant for the interviewee (Saunders et al., 2015), the locations were chosen together in mutual understanding. The times of the interviews varied from morning till evening. In addition, plenty of time was reserved for the interviews and the recordings lasted from 28 to 48 minutes with athletes and from 15 to 24 minutes with sports clubs’ representatives. Every interview involved only the interviewer and the interviewee except one interviewee came with a person who had closely witnessed different



sponsorships of the interviewee. Keeping in mind the objectives of this research, the additional person could specify or add information to the answers with the confirmation of the actual interviewee. Every interview was audio-recorded. In the transcription process data sampling was used.

The questions in the interviews (Appendix 1) were kept simple and composed keeping in mind the objectives of this research. The order of the questions was the same in all interviews, but one additional question was asked depending on the answer to the previous question. In addition, clarifying questions were sometimes used. The answers were typically long and diverse. Furthermore, the answers sometimes provided additional information that was not directly asked in questions. An open discussion at the end of the interviews offered valuable context and background information even when the subjects were not closely related to research objectives. Moreover, the interviewees occasionally shared personal information which indicates that a personal connection, which is important in interviews (Saunders et al., 2015), was established.

Saunders et al. (2015) claim that qualitative research analysis has either a deductive or an inductive approach. In this research, a deductive approach was chosen as the model of Terence Zinger and O'Reilly (2010) was selected for the framework at the beginning of this research. Thus, Terence Zinger and O'Reilly's (2010) model is used to helping to analyze the results. Furthermore, the results are presented without linking the answers to a specific interviewee in order to maintain the anonymousness.

## **4 Results**

The results of this study are presented in the following chapter. Firstly, the chapter presents different ways to provide value to a sponsor for athletes and sports clubs. Secondly, the best ways for athletes and sports clubs are identified. Thirdly, athletes' and sports clubs' opinions on the ways that do not include the visibility of the sponsor are provided. In addition, the results are summarized at the end of the chapter.

### **4.1 Athletes' ways to provide value to sponsor**

Athletes in cross-country skiing and golf had many similar ways what they had offered to their sponsors. In addition, athletes from both sports had numerous different ways. One of the most common ways was to offer visibility and increased public awareness through the sponsor's logos. Every interviewed athlete had had some or all their sponsors' logo in their clothes, equipment, car, and/or website. Providing visibility through clothes is very common especially when the athlete is shown on television. Furthermore, athletes had used the products or services of a sponsor in training, competitions, and even in everyday life. Interviewed athletes from cross-country skiing had also used social media as a channel to advertise their sponsors and their sponsors' products whereas golfers in this study had utilized it only a little or not at all. However, almost every interviewee emphasized the meaning of the content on social media. Thus, the content has to come more or less naturally without forcing it. In addition to increasing visibility and public awareness of a sponsor, these ways might cultivate a new brand image and even employee morale when the sponsor is linked to the athlete and his or her brand image. Athletes can also be a great forum for products and services and help sponsors reach new market segments through their fans. As one of the interviewees stated, it is very uncommon that an athlete would have two or more competitors as visible sponsors, hence sponsorship can block competition as well. In the best-case scenario, the athlete is in a situation where companies have to think is it a risk not to sponsor him or her and give the opportunity to a competitor. All of the previously noted benefits can eventually lead to new sales.

Along with visibility provided by athletes, sponsors have had the chance of using athletes' knowledge, presence, and brand image in their own purposes. For example, one cross-country skier had been involved in the product development of sports equipment by giving constant feedback to the sponsor and made training programs. Sponsors and/or

athletes have also organized events for the employees or key clients of the sponsor or for the public where the athlete gets to use his or her knowledge of the sport. In addition, one cross-country skier had used his network and sports contacts to help sponsor in recruiting participants to an event. The events might have been competitions or lessons from different sports, such as running, skiing, or golf, and lectures from training, nutrition, overall wellbeing, mental strength, or even entrepreneurship. Some had also combined the lectures with low-intense training. In addition, sometimes just playing golf or skiing with the sponsor and/or its stakeholders or providing exclusive tickets to an event had created unique experiences. Events organized by a sponsor and/or athlete could be used to e.g. increase public awareness of the sponsor, lift employee's morale, and entertain key clients depending on the audience. In addition, from both sports, some athletes had done different photoshoots for a sponsor and commercials for e.g. television. Furthermore, every athlete had participated in events representing a sponsor. Using the athlete's brand image could have a positive impact on the sponsor's image which could help in generating sales. However, it must be noted that the athlete's interaction with people affects the outcome as well.

Athletes from both sports had also shared tips and latest updates of their lives among other things in the sponsor's webpage or newsletters which had been either internal or external. In the case of a smaller sponsor, updates might have been delivered over the phone or by text messages. In internal communication, athlete's writings or video greetings can enhance employee morale. In external communication, they can at least affect the public awareness and brand image of the firm.

In addition, a couple of the interviewees from both sports had given either a thanksgiving gift with the names of all the athlete's sponsors or organized an event where sponsors could see and meet other sponsors. In other words, the athlete could be a platform where companies could meet other companies and benefit from it. One cross-country skier had had sponsors that only wanted to attend on that particular event in order to potentially achieve new clients. Furthermore, another athlete from cross-country skiing had a sponsor who provided marketing content and a sponsor who wanted to do a shooting with the athlete. The athlete managed to utilize the sponsorships and the sponsors ended up cooperating during and even after the athlete's shooting.

As one of the interviewees stated, creativity is limitless in sponsorships. Hence, there were only a few cases where the sponsor wanted only to be able to say that they sponsor a certain athlete. Understandably, they were only small sponsors. On the other hand, sponsors can be more of an investor as one of the golfers had a contract where he would

get financial support and in the case of success, some of the prize money would go to the sponsor.

All in all, the sponsorships of the interviewed athletes varied from patronage to fully functioning sponsorships with customer responses of not applicable, awareness, interest, decision, and action. However, most relationships seemed to be semi-strong sponsorships with awareness, interest, and decision as customer response.

## **4.2 Sports clubs' ways to provide value to sponsor**

All the sports clubs had used various ways to provide value to their sponsors as well. Every sports club had increased the public awareness of a sponsor by using and advertising sponsor's logos in different places such as clothes, websites, social media, public and private events, events' programs, and in addition, the golf club had their sponsors' logos in courses, buildings, and even in golf balls and carts. In addition, sports clubs might use their sponsors' products in their activities. Thus, sponsors are getting the visibility especially among the members of the clubs as all of the interviewed clubs have large membership counts. Furthermore, in some events organized by clubs from both sports, sponsors have got the chance to participate with the possibility to market themselves and sell their products. One cross-country skiing club had also organized a televised event where the sponsors receive major awareness through large placards seen in national television. Along with increased awareness, visible sponsorship with a club can help the sponsor cultivate a new brand image, block competition, reach new market segments and generate new sales.

Cross-country skiing clubs had offered different skiing lessons, waxing educations and days of recreation as well, which might raise the employee morale or entertain key clients, but the sponsors had not really used the opportunities. Yet, contrary to skiing clubs, the interviewed golf club had arranged numerous events such as golf competitions with other activities for its sponsors. However, it must be noted that the golf club owns the course and they typically charge from playing whereas the skiing tracks are properties of the municipalities and almost always free of charge. This might influence the results.

Due to the large membership counts, interviewed clubs have had sponsors with a straight commercial relationship. For example, one of the cross-country skiing clubs has organized skiing camps for its members and provided a large number of customers to the sponsor who has provided the accommodations with discount. In addition, the club has offered labor to one of its sponsor's events.

Sports clubs have been also a platform where sponsors could meet other sponsors and receive awareness and potentially new sales through B2B clients. For example, sponsors of one of the skiing clubs have received exclusive tickets for skiing club's televised event where they could bring their key clients and/or meet other sponsors. In addition, the interviewed golf club have arranged events for its sponsors where the sponsors could play and network with each other. Furthermore, the golf club is planning to utilize the networking possibilities even more.

Besides the ways sports clubs have used, especially cross-country skiing clubs felt that events and lessons with skiing or other sports for the sponsors or their clients could be offered more. Furthermore, the networking and collaboration possibilities between sponsors should be utilized. In general, creating real relationships to the sponsors by e.g. writing a blog or monthly letter or giving lessons to them might help clubs to form long-lasting sponsorships. In addition, naming different products such as competitions by a sponsor could easily increase awareness. The golf club wants also to exploit its spaces in winter which already are used e.g. for sponsors meetings in summer. Some of the club's sponsors have used the club's place for product or service demonstration as well.

To summarize, every interviewee emphasized the importance of creating mutually beneficial sponsorships. Hence, receiving financial support from sponsors without proper compensation is rare nowadays. Consequently, the sponsorships of the sports clubs varied from semi-strong to fully functioning sponsorships with the customer responses of awareness, interest, decision, and action. However, sponsors of the golf club have supported e.g. children's sport without getting anything in return as a surplus to their sponsorship package.

### **4.3 Best ways for athletes to provide value**

Interviewees had different opinions on what is the most important thing an athlete can offer to a sponsor which is understandable as everyone had own experiences of the subject. For every interviewed golfer time was the main offering for a sponsor even though they had offered visibility to almost every sponsor in some way. This indicates that in their perspective, golf lessons and rounds with the sponsor or its key clients, different lectures and other events where they represent the sponsor are the best ways to provide value in a sponsorship. They also emphasized the importance of offering real content in sponsorships and genuine interaction between humans. When the athlete organizes or is part of an event for the sponsor's employees, the employee morale might

rise. In addition, when the athlete represents the sponsor in public or sponsor's key clients' events, it might increase public awareness, cultivate sponsor's brand image, entertain key clients, and in best-cases, help to reach new market segments and eventually generate sales.

On the other hand, one cross-country skier answered that visibility is the most important thing to offer to a sponsor and the other affection of brand image. The answers are related to each other because when an athlete increases the awareness of a sponsor, he or she also affects the sponsor's brand image by his or her own brand image. The ways to increase visibility and affect the brand image of a sponsor are e.g. using sponsor's products, wearing its logo in different objects, and advertising sponsor in social media. Athletes are also a great forum for product or service demonstration, and they can cultivate the sponsor's brand image by representing the sponsor in different events. Increasing the visibility and public awareness of the sponsor and cultivating the brand image can also help sponsor to reach new market segments, block competition, and generate new sales depending on the situation.

As the disparity in answers suggests, it seems that there is no common best way for all the athletes in both sports. Thus, the last cross-country skier could not name the single most important thing as he argued that every sponsor might have different needs. In addition, a couple of interviewees emphasized that the athlete should find and utilize his or her strengths in sponsorships as some might be good at interacting with people and some might be visible in different media.

#### **4.4 Best ways for sports clubs to provide value**

When asked the most important thing what a sports club can offer to a sponsor, the cross-country skiing clubs answered visibility and large membership count. The answers are partly related to each other because clubs provide visibility to their sponsors especially in the eyes of their members. The increased visibility and awareness could also help the sponsor cultivate a new brand image, use clubs as a forum for product or service demonstration, reach new market segments, block competition, and ultimately generate new sales depending on the sponsorship. The club's large membership count could help the sponsor to focus its marketing directly and effectively to its target groups. In addition, large membership count enables straight commercial sponsorships which provide new sales to the sponsor almost without risks. This indicates that the best ways to provide value to a sponsor are e.g. to use sponsor's logo in different places such as clothes,

webpages, social media, and placards, arrange events where the sponsors could participate and market themselves and to make commercial agreements where the club provides customers and the sponsor gives a certain discount.

However, the golf club could not name only one important thing as it has numerous different sponsorships with diverse terms. The representative emphasized the meaning of finding agreements that are beneficial for both parties. In addition, even though almost every of the club's sponsor has wanted visibility, other services such as playing have been typically related to the sponsorship. Furthermore, the club has already utilized networking opportunities among its sponsors and is going to enhance them even more.

In conclusion, the best ways to provide value to a sponsor were related to visibility and membership count among cross-country skiing clubs whereas the golf club felt that there is no single most important thing to offer. The fact that the golf club owns a course and a clubhouse might affect its opinion.

#### **4.5 Athletes' perceptions of ways that do not include visibility**

Even though all the athletes from both sports had offered visibility to almost every sponsor in terms of e.g. carrying sponsor's logo in clothes, everyone argued that also the ways that do not include visibility matter. Furthermore, every golfer claimed that their time instead of increased visibility was the main thing to offer to a sponsor. In addition, some interviewees felt that the importance of the ways without increasing visibility grows when the sponsorship is maintained. Thus, at first, the sponsors might have thought that increased awareness has been their most important objective but when the sponsorship continues, other benefits surpasses visibility. Interviewees also noted that providing other things than visibility typically increases the duration of sponsorship because visibility is highly influenced by success. Hence, making a personal connection with the sponsor might help the sponsorship last even in weak seasons. Yet, one cross-country skier argued that when the athlete is very popular, the importance of visibility increases and the importance of other benefits decreases.

To sum up, even though the importance of visibility varies between athletes and sponsors, ways that do not include visibility matter in every sponsorship. Furthermore, the importance of the ways not offering visibility grows during the sponsorship.

#### **4.6 Sports clubs' perceptions of ways that do not include visibility**

Both of the cross-country skiing clubs felt that the importance of the ways that do not include visibility of the sponsor is low. Thus, the increased visibility has been part of the sponsorship package for all of their sponsors. Especially one of the skiing clubs felt that the commercial aspect of the sponsorship is the main approach of the sponsors and the other aspects are relatively insignificant. In addition, both clubs have used only a few ways, such as offering exclusive tickets, that does not include visibility of the sponsor in their sponsorships.

However, contrary to the interviewed skiing clubs, the golf club argued that the ways without providing visibility to the sponsor are also significant. The club has offered increased awareness to all of its sponsors, but everyone has not wanted it. Furthermore, the golf club has used numerous other ways, typically related to playing, in addition to the ways including visibility. That said, the differences of the cross-country skiing and golf clubs related to e.g. ownership of properties must be remembered as they might influence the opinions.

#### **4.7 Summary of the results**

To sum up, both the athletes and the sports clubs used multiple different ways to provide value to their sponsor. In addition, athletes and sports clubs in cross-country skiing and golf used numerous same methods. The most popular methods were the usage of logos and organization or participation in events. Even though every athlete and sports club had provided visibility to most or all of their sponsors, the opinions on the most important offering and the best ways to provide value varied. Furthermore, the ways that do not include the visibility of the sponsor are significant as well according to the athletes and the golf club whereas the two cross-country skiing club felt that those ways do not matter.



## 5 Discussion and conclusions

The object of this research was to identify different ways of how athletes and sports clubs can provide value to sponsors. In addition, this research tried to find the best ways for both entities and the meaning of the methods that do not include the visibility of the sponsor. The research was conducted from the perspectives of athletes and sports clubs in cross-country skiing and golf, and the model of Terence Zinger and O'Reilly (2010) was used as a framework in the analysis of the results.

Firstly, the interviews provided numerous different ways athletes and sports clubs had used in their sponsorships. Some ways such as providing visibility through logos and using the knowledge of the sport in sports lessons or lectures were popular among athletes from both sports but some ways, such as advertising in social media or utilizing the networking and cooperation possibilities among sponsors, were used only by a couple of athletes. All in all, every athlete had used a large number of different ways. Thus, the sponsors had benefited in virtually every way Terence Zinger and O'Reilly (2010) have on their continuum. In addition, the sponsorships varied from patronage to fully functioning sponsorships and the customer response from not applicable to action. However, most of the sponsorships seemed to be in the category of semi-strong sponsorship with awareness, interest, and decision as customer response.

The ways sports clubs had used to provide value varied as well but not that much. The most popular way was to increase the awareness of the sponsor through logos in different places such as clothes, golf course, and placards in skiing tracks. In addition, every interviewed sports club had organized different events for their members, public, or in the case of the golf club, for the sponsors where the sponsors could e.g. market themselves, entertain key clients, raise employee morale, and network with other sponsors. Also, straight commercial sponsorships were made due to large membership counts. Partly because the golf club owns the golf course and clubhouse, it had utilized more ways than the skiing clubs. Yet, the sponsors of either golf or skiing club could have benefited from all the ways in Terence Zinger and O'Reilly's (2010) model excluding pure patronage and community goodwill. Furthermore, the sports clubs seemed to have both semi-strong and fully functioning sponsorships with customer responses of awareness, interest, decision, and action. The results are presented in Figure 2 below.

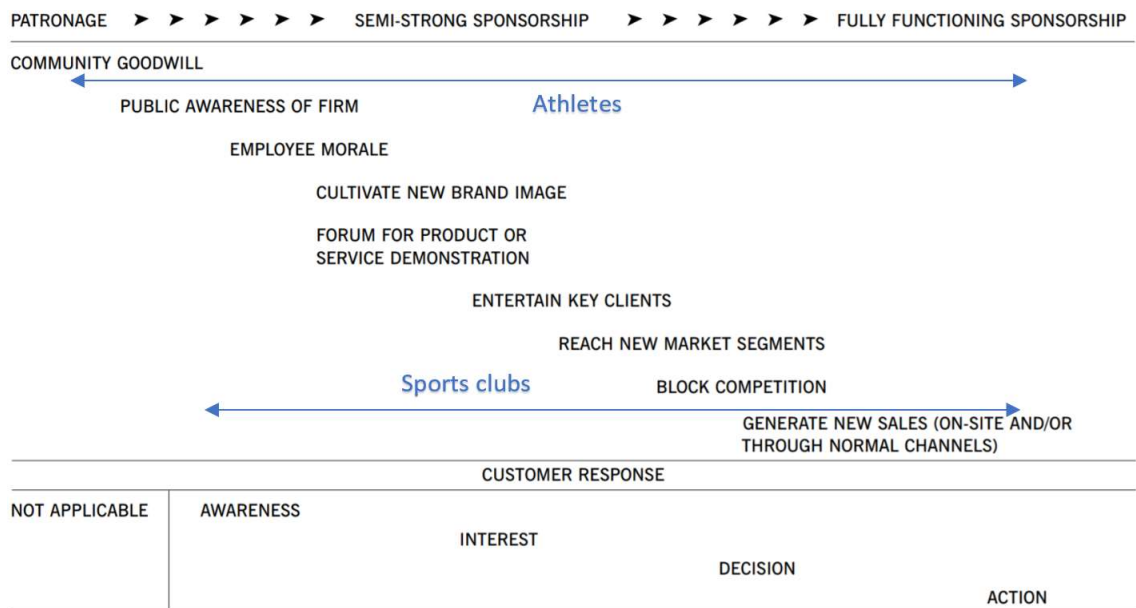


Figure 2. Sponsorships of the interviewees fitted in Terence Zinger and O'Reilly's (2010) model of sponsorship benefits

Secondly, this research tried to find the best ways for athletes and sports clubs but there was no single most important thing that everybody agreed on. Thus, there was no clear answer among athletes for the best way to provide value as everyone had their personal aspect of the issue. However, the golfers concurred that their time was the most important thing they could offer to a sponsor. In contrast, two of the skiers felt that influencing brand image and awareness were the main offering in sponsorships. Yet, the answer of the third skier covers the question rather well as he argued that there is no single most important thing because sponsors want different things. In addition, an athlete should utilize his or her own assets.

The sports clubs were not concurred of the best ways either as they all answered different things for the most important offering to a sponsor. The cross-country skiing clubs felt that visibility and large membership counts were the main offerings which were also the key factors in Berrett and Slack's (2001) research. However, the golf club could not name only one thing as it emphasized the relevance of finding mutually beneficial sponsorships. The golf club's response got support from the various range of ways it had used. In addition, typically its sponsorships are packages which include playing in the course which makes it hard to separate single most important thing.

Finally, the interviews gave opinions about the ways that do not include visibility from the perspectives of athletes or sports clubs. The ways that do not include the visibility of the sponsor are valuable as well according to every interviewed athlete. Furthermore,

the importance of those ways typically increases when the sponsorship continues. They could even be the most important ways to provide value to the sponsor in the case of a moderately unknown athlete but beneficial also for more famous athletes.

However, in contrast to athletes, both of the skiing clubs felt that the ways not including the visibility of the sponsor were insignificant. In their sponsorships, visibility has been part of every sponsorship package and the commercial aspect has been important. On the other hand, the golf club argued that the ways without visibility are also significant as it has had sponsorships without increased awareness. Yet, it seems that the ownership of the course and clubhouse have an influence on the opinion.

In conclusion, the interviews showed that visibility through logos is still one of the main methods in sponsorships in Finland. However, this research provided also numerous other methods including and not including the visibility of the sponsor. In addition, this research offered the best ways to provide value to a sponsor for athletes or sports clubs according to the interviewees even though it could not find the best methods for everyone. Furthermore, it gave athletes' and sports clubs' opinions on the ways not including visibility of the sponsor and found that they are more important for athletes than sports clubs.

## **5.1 Implications to practice**

This research provided multiple ways on how to provide value to a sponsor and gave opinions on the best ways. Thus, the results are useful for athletes and sports clubs when they are approaching, negotiating, and maintaining sponsorships. Furthermore, this study is beneficial for the sponsors as well as they get ideas for their sponsorships. In general, sponsorships should utilize more different methods in order to provide more benefits. In addition, sponsored athletes should use their strengths, such as high visibility or good interaction skills, in sponsorships. Sponsorship should be also considered as a unique relationship which relies on the needs of a sponsor and sponsored entity.

## **5.2 Limitations and future research**

This research has certain limitations. According to Saunders et al. (2015), semi-structured interviews might have interviewer, interviewee, and participation bias. However, these potential biases have been recognized before the interviews. Thus, the

interviewer tried to gain the trust of the interviewee and not to pursue his own opinions of the subject. In addition, all the interviews were voluntary, and the place and time of the interviews were decided together to minimize the effort of the interviewee and to ensure that there is plenty of time for the interviews.

The answers of the interviews were also opinions of a limited group of individuals from only two sports and therefore, the results are not generalizable. Especially, when identifying the best ways, it must be noted that the suggestions were based on the experiences and feelings of the interviewees, not on measurements of the actual benefits which could have led to different results. Furthermore, other representatives of the sports clubs and athletes in a different stage of their career might have had different responses. In addition, the differences between the interviewed cross-country skiing and golf clubs might have an influence on the opinions and their comparability. Finally, even though this research was limited to athletes and sports clubs locating in Southern Finland, athletes might have lived and acquired sponsors from other parts of Finland as well.

For future research, it could be beneficial to interview also the sponsors in order to achieve a more comprehensive view of the subject. In addition, more athletes and sports clubs from these and other sports should be interviewed to achieve more generalizable results. Lastly, future research could be made from a broader perspective of sponsorship to obtain more insight into why certain methods are used or not.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview questions (in Finnish)

Haastattelukysymykset

Haastattelu koskee menneitä ja nykyisiä yhteistyökumppaneita:

- Minkä koet olevan tärkein tarjoamasi/tarjoamanne konkreettinen asia yhteistyökumppanille?
- Kuinka suurelle osalle yhteistyökumppaneistasi olet tarjonnut/olette tarjonneet näkyvyyttä ja millä eri tavoin? (Arvio %)
- (- Mitä olet tarjonnut/olette tarjonneet, jos yhteistyö ei ole sisältänyt näkyvyyttä?)
- Mitä olet tarjonnut/olette tarjonneet yhteistyökumppaneille näkyvyyden lisäksi ja millainen vaikutus niillä on sinusta/teistä ollut yhteistyökumppania hankkiessa ja yhteistyösuhteen ylläpidossa?
- Mitä muita asioita keksit/keksitte, joita urheilija/seura voi tarjota yhteistyökumppanille?
- Vapaa sana

### Appendix 2. List of interviewees

Skier

- 33-year-old male
- Recently retired
- Finnish champion in an individual distance and multiple relays
- Participated in multiple World Championships and Winter Olympics

Skier

- 34-year-old female

- Multiple medals from the Finnish Championships in individual distances and gold medals in relays
- Medal from World Championships and participation in Winter Olympics

#### Skier

- 32-year-old male
- Recently retired
- Finnish champion in multiple individual distances and relays
- Podium-place in World Cup
- Participated in multiple World Championships and Winter Olympics

#### Golfer

- Male
- Retired in recent years
- Multiple years as a pro

#### Golfer

- 34-year-old female
- Over ten years as a pro
- Win at Ladies European Tour
- Multiple appearances in Women's major golf championships

#### Golfer

- 39-year-old male
- Recently retired
- Over 15 years as a pro
- Multiple wins at European Tour
- Multiple appearances in Men's major golf championships

- Participated in the Olympic Games

Representative of skiing club

- Board member of the club and has been multiple years in charge of sponsorships, fundraising and skiing services

Representative of skiing club

- Multiple years as an activity coordinator of the club and partly in charge of sponsorships
- Recently retired from the duty

Representative of golf club

- Multiple years as a service manager of the club and partly in charge of sponsorships